

Rape and Murder Shock Outsourcing Industry

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BANGALORE -- The rape and murder of a Hewlett Packard worker by a cab driver has shocked the high-tech industry and outsourcing hub.

Prathibha Srikanth Murthy, 24, was picked up from her home at about 2 a.m. on Dec. 13 by a non-regular cab driver, identified later as Shiv Kumar. She was never taken to the Hewlett Packard Global Delivery Application Services where she worked. Her body was found two days later.

Police said Kumar confessed to his crimes under intense interrogation. Kumar raped her and then slit her throat before dumping her body in a culvert, police said. An autopsy indicated she was raped before being slain.

Murthy recently wedded Pavan, who works for the BPO unit of Ocwin Finance, a Florida company.

Police said sex appeared to be the motive.

"He has done this with a clear sexual motive and there is no robbery angle here," said the area's Deputy Commissioner of Police Alok Kumar.

Police Commissioner Ajai Kumar Singh squarely blamed Hewlett Packard for the brutal killing.

"There is a security lapse on the part of the company," he told reporters.

Moments after Murthy had been picked up by Kumar, the regular cab driver, Jagadeesh, showed up at her home, Singh said. Jagadeesh then called Murthy on her mobile phone and was told she was already in a cab driven by Kumar.

Jagadeesh reportedly grew suspicious and informed HP's transport desk about the switch of cabs that picked up Murthy. But HP did nothing, even when she failed to show up for work, Singh said.

Following Murthy's killing, police have announced a series of security measures intended to protect working women in the city, many of whom increasingly work late hours at several call centers and other business provisioning outsourcing

companies.

Police have asked companies to start providing escorts for female employees from their homes to their workplaces, said Bhupendra Singh Sial, Bangalore's police chief.

Cab companies contracted to take the workers to and from their jobs were also asked to give photos and work histories for their drivers, he said.

"Many rapists are opportunists and we are trying to see how we can minimize those opportunities," Sial told The Associated Press. "Companies will be instructed that there can be no first pickup and last drop-off of a lady."

Kiran Karnik, president of India's National Association of Software and Services Companies, the main outsourcing trade body, described the killing as "terrible news," and said: "We will immediately talk to all the companies so that we can improve our systems and ensure that such a crime is not repeated."

Many companies in Bangalore have started reviewing their transport arrangements in the wake of the killing.

"We practice many rules to safeguard our workers, but this incident has driven us to take another close look at them," said Hari Hegde, general manager at Wipro Ltd., India's third largest software exporter.

Hewlett Packard, based in Palo Alto, Calif., condemned the crime, with company spokesman Amit Sirkar saying "our focus is to stand by the side of the employee's family in their moment of grief."

The crime has shocked the city's high-technology and back office industries, which employ 250,000 workers. Nearly half the workers are women.

Many of those employees work nights so they can take calls during what is daytime in North America and Europe, making it one of the few industries in India where women work late shifts.

Bangalore accounts for a third of India's outsourcing export revenues of \$17.2 billion. The city's offshore outsourcing industry works round the clock and depends on hundreds of cab companies to transport employees to work.

That's led to a high demand for drivers and background checks are often cursory, at best.

Police also have ticketed 277 cab drivers on charges ranging from drunken driving to negligent driving.

The Times of India and Associated Press contributed to this article.