

A crime of passion neurology meets social and forensic psychology Dissecting the murder of Ketan Aggarwal

Abstract

This multidisciplinary commentary examines the Ketan Aggarwal murder case through the integrated lenses of neurology, social psychology, and forensic psychology. The case has attracted significant media attention, exemplifying Stanley Cohen's concept of moral panic—where societal fear generates disproportionate media coverage that often supersedes emerging evidence. The case illuminates a widespread tension in contemporary Indian society: the friction between family-arranged engagements and independently chosen relationships. While such conflict doesn't excuse serious crimes, it reflects systemic social pressures including reputational consequences, family conflict and business implications that intensify such internal contradictions.

Rather than condemning an entire generation, the commentary argues this case serves as a barometer of societal health, revealing the pressing need for accessible mental health resources and open dialogue around relationship autonomy. The commentary emphasizes that guilt must be determined through judicial examination of evidence, while simultaneously acknowledging how cognitive biases and cultural norms shape public perception.

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Ridhi Agarwal,¹ Akshita Singh,² Shrey Singh,³ Fitrat Mahal,⁴ Unaiza Khan,⁴ Saima Niyaz,⁴ Suzain Asfi,⁴ Nitin K Sethi³

¹O.P. Jindal Global University, India

²University of Delhi, India

³PSRI Hospital, India

⁴Jamia Millia Islamia, India

Correspondence: Nitin K. Sethi, MD, MBBS, FAAN, Former Associate Professor of Neurology, New York-Presbyterian Hospital, Chairman Neurosciences and Senior Consultant, PSRI Hospital, New Delhi, India, Tel 2127465519

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Introduction

In February 2026, Siya Goyal, aged 20 and Ketan Agarwal, aged 26 got engaged and were set to be married by November 2026. On June 18th, Ketan died after falling in a gorge at Lohagad Fort. Initially, the death was ruled accidental. However, after reported objections from the victim's family and further police investigation, a murder case was registered. The accused are Siya Goyal and Chetan Chaudhary. These are the only established facts of the case. According to publicly available investigative reports the police allege that Siya and Chetan are in a romantic relationship. It is also alleged that Siya and Chetan rehearsed the crime multiple times. Both the accused are currently in judicial custody while the police investigates further to build up their case and try to understand what happened and how the event unfolded. This case has been the center of public attention for weeks, raising questions that extend beyond the courtroom. This commentary aims to discuss the medical, social and forensic psychological aspects underlying this case with the objective of examining it through a multidisciplinary lens. While the criminal case highlighted is set in India, the medical, social and forensic psychological aspects raised in its wake will appeal to a global audience as localized judicial decisions frequently carry international implications and shape global criminal investigative procedures and legal standards.

Case report

In February 2026, Siya Goyal (20) and Ketan Agarwal (25), a Pune-based businessman, became engaged, with their wedding scheduled for November 2026 in Udaipur. On 18 June 2026, Ketan died after reportedly falling into a gorge at Lohagad Fort, an incident initially treated as accidental. Police later alleged that this had in fact been the second attempt on his life, with a first attempt at the same location said to have failed on 14 June 2026. Between 19 and 22 June 2026, suspicions raised by Ketan's family prompted police to start investigating the case as a suspected murder rather than an accident. On 23 June 2026, Siya Goyal and Chetan Chaudhary (later identified as her alleged lover) were arrested on charges of conspiracy and

murder. In the days that followed, investigators have reconstructed the crime scene and examined CCTV footage, mobile phone data and call records which provided evidence suggestive of premeditation. On 3 July 2026, a Pune court sent both accused to judicial custody for 14 days and the investigation into the alleged conspiracy has continued since.

Commentary

The case through a social psychology lens

Social psychology examines the relationship between individuals and their social surroundings. From this perspective, many mechanisms explain why this case has become the centre of attention and has gained weeks of media coverage. Stanley Cohen's concept of moral panic offers a useful framework for understanding how such fixation occurs. Moral panics are events that occur when societies react to a condition, episode, person, or group of persons within their society that is identified as a threat to their fundamental values or beliefs.¹ People viewed as a threat are called folk devils. Once this framing takes hold, media coverage tends to focus on confirming the narrative by resurfacing and recycling old material rather than on the newer, more reliable evidence. Outrage generates further outrage, speculation gets treated as confirmation, and the story develops momentum that may outpace the evidence still being gathered.

The point that gets raised is that there is also Chetan Chaudhary, who is a co-accused and the alleged lover of Siya Goel, has been charged with the same crime. But why is he not put on trial in the media with the same effect? Research shows that the way the media portrays individuals accused of violence reveals gender-based patterns. A study by O'Donnell used thematic analysis to compare newspaper portrayals of a male and female serial killer in two separate cases.² The findings suggested that the female offender was more heavily sexualised, dehumanised, and blamed for her crimes. In contrast, the male offender's mental illness was emphasised as a partial explanation for his actions. This asymmetry reflects what Glick and Fiske call benevolent sexism, the cultural tendency to cast

women as nurturing and non-threatening by default.³ When that image is allegedly punctured, public reaction often goes beyond surprise to a sense of moral offence.

This is just one aspect; the case sits atop a much more common tension: the friction between family-arranged engagements and the independently chosen relationships. Reports suggest Siya was engaged to Ketan while allegedly involved with Chetan; one relationship public and the other private. This isn't a rare configuration. A growing number of young Indians are living exactly this two-fold life: a dating life built on personal choice, running underneath a marriage timeline set by family expectations. This can lead to a great deal of discomfort and stress. Psychology has a term for this discomfort of holding two incompatible commitments at once called cognitive dissonance.⁴ The healthy way to resolve it is through conversations and communication. However, what's disturbing about this case isn't the common dissonance; it is the alleged alternative chosen instead of that conversation. It's also worth asking why walking away from an arranged engagement carries such a steep social price to begin with: reputational fallout, family conflict and here reportedly business ties bound up in the match.

None of that excuses the seriousness of the case, but it is worth examining how such pressure can shape people's choices and affect their social relationships.

The role of forensic psychology in this case

The recent media sensationalism and debate around the Siya Goyal case isn't just a pertinent social discussion that needs to happen in our country, but it also sheds light on the fact that the current way our legal and law enforcement system works. How little it has changed is simply bizarre considering how rapidly the world we live in is changing. The world has grown exponentially complex, with socio-cultural aspects rapidly evolving since the beginning of the 21st century. Given the diversity and complexity of the country we live in, it becomes pertinent for our judicial and criminal court systems to evolve and incorporate recent techniques, especially those more in line with forensic psychology.

Circumstantial evidence

As it stands, all the reliable and verified evidence that exists is so little, the only irrefutable facts are that Siya and Ketan were at Lohagad Fort where he fell to his death in a suspicious manner, and Chetan may have been there too. All other allegations that have been made against the accused – ranging from their possible romance to rehearsing the crime multiple times – are based merely on 'circumstantial evidence.' Circumstantial evidence is indirect proof that does not establish a fact but allows for a logical inference to be made. In this case, since we know Siya was there when Ketan died, we can logically infer that she may know something about the incident. However, her mere presence is not enough evidence to prove that she conspired to kill him.

Standard of proof in criminal courts

The established facts of the case definitely arouse suspicion as to what exactly occurred that day, but as of themselves are not enough to prove guilt in a criminal court of law. Courts have a 'standard of proof,' which dictates the certainty and degree of evidence needed for a party to prove their argument. In criminal courts, the burden of proof falls onto the prosecution, meaning that they have to present evidence to prove their theory of the crime. The defence just has to disprove that theory and the accused will be acquitted. The particular standard of proof upheld in criminal courts is 'guilty beyond any reasonable

doubt.' As the name suggests, the prosecution needs to prove the guilt of the accused so thoroughly that there is no other logical and reasonable explanation possible. The current array of evidence we have is not enough to get a conviction on these grounds.

Polygraph and narco-analysis

Polygraph and Narco-analysis are two medical forensic techniques that are used in criminal investigations. Despite the frequency of their use in India, information gained through these techniques is rarely admissible in court due to the unreliable nature of the content. In regards to the Siya Goyal case, these terms have been used a lot in the media. A polygraph was not administered as neither accused consented to it.

A **polygraph**, commonly known as a lie detector test, records physiological responses such as heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, and skin conductivity while a person answers questions. It does not detect lies directly. Instead, it is based on the principle that deception may cause emotional stress, activating the sympathetic nervous system and producing measurable physiological changes. These recorded responses are then interpreted by a trained examiner. However, research has shown that there are no specific biological markers that can conclusively identify deception. A polygraph measures signs of emotional arousal or distress rather than deception itself. Therefore, while it may assist investigators by providing useful leads, its results are not considered completely reliable and should always be interpreted alongside other evidence.⁵⁻⁷

Narco-analysis is another forensic investigative technique in which sedative drugs such as sodium pentothal (thiopental sodium) or sodium amytal are administered to place a person in a semi-conscious or hypnotic state. In this condition, the person's inhibitions are reduced, making them more likely to speak freely. However, narco-analysis is neither a lie detector nor a "truth serum." A person may still lie, remain silent, or confuse real memories with imagined events. The results can also be affected by factors such as drug dosage, medical condition, and psychological state. For these reasons, narco-analysis is used only to obtain investigative leads, which must be independently verified through scientific evidence. In India, statements made during narco-analysis are generally not admissible as evidence without voluntary consent, although evidence discovered as a result of those statements may be admissible if independently verified.

Interrogation vs investigative interviewing

Given the current scenario, it seems highly likely that despite allegedly committing the crime or being involved somehow, both Siya and Chetan may get to walk free due to the lack of concrete and undeniable evidence against them. Unless the investigative officer (s) receive a proper voluntary confession from either party, a break in the case seems unlikely. The situation would've been much improved if law enforcement had waited longer before arresting the accused in order to gather more evidence against them. The moment the arrest was made, the cops started racing against a ticking clock, and right now it seems like this is a race that they could lose. The methodology used by police and law enforcement agencies when interviewing victims, witnesses, and suspects, has a profound effect on the fairness, reliability, and overall outcome of criminal investigations and judicial proceedings.⁸

When interrogating a person, the goal is to establish guilt and get a confession. Instead of questioning to establish the truth, the IO seeks to confirm their own theory of the crime. Interrogation starts with a presumption of guilt; therefore confirmatory bias begins immediately.

Inconsistencies in stories are exaggerated, the IO may selectively listen, and even the questions are more close ended. Neutral behaviors may be seen as deceptive and denials are seen as resistance. The officers also use dominating and threatening body language. This method has a higher rate of false confessions, as it involves inducing a lot of intense negative emotions such as anxiety and dread. The basis of the interrogation method is that the consequences of staying silent are worse than those of confessing, hence suspects may give false confessions.

An alternate method of obtaining confessions curated by forensic psychologists is **investigative interviewing**.^{9,10} This is a non-adversarial, rapport-based approach to interviewing suspects, which prioritizes the presumption of innocence and suggests a model of criminal investigation which is more effective in preventing coercion and solving crimes. Under this form of interviewing, the IO walks in with a *presumption of neutrality*. The emphasis remains on gathering all information and constructing a story of the crime. Since investigative interviewing is an information seeking model, the emphasis is on establishing *factual and corroborated* information. A forensic psychologist would have applied this technique with both Siya and Chetan and focused on forming a rapport. An important advantage of this method includes that even if a signed confession is not achieved, the suspect may end up dropping clues or mentioning things that will aid the investigation. A common opening to questioning under investigative interviewing is simply asking the suspect to recount the day of the incident right from when they woke up. They are asked to recount their entire day, from what they ate to who they spoke to. This line of questioning establishes the suspect in a narrative role, which may lead to them disclosing pertinent information without intending to. It further helps build a comprehensive understanding of the suspect and their personality.

Psychological autopsy

A psychological autopsy (sometimes called a “psychological reconstruction”) is specifically built for cases like this one where the cause of death is unclear or contested and there’s no living victim to interview. It’s essentially a retrospective, structured reconstruction of the deceased’s mental state, behavior, and relationships in the period leading up to death, built entirely from second hand sources.¹¹ Usually a psychological autopsy is only done for a victim. However, in this case a psychological autopsy of Siya and Chetan along with the victim would be more pertinent to the circumstances. Psychological autopsies are essentially a deep-dive into a person’s psyche and their life to understand their present circumstances. This would entail interviews with not just family members and friends, but also co-workers, neighbours, owners of shops they frequented, etc. Digital evidence ranging from personal chats and social media activity to financial and medical records are looked at. Additionally documents such as personal diaries are immensely helpful in understanding a person’s mental and emotional state before the crime. An autopsy like that would look at recent stressors to closely identify problem areas in their lives and assess interpersonal relationships. Mood and behavior of all three should be studied leading up to the final days, as well as their communication patterns.

The police allegedly claim that there were over 2000 calls between Siya and Chetan in a span of 6 months. If that is true and these two were in a secret romantic relationship, then family members, friends and co-workers were bound to have noticed something. Ketan himself might have grown suspicious, giving another possible motivation for

the crime. The crime was investigated further because Ketan’s family members were suspicious, but what was the basis of their suspicions? Did they notice things themselves, or did Ketan mention certain things to them? These questions are important and pertinent to the investigation and need to be looked at closely.

Conclusion

Is this case an indicator of our society’s deteriorating brain & mental health?

In the eloquent words of Arthur Conan Doyle, “Once you eliminate the impossible whatever remains, however improbable must be the truth.” Cases like the Siya Goyal case don’t just expose individuals with maladaptive values but function as a barometer of a society’s health itself. According to the WHO “Brain health is the state of brain functioning across cognitive, sensory, social-emotional, behavioural and motor domains, allowing a person to realize their full potential over the life course, irrespective of the presence or absence of disorders.” Brain health is the continuous state of both optimal brain and mind functioning.^{12–14}

When such cases emerge in the public sphere, they force an uncomfortable reckoning: what lapses in individual brain health. Inadequate impulse control, fractured moral reasoning, or absence of empathy reflect deeper systemic failures in societal health itself? The question is not merely forensic or juridical; it is epidemiological. A society’s collective capacity for justice depends on how well its institutions cultivate and protect the neural and psychological foundations that enable ethical behaviour and emotional regulation. Yet simultaneously, the very systems meant to investigate these failures often become entangled with the very cognitive distortions they seek to address, as media amplification, public emotion, and institutional bias reshape the narrative around culpability.

It must be reiterated that everything discussed here remains alleged. Only the court, through the examination of evidence, can determine guilt or innocence. However, we cannot deny the fact that public opinions are equally shaped by cognitive biases, cultural norms and media environment alongside the evidence. Rather than diagnosing individuals from media reports, psychology contributes by examining how cognitive biases, social pressures, interpersonal dynamics, and media narratives shape both behaviour and public perception.

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