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India gang rape suspect found dead

By Amy Kazmin in New Delhi

The alleged ringleader of a gang rape that shocked India and highlighted the dangers Indian women face in public spaces has been found hanged in his high-security jail cell in New Delhi.

Ram Singh, a 33-year-old bus driver, was facing the death penalty for his alleged role in the brutal gang-rape of a 23-year-old physiotherapy student on a bus she had boarded to go home after watching a film at an upmarket shopping mall.

The young woman died from her injuries in December after a two-week struggle to survive that had gripped India.

The rape attack triggered huge protests in New Delhi, where women say they routinely suffer harassment – and worse – in public spaces. In response, India's Congress-led government established a fast-track court to try the five suspects and passed an emergency ordinance that imposes the death penalty for rapists in the most serious cases.

Authorities said that Mr Singh, who allegedly instigated the attack on the young woman and her male companion, hanged himself in a maximum security area of New Delhi's Tihar jail. A magisterial inquiry has been established to investigate the circumstances of the death.

Authorities said that Mr Singh was lodged in a cell with several other prisoners and a guard outside. Legal experts said the death raised questions about whether he was under adequate surveillance to prevent a potential suicide, or any other attack on him.

Mr Singh's family and his defence lawyer, VK Anand, said they suspected foul play, with the family complaining he had been mistreated in jail. "I doubt it is a suicide," the lawyer told Indian TV. "He is not such a person who can commit suicide."

The death of Mr Singh comes in the midst of the criminal trial in the special fast-track court, which has been holding daily hearings that have been closed to the public and the media. The court has heard evidence from the young woman's companion, who was with her on the bus, as well as the detailed testimony she gave authorities in the days before she died.

Women's rights activists expressed dismay at the suspect's death, which they said would

subvert the legal proceedings. “The course of justice should have been served,” said Kavita Krishnan, member of the All Indian Women’s Progressive Association. “It could have been a landmark case, but now it is no longer that ... It is extremely muddy by the fact of this custodial killing or death.”

According to India's National Human Rights Commission, 14,231 people died in police or judicial custody between 2001 and 2010, an average of four people per day.

Suhas Chakma, director of the Asian Centre for Human Rights, said most Indian custodial deaths take place in the first 48 hours after suspects are arrested, when they are subject to what can be brutal and violent interrogations by police trying to gather sufficient evidence for a case.

But with the gang-rape trial now well under way, Mr Chakma said, Mr Singh was unlikely to have been subjected to any further police interrogation.

“Even if we presume this is a genuine suicide, the fact that people are taken into custody and they manage to commit suicide in the presence of police and other inmates raises serious questions about prison management,” he said.

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