

Bride-to-be and her secret lover 'pushed fiancé off cliff'

India

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Surrounded by gorges, valleys and lush, evergreen vegetation, the hilltop Lohagad Fort on the outskirts of Pune in Maharashtra state was once home to ancient imperial rulers.

With its winding, steep staircase and spikes used to stop rampaging enemy army elephants, the fort was considered so secure that in the 17th century, the ruler Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj installed his treasury there.

Now it is the scene of a murder inquiry that has shone a spotlight on the expectations of arranged marriage.

This month, Siya Goyal asked her fiancé, Ketan Agarwal, to join her on a trek to the fort in celebration of her 20th birthday. The pair, who had been together since last year, were preparing for their wedding in November. The jewellery had been bought and a venue was booked, as well as two private jets to transport guests.

Both of their families are wealthy. Agarwal's have a property company, where he worked as a director. Goyal's parents run a spice and dried fruit business and she has recently opened her own bakery. Their arranged marriage, between two families who had known each other for some 35 years, was seemingly a match made in high-society heaven.

A keen trekker, Agarwal needed little persuasion to go, despite the couple having made the same journey four days earlier, and his fiancée having almost pushed him off a cliff, acciden-

tally, she said, as she sought to protect him from a nearby snake.

On June 18, the couple again travelled to Lohagad Fort. Hours later, Agarwal was lying dead at the bottom of a gorge below the fort after plummeting 120m (390ft) from a cliff.

Goyal said Agarwal, 26, had been taking photos on a windy morning when he slipped and fell. The police initially accepted this version, registering the incident as an accident.

However, his family were suspicious and asked officers to investigate further. Days later, the police opened a murder inquiry.

Goyal and her secret lover, Chetan Chaudhary, 22, were arrested.

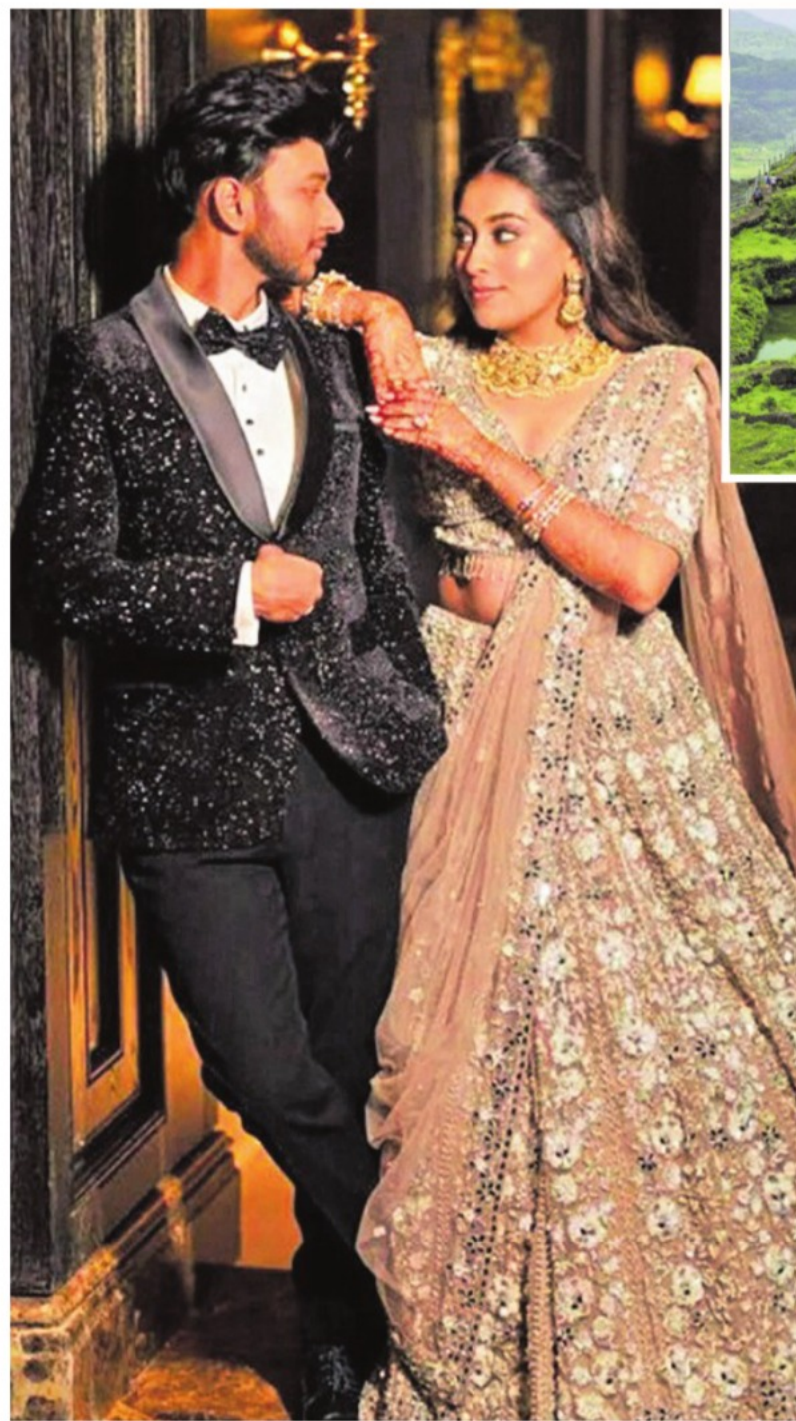
Both have confessed to murder, Pune police claimed, and remain in custody. "The phone data shows she didn't want to marry Agarwal. She wanted to be with Chaudhary," Superintendent Sandeep Singh Gill told local media.

He added that their phones also showed internet searches on how to kill someone.

The investigation showed that Goyal and Chaudhary had conducted reconnaissance of the location twice before the incident. A forensic team has carried out an inspection of the site where Agarwal fell.

On the morning of the murder, CCTV images showed Chaudhary wearing a hoodie pulled over his head despite temperatures that day reaching 33C.

He followed the couple as they walked up to the fort and, at the top, Goyal indicated to him through pre-determined gestures when to approach.



Ketan Agarwal and Siya Goyal were soon to marry. His body was retrieved from below Lohagad Fort. Chetan Chaudhary, above right, was allegedly her lover



alleged affair. "If my daughter is found guilty, then she should be thrown from the same place where Ketan was thrown from," her mother, Pooja, told NDTV.

Her father, Praveen, agreed: "From the fort where Ketan fell, the accused, even if it is my own daughter, should be pushed down."

He also sympathised with the Agarwals, saying: "They've lost their son, and their son was ours, too. We loved him so much."

The case has raised questions about arranged marriage. Chaudhary said during police inquiries that Goyal did not want to break off her engagement for fear of bringing dishonour to her family.

"Given society's expectations and her family's status, Siya felt she did not have the option to elope with her boyfriend. It would tarnish her family's reputation," a police officer told The Times.

But Agarwal's father, Vishal, asked why she had not told the families that she did not want to get married.

"She could have anonymously sent a photo of herself with her secret boyfriend to alert us and make us call it off," he said.

Police said he had left his phone at home but communicated with Goyal on WhatsApp using a friend's phone.

Officers believe the murder plot was conceived soon after Goyal met Chaudhary eight months ago during Diwali. They developed a close relationship through their business dealings. A police examination of phone records showed that the clandestine lovers had

shared 2,004 calls this year. Police say Goyal and Chaudhary were spotted on CCTV together in a café the day before Agarwal died.

The lovers have turned on each other in custody, each blaming the other for carrying out the murder, according to NDTV, an Indian broadcaster.

Goyal's family said that they were heartbroken and had no idea about her