MURDER

A Bloody Affair

The Shahs: a gruesome end

IT seemed incredible that a murder could be committed in a building right on the main road of one of the City's busiest areas—Chowpatty. But on November 12, ex-judge of the Bombay High Court S.M. Shah, 75, and his wife Dr Mira Shah, 61, were found in a pool of blood in their home in the Central building near the Aram restaurant. Presumably they were done to death with a sharp instrument which was later found at the apartment. According to newspapers there were approximately 40 wounds on Mira's body and Shah had about eight stab wounds. "The blood was dripping from the bed for hours later," said M.B. Dalal, one on the building's residents.

The murder sent tremors of shock throughout the City. "The most frightening thing is that it could happen to any one of us," said one of the neighbours who hung around in horrified curiosity after the discovery of the murder. "But how did the murderers get away without us hearing anything at all," wondered a bewildered Ramji, who has been fetching milk for the residents of the building for the past 15 years.

Neighbours in the building, visibly shaken, unanimously declared that after this gruesome event they could never sleep in security again. Not many of them were intimately acquainted with the couple. "We were on nodding terms only," said Jayaben Hyderabadi, who lives in the flat above the Shah's. The landlords of the building, the Zaveris, who lived across the landing were, however, close friends of the murdered couple. "Our children used to be wandering in and out of their house," said Anil Zaveri. "In fact," he added, "she was their doctor when they were younger." "Since they were childless," said Arun Shah, nephew of the judge, "they were particularly fond of my children." They seemed to have no

The curious cluster around the flats doorway

enemies and were universally acknowledged as a quiet, uninterfering, decent pair. Justice J.C. Shah, of Shah Commission fame, had a special word for his late friend: "A clever advocate and a gentle person." The three-storeyed building where the Shahs lived has a superficial look of sturdiness like most pre-war constructions. However, on closer inspection it shows signs of oncoming dilapidation. With its dimly-lit staircase, dark landings, and several empty flats which are permanently locked, it seems neglected enough to be the right setting for such a crime.

Confusion: However, there are confused reports as to what actually took place on the night of November 12. Even the police came up with conflicting opinions as to whether the murderer—or murderers, since it is suspected that there was at least one accomplice—entered the house from

the verandah leading into the bedroom, or from the main door. The servant, Raju, hired just one month before the crime, is the prime suspect. A young boy of about 25, Raju had come to the City from Chiplun, and has not been traced since the murder. He normally slept in the balcony and it is surmised that he could have left the latch of the communicating door open. However, there is also the question of the maidservant, Suman Kadam, who was working for the Shahs. It is not known whether she was sleeping outside or inside the house.

Inspite of the confusion over details, the police have established theft as the motive. In fact, by November 14, detectives of the Crime Branch had found jewellery worth Rs 100,000 at the house of the suspect's brother. The police claim that the crime was carried out with all the expertise of an old hand, but it seems a little naive on the part of the criminal to leave his loot at so traceable a hide-out. Nevertheless, the police feel that he may have a conviction record and they are fairly confident that he will be nabbed soon.

Whether or not the case is solved immediately, it will probably grip the City as much as the Chopra children's murder by Billa and Ranga in Delhi. And for a few days more at least, Bombay, known to its residents as one of the safest cities in India, will be kept under careful lock and key.

—*Rohini Soman*