

Aug. 13, 2005, 1:17AM Houston Chronicle

Hindu slain here was admired by friends for his faith, service

He apparently was killed while meditating in park

By TARA DOOLEY

Meditation was a ritual of Akhil Chopra's daily life.

He began each morning with prayer and meditation before a small shrine in his southwest Houston apartment. During the workday, he might step outside for a moment of silence and calm, his friends and co-workers said.

They believe the 28-year-old Hindu community leader was meditating in a park near his office when he was shot and killed Thursday.

Chopra may have been so deeply concentrating that he did not notice his killer, said Ramesh Bhutada, president of Star Pipe Products, the company Chopra had worked for since 2002.

"I think after lunch he went there for a moment of quietness," Bhutada said. " ... He probably didn't hear it."

Star Pipe employees held a Friday morning memorial service for the young man many had come to view as family. The workers, some of whom talked of preparing feasts for his birthday and marveled at his commitment to faith and community service, placed yellow roses on the bench where Chopra died.

"I think he was one of the most noble of souls," Bhutada said. "We were all touched by him. That is a lot for a person to achieve."

Police had no leads Friday in his death, which they believe occurred during a robbery, said Sgt. Robert Torres, a Houston Police Department investigator.

Chopra's body was found by a passer-by about 1 p.m. Thursday on a bench inside a gazebo at Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza Park, on Ashford Point, not far from Star Pipe offices, Torres said.

Chopra had a gunshot wound to his left temple and a bullet appeared to have grazed his forehead. His wallet was missing and no gun was found at the scene, Torres said.

At the time of his death, Chopra's life in America had just started falling into place, friends said.

Born in India, the young man had come to the United States in 2001 to study for a master's degree at Texas A&M. He was struggling financially and looking for a summer job when he met Vijay Pallod, Star Pipe's controller. Pallod encouraged Chopra to apply for an internship, which turned into a full-time job offer by the end of the summer.

While working at Star Pipe, Chopra completed a master's degree in management information systems at the University of St. Thomas in 2003. He recently was promoted into the company's information systems department and was finally putting his degree to work, his roommate and co-worker Kirthi Jain said.

"He just continued to blossom and worked so hard to get his degrees," said Alice Holley, an accounting clerk who sat next to Chopra for about three years.

He was considering marriage next summer and, according to Indian tradition, was expecting his parents to suggest a bride, Jain said.

Though only 28, Chopra had made a name for himself as a contributor to Houston's Indian community. He worked with the Hindu Students Council, a national organization, and volunteered for a variety of local groups offering education programs for children and young people.

Every Sunday he was the voice of the news in Hindi for Sanatan Radio Program.

This year he was one of the primary organizers of the Janamashtami festival, which celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna. It is one of the Indian community's largest religious festivals and will be held at the George R. Brown Convention Center Aug. 27.

For two years, Chopra had participated in the MS150 Bike Tour from Houston to Austin, which raises money for multiple sclerosis research.

"He was a very compassionate person just in the way he treated his fellow workers," Holley said. "He called me Mama ... He'd come to my desk and say, 'Mama, let me show you something.'"

When he did not return from lunch Thursday, co-workers at Star Pipe immediately thought something was wrong. By about 4 p.m., Chopra's immediate supervisor, Girish Naik, decided to see if he was at home and left the office with Jain to find him.

On the way, they received a cell phone call alerting them that Chopra's car had been seen at the park. When they arrived at the park, his car was surrounded by police officers.

"That was when my heart sank," Naik said.