

# As they rise, men push them back

Last month in Rewari, a student on her way to class was abducted, drugged, and gang-raped by three young men. **Ashok Kumar** reports on how the growing crimes against women in Haryana are stifling their freedom and aspirations

Rewari's Civil Hospital is a drab, double-storey structure that caters to roughly 15 lakh people living in and around the district. Sitting on a wooden bench in the hospital premises, in a small park littered with plastic cups, cigarette butts and polythene bags, is a frail man, mostly unnoticed by the crowd of visitors hurrying past him.

In his late forties, he is a meagrely paid Physical Training Instructor at a local school. He augments his modest income by training kabaddi students in his village. He fought against all odds, including the violently patriarchal mindset entrenched in Haryana's culture, to fulfil the aspirations of his teenage daughter, a Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) topper in Haryana.

On this September afternoon, he cuts a forlorn figure. His "little princess" – sexually assaulted by three men from his own village on the morning of September 12 – is undergoing treatment inside the hospital. "Having struggled all my life to make both ends meet, I just wanted to see my daughter stand on her own feet and get a government job," he says.

The girl's teachers and friends fondly remember the teenager as "obedient", "studious" and "industrious". In 2016, she was invited by the Ministry of Defence for the Republic Day parade, and was part of a select group of students that met the President – a proud moment for her family.

"Most of the girls in the village quit studies after middle school (Class VIII) as they have to walk 4-5 km to the nearest senior secondary school," says Ram Prasad, a local villager. "There is no public transport, and that is enough for concerned parents to pull their girls out of school. But despite his limited resources, the teenager's father got her admitted to a private school in Mahendergarh (around 25 km from their village) where he is an employee. The father-daughter duo would commute together in a school bus everyday."

The 19-year-old opted out of regular college and enrolled at a coaching institute – located about 20 km away – which was an hour's ride by bus. She had represented her school in kabaddi and baseball at State-level competitions, and also excelled in academics. She devoted herself to preparing for competitive examinations.

On that fateful morning, she left as usual for her coaching class in Mahendergarh. But unbeknownst to her, three young men from her own village began following her in a car and two motorcycles. When she got down at her usual stop near her coaching centre, the trio allegedly abducted her, drugged her, and transported her to a secluded tube-well room on the outskirts of their village, where they took turns to rape her for several hours. "We found out much later that they had been trailing us right from our village," says the father. "Both of us boarded the school bus from our home at seven in the morning. When my daughter got down at her designated bus stop, I waved her goodbye."

## Insensitivity of the police

The teenager's father is deeply pained that among the alleged rapists was someone who he had trained in kabaddi. Pankaj, an army jawan, had been his student since the age of ten.

The father also feels let down by the system in his quest for justice. A man with limited financial resources, he borrowed a few thousand rupees from his relatives, hired a vehicle, and reached the Women's Police Station – set up in all the districts of Haryana to deal specifically with crimes against women – in Rewari around midnight, along with his wife and daughter, to report the crime.

But the Station House Officer, Sub-Inspector Heeramani, who was later suspended, threw their complaint out. She accused the victim of fabricating stories to implicate "innocent boys" and deprive her of sleep in the middle of the night. Claiming that she had dealt with a similar case two days ago, she chose to interrogate the hapless teenager, who was already in deep distress, and embarrass her in front of her parents.

A Zero First Information Report (an FIR which can be registered at any police station) was eventually registered two hours after the parents and the teenager came to lodge a case. But their bureaucratic nightmare had only just begun. The incident had taken place under the jurisdiction of the Kanina Police Station in Mahendergarh, and the Rewari Police did not inform their counterparts about the case for more than 24 hours, thereby providing ample time for the accused to abscond.

Recounting the sequence of events that took place in the 48 hours following the registration of the FIR, the teenager's father says that one of the accused, Nishu, came to their house the morning after they had lodged the FIR and threatened them with dire consequences if they did not withdraw their complaint. "While the accused were roaming freely, the Kanina Police told me on the evening of September 13 that they were



**Unsafe spaces:** Kanina bus stand, Mahendergarh, where the teenager used to get down to attend coaching classes nearby. She was abducted by the accused here. •VIVEK TRIPATHI



families of the accused were also in the know, but they too chose to keep mum." Besides, rumours in the village had it that a girl from a neighbouring village, who had been gang-raped by the accused about a year ago, was murdered, allegedly by her family to protect their honour, further emboldening the culprits.

The tube-well room in question is a single room located far out in the fields and not frequented by the villagers. When the police personnel raided the place, they found it well-stocked with food and liquor in a refrigerator.

## Victim, accused knew each other

The victim and the three prime accused in the case knew each other well and had studied at the same school in Mahendergarh at different points in time. Nishu, a promising wrestler, had trained at Mahavir Phogat's Dadri *akhara* (made famous by the Bollywood hit *Dangal*) for almost four years. He was arrested just four days before his scheduled medical examination for a job in the Merchant Navy. As his father, Rajesh Phogat, had lost his right leg in a road accident seven years ago and become bed-ridden, the family's hopes were pinned on Nishu.

"My son is innocent. He has been framed. It was all done by Pankaj," claims Rajesh Phogat. He says that Pankaj was alone with the girl at the tube-well room, and when her condition deteriorated, he called Nishu, who was then sleeping at home, to arrange for a doctor.

However, Nishu's Facebook posts tell another story. They are replete with innuendoes and vulgar remarks. The villagers maintain that Nishu was the most notorious among the three and was sacked from the job of a school bus driver just a month prior to the incident, after school girls complained about his misbehaviour.

Pankaj got married a year ago, after he joined the Indian Army. His seven-month pregnant wife walked out of the

marriage after he was named in the FIR, breaking all ties with him and his family. His mother, Silochna, says that Pankaj had been visiting the teenager's house since he was in Class V. As a widow, she does not even have the resources to hire a lawyer for her son, she says.

Eighteen-year-old Manish, the youngest of the three accused, just finished his senior secondary school in Mahendergarh and was preparing for a job in the Indian Air Force. His father Om Prakash says that his son, the youngest among four siblings, was framed due to political rivalry in the village.

"Manish and Nishu were not present when Pankaj allegedly abducted the girl. He [Manish] had only gone to drop the girl back to the bus stand in the evening at the insistence of Pankaj," he says.

Besides the three, five more persons, including a medical practitioner, have been arrested so far by the SIT, on charges of criminal conspiracy, concealment of information, and harbouring the criminals while they were on the run. The medical practitioner, Sanjeev, has two daughters who go to college and a minor son. When the blood pressure of the teenager dropped dangerously, the accused allegedly telephoned him and told him that a labourer in the fields had fainted. Sanjeev gave first aid to the girl and in a way saved her life. But the police have charged him with concealment of the crime since he did not inform the police. Local villagers sympathise with him as they believe that he was at the wrong place at the wrong time.

## Joblessness and skewed sex ratio

Gangs of unemployed and unmarried youngsters have emerged as troublemakers in almost every village of Haryana over the past few years. The trend has been attributed to several factors, ranging from lack of employment opportunities and a skewed sex ratio to growing drug addiction. Taken together, these have created a law and order

situation marked by rising crimes against women.

As per the latest National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) figures, Haryana recorded 191 cases of gang-rape in 2016, the highest among Indian States in terms of crime rate – number of crimes reported per lakh of population. While the national average for gang-rapes in 2016 was 0.3, it was 1.5 for Haryana, earning it the dubious distinction of being the 'gang-rape capital' of India.

**Though the villages may not have stadiums, liquor vends at the bus stops are hard to miss, hinting at the priorities of the government**

JAGMATI SANGWAN  
Former general secretary,  
All India Democratic Women's Association

Haryana stood sixth among all the States in 2016 in terms of crimes against women, with a total of 9,839 cases, contributing to 2.9% of the total. In one of the most high-profile cases, State Bharatiya Janata Party chief Subhash Barala's son Vikas and his friend Ashish were arrested in August last year for chasing the daughter of a senior IAS officer in Chandigarh in their car late at night, allegedly in a bid to abduct her. Both were booked for stalking and drunken driving amid allegations that the police had invoked lighter sections of the Indian Penal Code.

## Abductions and killings

In May last year, a 23-year-old woman was abducted on her way to work, gang-raped, and brutally murdered in Haryana's Sonapat district after she had refused the accused's proposal for marriage. Her mutilated body was found by a passer-by. Stray dogs had bitten away the victim's face and the lower portion of her body.

Similarly, the death of a Dalit teenager in Kurukshetra in January this year remains a mystery. The girl's mutilated body was found in a canal in Haryana's Jind with 19 injuries. Not satisfied with the probe, the family has been seeking a Central Bureau of Investigation probe into the matter.

Human rights activist and former general secretary, All-India Democratic Women's Association, Jagmati Sangwan, says that Haryana's girls have been proving their mettle in every sphere of life, be it sports, academics or beauty contests, but they lack a safe environment to realise their dreams. Referring to an indefinite hunger strike by a bunch of Class IX and X girls at Rewari's Gothra Tappa village over a year ago, she says the girls were only seeking better facilities in their village school. The government approved their demands on paper, but the situation on the ground has remained unchanged.

While the girls are aiming high, there is no infrastructure in place – by way of stadiums or sports clubs – to help channelise the energies of the unemployed young men in the right direction and nurture their talent. "Though the villag-

es may not have stadiums, liquor vends at the bus stops are hard to miss, hinting at the priorities of the government," says Sangwan. Frustrated by the lack of job opportunities and unable to get married due to a skewed sex ratio, the youth have turned into rebels, asserting their masculinity in problematic ways.

Not just young girls, even women in the State are now seeking a greater role in decision-making at the household level, but are denied by men. The various provisions of the law pertaining to crimes against women are rarely implemented due to lack of budget, resources and commitment, says Sangwan.

## Need to change mindset of police

Rajbir Deswal, a retired IPS officer, points out that Haryana Police is not unaffected by the "rabid patriarchy" in the State. He adds that there have been attempts to improve the thinking of the police personnel but there is still a long way to go when it comes to being sensitive to women, children and the elderly.

He says the setting up of Women's Police Stations across the State three years ago has led to an increase in demand for women police personnel, but since there are not enough trained women police officers, inexperienced women personnel and those recruited under the sports quota have to be deputed in these police stations to bridge the demand-supply gap.

"The workload in these women police stations has increased several-fold as most of the cases involve women. Earlier, the women police personnel were not involved in serious investigation and mostly dealt with regulatory jobs. In fact, the overall policing in the State has been affected adversely by the creation of the Women's Police Stations in an unprecedented hurry, as they are both understaffed and under-trained for tackling these serious crimes," says Deswal, now an advocate at the Punjab and Haryana High Court.

Deswal, who retired as Additional Director-General, Human Rights and Litigation, believes that changes in the functioning of the *khap panchayats* have also contributed to the crisis: "In the past, the much misunderstood *khaps* would rise above petty and partisan considerations in their decisions. But today, they are dominated by misguided men seeking a shortcut to a political career, and they keep issuing problematical diktats. This has damaged a key social institution that used to play a constructive role."

Meanwhile, the distraught father is struggling to understand why his daughter has to suffer. "I still cannot find one reason why she had to undergo all this pain and trauma. Is it because she is a woman? Perhaps she was wrong to have big aspirations despite being a woman in this male-dominated society. But could staying indoors have guaranteed her safety? Maybe, maybe not," he says. "It is not just those three youngsters but the entire society and the system seem to have conspired to rape her."



**Den of crime:** The tube-well room where the girl was drugged and gang-raped. The room had turned into a den of crime, but the villagers were too scared to speak out, says a panchayat member. •VIVEK TRIPATHI