

## **About Thread Bared**

The article 'Thread Bared' is one that documents a number of rapes and cases of sexual violence during sectarian violence that broke out in North India in September 2013. Over 1,00,000 people were displaced and close to 200 people were killed in the Shamli and Muzaffarnagar district. This article was reported just a few weeks after the riots broke out under still simmering tension and hostility in the air. The minority community, the Muslims, was driven out of all villages by the Hindus. Women's bodies were used as battlegrounds by one community to establish supremacy over another community.

This reporter met hundreds of riot affected people living in relief camps to corroborate cases of mass rapes and then managed to join the dots for this specific incident in the house of a village headman. Close to 19 women were raped and sodomised inside the village head's compound on the morning of September 8, 2013. The reporters got to know through the doctors in the relief camp about the injuries on women's bodies on their private parts. However, not a single case of rape was reported for the fear of social stigma. The rape survivor's own families were opposed to the idea and so were the organisers of the relief camps because of religious and patriarchal reasons. In this situation, talking to the victims, who took several days to open up and corroborate the incident in at least 20 relief camps with 80,000 people was quite challenging.

To add to it, corroboration in Lakh Bawdi village, the particular village in question was very difficult since the Hindu population left in the village was quite hostile to media and had blocked entries of all outsiders in the village. The police had denied assistance to go the village. The reporter went to the village at great personal risk to report and corroborate. Since the story was politically charged, initially no media organisations-local or international wanted to print it. It took several weeks of convincing to finally get the story out in public domain. The story was widely acclaimed and created a huge uproar and debate in India.

## Thread Bared

They had invested hope in the village pradhan. He had said he'd protect them. Instead, what happened at his house during the morning of the riots will make you shudder. *Outlook* meets Muslim women at the camps, the faceless Nirbhayas of Muzaffarnagar....

NEHA DIXIT

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Lakh Bawdi, a village in Uttar Pradesh's Shamli district, 20 km from Muzaffarnagar town, is surrounded on three sides by harvest-ready fields of sugarcane as high as the average Indian, and a pond on the fourth. The joke in north India is that there is no better place to hide an abducted person than in a harvest-ready sugarcane field.

This harvesting season, however, the cane fields in Lakh Bawdi are throwing up tales infinitely more sordid. Like the partially decomposed, half-naked body of a woman found recently. It won't be the first—more corpses will emerge as the harvesting season progresses.

Lakh Bawdi was among the villages most affected by the sectarian violence in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli districts in September, the others being Lisad, Phugana, Kutba-Kutbi, Kirana, Budhana and Bahawdi.

It's a scene etched firmly in Abid Khan's mind. "It was 7.30 in the morning," recalls the 35-year-old from Lakh Bawdi. "A group of young men stopped outside our house and asked us to run away if we wanted to stay alive. We ran to Billu Pradhan's house for help." He is referring to Sudhir Kumar, the elected head of the village, better known as Billu Pradhan.



Openly distressed A refugee camp in Jhola

Lakh Bawdi has a total voting population of 9,500; most of the village's 1,200 Muslims live beyond the fields, in an area locally called pallipaar, working as agricultural labourers, carpenters, washermen, butchers, tailors. Sugarcane farming, the primary occupation here, is the preserve—and the privilege—of the land-owning Hindu (and a handful of Muslim) Jats.

Billu Pradhan's is a sprawling mansion. We are constantly asked "not to leave" the pucca road while seeking directions to it. The road's fairly new, the only metalled one in the village, and ends at the pradhan's house.

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**"First, they pulled my elder daughter. Dragged her to the ground, raped her by turn. Then they took my second one, hit her private parts with a baton."**

To reprise the well-worn back story, things had been tense for a while, since the end of August. Word was a Muslim boy in Kawal village had 'eve-teased' a Jat girl (though some say it was a traffic-related incident). Her brother and cousin apparently avenged the slight by killing him, and were in turn allegedly lynched by an irate Muslim mob on the spot. Tempers ran high for days—the air rife with rumour, fake videos and all the modern complements of a riot in the making. Politicians led the chorus as provocative speeches and incitements to violence rent the air at two 'war councils': a Muslim congregation after Friday prayers in Muzaffarnagar town, and a Jat mahapanchayat at Kawal on September 7. The following morning, several villages woke up to the news that a Muslim mob had attacked groups of Jats returning from Kawal, killed them and dumped their

bodies in the Jauli canal, a Muslim-dominated area. The news reached Lakh Bawdi too. "When we asked Billu Pradhan to protect us, he assured us that nothing would happen," says Abid. "While some of us collected in his courtyard, others were asked to flee in a different direction."

Billu Pradhan's house has a well-manicured garden; neatly trimmed rose plants line its entrance. Three tractor trolleys are parked to the left, five buffaloes are tied on the right. The building has a separate visitor's room, with charpoy and hukkahs—markers of Jat identity. There's a big courtyard in the centre, the one Abid is talking about.

Around 30 people, including Abid's mother and other women from the village, had come here that morning. Abid himself, along with 50 others, including his grandfather and uncle, had taken the route to safety the pradhan had suggested. Except that a mob awaited them there. "My grandfather and uncle were killed in front of my eyes. Me, my father and other family members ran into the sugarcane fields to hide," Abid recalls. Frantic, he'd called the police on the mobile. "They arrived, but only at 12.30 pm, four hours after everything was over. Around 80 people from my village had been killed by then," he says. They found Abid's grandfather's body on September 8 itself; his mother's naked and mutilated body was found a day later, in a store heaped with dung cakes. That very day, Abid left for the makeshift camp in Loni in Ghaziabad district, 40 km from the national capital, along with the rest of the family members.

It may be difficult to corroborate the number of dead Abid quotes, but testimonials of several refugees from the village, now in the 16 relief camps in Shamli and Muzaffarnagar districts, leave no doubt of the gruesomeness they encountered.

It's raining the evening we reach the Idgah camp in Kandhla in Shamli district. A town dominated mostly by Muslims, the refugee camp is being supported largely by donations from locals. Several heaps of donated clothes lie soaked in muddy pools in the compound of the mosque as we enter. Over 12,000 people from the riot-affected villages have taken refuge here. When the rooms in the madrasa couldn't accommodate them, tents were set up. Except that when the rains came, water leaked through the tents and forced people to stuff themselves in the madrasa's corridors.

Women occupy the first and ground floors. Sitting with a group of old women is Shabana, a thirtysomething from Lakh Bawdi. The left side of her face is dominated by a giant black-and-blue bruise, and she sits there, medicines given by the camp doctor in hand, the women around her exhorting her to

take them. What happened? “My house was burnt, three buffaloes were burnt too and my two sons are missing,” she says, in a tired and practised answer. What’s her name, what are her sons’ names, what happened to her and how did she escape? Again, the same mechanical answer. “My buffaloes were burnt too.” Shabana is too traumatised to provide any immediate answers. After a full hour of reassurances and demonstrated empathy, she recounts what happened to her on September 8.

“They came at eight in the morning, a group of 20 men. I was cooking while my husband, a washerman, was about to leave for work. As soon as we heard the commotion, my husband, two sons and I fled. Even as we were running towards Billu Pradhan’s house, we saw our house being set on fire.” It was in this mayhem that Shabana lost track of her two sons. The couple reached Billu Pradhan’s house and were taken inside the gated compound. “Within half an hour, a group of men from the village entered the compound and attacked us. They hacked my husband right before me.” Was she attacked? Shabana is quiet. I try again. This time, her voice a whisper, she says, “They stripped several of us. Took our honour.”

They first beat them with batons, then stripped them and brutally sodomised them. The men were stripped and simply chopped into pieces. Shabana and several others were thrown out, naked, an hour later.

“I and two other women hid behind a house,” she says. “I don’t remember what happened after that, except that a man from this camp gave me his kurta. He must be here. He is wearing a shirt,” she tells me, seeking him out with her eyes in the water-logged fields the balcony overlooks.



The plundered Sakira, at the Islamabad camp in Shahpur

She and other women were rescued in the trolleys Haji Wajid Hasan, chairman of the municipal corporation of the Kandhla block, sent off to the neighbouring villages. “They didn’t have clothes,” says Khurshida, a woman from Kandhla. “None at all.” Locals like her collected clothes from the neighbourhood that very evening. Shabana’s two sons, Tahir, a student of Class 5, and Shahid, who was in Class 2, are still missing. It has been three months.

Shabana's, though, isn't the only harrowing tale. Sabra, in her late 40s, recounts the same nightmare as her 12-year-old daughter Saju listens on. She too has come to Idgah camp from Lakh Bawdi. "My husband Ajiman and his first wife Almiyat, who was also my elder sister, along with me and my three daughters, including Saju, were in Billu Pradhan's house that morning. My elder son had asked us to stay there while he went to arrange a vehicle for us." Sabra was married to Ajiman 10 years after his first marriage because her elder sister could not bear children. She worked at the neighbouring brick kiln.

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**"Hindi songs blared on loudspeakers as they raped us. Dhols too were playing. Two men held me, biting me everywhere. Three then raped me."**

"My husband was old and a tuberculosis patient," she tells me. "We thought Billu Pradhan had been the head of the village five times and would help us." Ajiman and Almiyat were attacked with a sickle on the neck within 15 minutes of entering the pradhan's house. Sabra looks away as her eyes well up with tears. And your daughters? She purses her lips tight and shakes her head, refusing to say more. When I persist, the tears roll down her cheeks. "How can I tell you?" she says, looking at Saju, her 12-year-old. She then takes me aside, to the extreme corner of the compound. "If I tell anyone, who'll marry Saju?"

A deep breath and fresh resolve later, she continues, "They first pulled my elder daughter and stripped her. Two boys dragged her to the ground and took turns raping her. Then they grabbed my second daughter and hit her private parts with batons. She started bleeding and was pushed to a corner. They then proceeded to assault the other girls." "Aapa was engaged and would have gotten married today," Saju tells me later. That day, when the gates were opened after an hour, Sabra rushed out with Saju and others into the jungles close by. They had to walk a whole day and night to reach Kandhla where the volunteers of the camp there came to their aid. This is where she found Rashid, her elder son, who on that day had gone looking for help, and who is out again today, to the Loni camp in Ghaziabad to look for his two sisters who have been missing since that morning at the pradhan's house.

It is important to note that the first response at any of these camps to questions of sexual violence is immediate denial. In Gangeru, a small town in Muzaffarnagar district dominated by Shia Muslims, the Arabia-Islam-Hudru-Islam madrassa has provided refuge to over 400 people from the 21 villages nearby. When asked if any of the women here had reported any cases of rape, Mohammed Sanaullah, the head of the seminary, tells me candidly, "Women have been raped and tortured, but it is my sincere advice to forget them. The families of these women will disown them if they come to know that they have spoken about it."

When I reach the Gangeru camp, a group of women is sitting around Sabiha, who gave birth to her third daughter three days after reaching this camp. I asked them if they knew of any cases of sexual violence, and they all replied in unison, "We fled before it happened. But we know of other women who were brutally raped." This attribution to other women when talking of sexual violence is consistent across camps. "In Islam, rape is treated like adultery," Manzar, a local lawyer from the district, had told me earlier. "The women will not talk for fear of being accused of adultery."

However, even as I am leaving, twentysomething Shama follows me. "How did you know women had been raped," she asks me. "Women at the other camps told me," I respond. "It's true," she says. "It's painful to pee and take a dump. I can't even tell the camp doctor. The women in the camp have given me herbal medicine."

Shama's husband Iqbal and his younger brother Tahrir were both killed in Lakh Bawdi on September 8. Her husband ran a horse carriage for a living; it was found burnt at the house when they went there for a visit later.

"I went to Billu Pradhan's house with my six children," she recounts. "They twisted both arms of my three-year-old daughter and threw her. They were young boys whom I had fed so many times in my house.

When I ran to rescue her, they thrashed me with a baton, then used it to rape me, as they did to four or five other women.”



Pieces of a life Inside the Idgah camp at Kandhla

Shama's sister Shazia, who has been standing 100 metres away so far, joins us. “Don't tell anyone about it.” Once Shama and her children were thrown out of the pradhan's house, they and Shazia, with her seven children, fled. “The men and women from the village watched her naked, bleeding, crying, but no one came forward to help. The women we had assisted during childbirth on several occasions also looked at us blankly,” recalls Shazia.

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**“They twisted my three-year-old daughter's arms, threw her. When I ran to rescue her, they thrashed me with a baton, then used it to rape me.”**

“They shouted *Musalmanon ki laundiyaon ko rakh lo* (keep all the Muslim girls),” recounts Mehrnaz with a shudder. She too had taken refuge in Billu Pradhan's house and was, like the others, both witness and victim in this numbing festival of violence and hate. She is among the only few women who answers with an emphatic ‘yes’ when asked about sexual assault. Her breasts were attacked with a sharp trowel. “There were 8-10 boys who seemed to be on a mission. They'd strip a woman, attack her and rape her. Then they'd grab the next one, within minutes. Billu Pradhan had vanished after the first 20 minutes.” Her 12-year-old son had been left behind as Mehrnaz had fled with her eight-year-old daughter and husband Akbar Qureshi. The house was attacked by a group of 10-15 men and her son burnt alive. His charred body was found later.

Her voice is still charred. “When the gates of Billu Pradhan's house were unlocked, I had no clothes on me. My husband and daughter had hid in a jute sack under a charpoy. We all ran as the Hindu boys chased us. But somehow there was news of the police reaching the village. The boys turned back,” she says, wending her way again through the nightmare, her unslept, baggy eyes turning red. “The police came only two hours later. When we asked them for protection, the police officer tried to arrest my husband for inciting violence. We carefully stepped back and took the way to the highway through the

jungles. We later took a trolley that was carrying several other Muslims from our village.” Mehraz is now in the Loni camp and does not want to return to her village ever.



Sun has set 70-yr-old Allah Banda, at the Idgah camp in Kandhla

Another camp, another horror story. This time it's Rubeena, in her early 20s, at the Malakpura camp. "There were loudspeakers, Bollywood songs blaring out of them, while they were raping us," she says. "Some boys were also playing the dhol (a local drum), outside the gate." Rubeena's cheek has been bitten off, badly. That morning, her mother had asked her to leave for Billu Pradhan's house along with her younger sister. She told her she would follow with the rest of the family. "Two men held me by my arms as they bit several parts of my body. Three men raped me then, one after the other," Rubeena tells me, her expression blank, voice emotionless. Rubeena's parents and the rest of the family have been missing for the last three months. She also says two women from her village were made to dance naked in the mosque. Has she registered a complaint about what was done to her? "Please don't tell anyone," she urges. "How will I live in the camp if I do complain?"

While women after women in several camps talk in hushed tones about what happened on the fateful morning, the people residing in Lankh Bavdi village currently remain defiant. Saroj Bala, mother of 28 year old Bagla Bhagat, who is a father of two kids who has been accused in the FIR on the charges of rape, murder and robbery during the riots, announced, "The police have arrested my son for no reason. Everybody knows him. You can ask anyone in the village if he can do something like this." Similarly, 50 year old Vimla claims, "They have named my son Dharamveer in the FIR for no reason. Why don't they arrest the Muslims who keep bombs in their mosques?"

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**"Women have been raped, but their families will disown them if they come to know they have talked," says a madrassa head.**

The mosques in the villages stand burnt, vandalised. Ask about the charred Muslim houses in the village, and the stock response is, "They set their own houses on fire for the compensation." "Hindus respect their culture," the women add. "They can never dishonour any woman." Ruling Samajwadi Party leader Pramod Rana told villagers, while addressing them recently, "If the Muslims come back, cooperate with them, but tell them you can't protect them."

Billu Pradhan has been absconding since the week after the riots. When we contacted his wife, she refused to talk about the incident or his whereabouts. Till date, only six cases of gangrape and five of rape have been registered. And the list of complainants does not even include the testimonies of Shabana, Mehrnaz or the others in this story. Based on what the nine women we spoke to have told us, close to 19 women were killed, abducted, raped or sodomised that morning at Billu Pradhan's house.

Last week, after the body of a half-naked woman was found in Lakh Bawdi's sugarcane fields, UP state women's commission chairperson Zarina Usmani confirmed sexual violence on women during the communal riots in Muzaffarnagar, Shamli, Baghpat, Saharanpur and Meerut districts. In an open letter, she urged "women to come forward and register their complaints". "A majority of the (victimised) women are from the weaker sections and are being threatened to stay silent," she said. UP home secretary Kamal Saxena, when asked if women had been raped and molested during the riots, said, "No woman has registered a complaint with the police. The police can take action only after getting complaints."

Patriarchy and communalism. They colluded, once again, on the morning of September 8. At the house of none other than the village head. Billu Pradhan.

(The names of all the rape victims have been changed.)

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*By Neha Dixit in Muzaffarnagar; Photographs: Narendra Bisht*

## **About 'After Rape and Neglect, a Survivor's Family Fades Into Oblivion in Delhi'**

In December, 2012, India saw its first mass outrage on gender, when people flocked the streets of New Delhi, the national capital in protest against the gangrape of a 23 year old paramedic in a moving bus. The protests created a space to deal with the issue of rape and sexual violence with an urgency and sensitivity which was otherwise absent in the patriarchal Indian society. This story is a follow up on the rape of a five year old girl, Gudia, who was brutally assaulted, raped and sodomised and locked in a room for over two days, before she was finally found. She became a household name and was on the list of all political campaigns. This story is a follow up from the point where the media attention stopped. The reporter traces how she and her family were stripped of all agency and freedom in the government's attempt to rehabilitate them. Gudia, her mother and two and half year old brother were kept in solitary confinement and not allowed to talk to anyone including Gudia's father. They were discriminated against in the rehabilitation home and when they were finally let off, they had to share a small room with 11 people, for a lack of place to go. The story raises questions that while demand for justice is well placed, the rehabilitative measures are equally important. It was a difficult story to do since the family had faded into oblivion and accessing them while they were in rehabilitation home and in the hospital was next to impossible. The story created a global outrage with help pouring in from all quarters. As a result, Gudia and her brother have been successfully enrolled in a school with proper medical attention and a house to live in.

**The New York Times**

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## **After Rape and Neglect, a Survivor's Family Fades Into Oblivion in Delhi**

By NEHA DIXIT

In April, a 5-year-old girl was raped and tortured in eastern New Delhi, then left for dead, with her internal organs and sexual organs damaged. The horrific nature of the crime set off a renewed fury in the streets of Delhi, which had already seen thousands of people protest after the gang rape of a 23-year-old student on a moving bus.

Five months later, the public's outrage has moved on to other rape cases, like the one in Mumbai, where five men are accused of sexually assaulting a young photographer. Meanwhile, the 5-year-old girl, who was nicknamed Gudiya (Doll) by the Indian press, and her family members struggle on their own to help the girl recover from the trauma of the rape.

On a July afternoon, the girl's father stood in the corridor outside the intensive-care unit at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi. A small patch of translucent film pasted on the glass door of the unit had come off. He peered through the opening in the door and waved his hand every few minutes to his daughter, who was lying on a bed in the I.C.U.

With two pillows propped up under her, Gudiya, with her short, wavy hair, wore a purple frock, as a white sheet covered her lower body. Her father was waiting to meet her after her fifth and last reconstructive

surgery, this one for her colon. During the rape, Gudiya's internal organs had been damaged, so she had needed an immediate colostomy, which required a bag to hold her body's wastes.

"The passage for the stool would leak every half an hour," said Gudiya's mother, a wiry woman in her mid-20s, who wore a blue and yellow sari and had tied her hair into a shabby bun.

The surgery was a success. Gudiya, seeing that she no longer needed a colostomy bag, pointed to her stomach and screamed in glee, "Papa, everything has gone inside!"

It was one of the very rare moments of joy the family had experienced since Gudiya was found semiconscious in an abandoned apartment near her home in Gandhi Nagar in eastern Delhi. The area is populated by daily wage laborers and factory workers, many of them working in the massive textile market of the area.

Gudiya's father, a laborer, had moved from flood-prone Sitamarhi in Bihar state, which is among the 100 poorest districts in India, to Delhi in 2010. He found work as a construction worker and earned close to 200 rupees (\$3) a day. Around the same time, his younger brother also migrated to Delhi to work at a bicycle shop.

Gudiya and her mother came to New Delhi last year after her father found regular work. The family lived in a cramped single room with a tiny window in a Gandhi Nagar building rented to poor workers. The 20 families on their floor share a few bathrooms and toilets at the far end of a corridor.

Gudiya's mother had never left her village in Bihar before she and their child joined her husband in Delhi last year. The city had overwhelmed her, and she feared for her husband's safety as he went to far corners of the expanding metropolis to work as a laborer. He had bought

her a cheap mobile phone to reassure her.

On April 16, Gudiya's father and his younger brother were at the New Delhi railway station, dropping off their third sibling, who was returning to Sitamarhi to sow paddy on their ancestral land. Her father's phone rang. Her mother was on the phone. Five-year-old Gudiya was missing.

After her father received the alarming call from his wife, he and his brother rushed home and looked for Gudiya. They went to the local police station. Dharpal Singh, the officer in charge, shooed him away, according to Gudiya's father. "Go and look for her yourself. Inform us if you find her," Gudiya's father recalled the police officer telling him.

Two days after the child went missing, a young laborer from Bihar who lived in the basement of their building told Gudiya's mother that he saw a child crying near his room. "We used to live in that particular room before moving to a first floor room," said Gudiya's father. He found his 5-year-old daughter, crying, naked. Her neck and legs were covered in blood.

The next afternoon, Gudiya was transferred to India's premier public hospital, All India Institute of Medical Sciences. "We had to perform the colostomy procedure to divert stool and surgical procedure for the dressing of her internal organs," said Dr. D.K. Sharma.

Four days after Gudiya was admitted to the hospital, her parents went to meet Sheila Dikshit, the chief minister of Delhi. Ms. Dikshit met Gudiya's parents but left them with cold, callous words. "There are so many rape cases every day in Delhi. How many can I take care of?" her father recalled Ms. Dikshit telling them.

On April 19, four days after the assault on Gudiya, a team of Delhi and Bihar police raided a house in the town of Muzaffarpur in the northern state of Bihar. They arrested Manoj Kumar Sah, a 22-year-old man who was working as an electrician in Delhi and living in the same building as

Gudiya's family in Gandhi Nagar area. A crying, bleeding Gudiya had been found in his room.

Mr. Sah and his friend, Pradeep Ram, 19, had fled Delhi by taking a night train to Bihar. Mr. Sah was hiding at his in-laws' in Muzaffarpur when the police found him. Mr. Ram was arrested the next day in the Lakhisarai district of Bihar, where he was hiding at his maternal uncle's house.

The police said the two men confessed to raping the girl, saying that Mr. Sah had stepped out of his room when he saw the 5-year-old playing outside. The police said he then offered her potato chips and lured her into his room, promising more. The child followed Mr. Sah into the room.

Delhi Police charged Mr. Sah and Mr. Ram under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses Act, which places the burden of proving their innocence on the accused. On July 24, the two men were arraigned in Delhi, and the examination of the witnesses is now under process.

While Gudiya was being treated at the hospital, her father moved out of his rented Gandhi Nagar home and moved in with his younger brother in a distant neighborhood of Delhi. He couldn't bear the callous and caustic barbs of his neighbors.

"People said that my daughter was greedy and that's why she could be lured with a packet of chips," he recalled.

The brothers had been pursuing the police case, running between hospitals. Their meager savings were drying up. Her uncle sent his family back home to ease the pressure of feeding a larger unit in an expensive city.

"We all could not afford to live together, especially when both *bhaiya* and me have not been working for the last three months," her uncle said,

using the Hindi word for “older brother.”

After Gudiya’s initial treatment, the Delhi government’s Child Welfare Committee decided that as the girl needed several surgeries, she needed to live in a hygienic place. On April 20, the Young Women’s Christian Association in New Delhi offered free boarding and lodging to Gudiya, her mother and her infant brother. Her father couldn’t live there, as the hostel is meant only for women.

The YWCA hostel in central Delhi is a multistory building, but Gudiya, her brother, and her mother were restricted to their room. “I was asked to not go out of the first floor room allotted to us,” she said. The food on offer was very little, according to the young mother. “I gave my breakfast to the kids and ate my first meal when lunch was served,” she said.

They shared a common toilet with 12 other girls who were survivors of sexual abuse, but Gudiya’s mother said she was forced to clean the toilet twice a day because of Gudiya’s condition. “They said, ‘Your daughter keeps [expletive] all the time and that’s why you should clean up.’” YWCA administration did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

At the YWCA, her father was allowed to meet his daughter for half an hour. His wife was not allowed to leave the shelter except to buy medicine from a nearby hospital. The YWCA administration chose the people she could speak to, she said. “I was not allowed to meet my brother-in-law,” she said. “He knows more about the case than my husband.”

Rakesh Sengar, national coordinator of Bachpan Bachao Andolan, a nonprofit organization that has worked on child rights for four decades, said it was not uncommon to keep rape victims sequestered. “Once the rape survivor agrees to fight her case, it is important to shield her from all outside pressure to withdraw her case,” he said. “That is why the rehabilitation homes often impose restrictions on the movement of its inhabitants.”

Gudiya's mother alleged that one day at the YWCA hostel, Gudiya walked into a room where a meeting was taking place and a caretaker slapped her. Another day, she said, her young son was slapped. She sneaked out of the hostel and spoke to the press. "After that, my movements were under strict vigilance. If it were a rich woman and her child, they wouldn't have treated us like this," she said.

On July 16, Gudiya was discharged from the hospital. Indian laws had nothing to offer by way of support for her rehabilitation. The family spent a few weeks in a relative's one-room house until they could find a new place to live. They couldn't return to their village, as scores of television crews had landed there after the incident.

"My elder brother has stopped talking to me. He blames me for not being able to control my daughter," Gudiya's mother said. "Everyone there knows what happened to my daughter."

They sought refuge in the gift of anonymity Delhi provided. Gudiya's father moved his family to a lower-middle class area on the outskirts of Delhi, where he began a new life as a vegetable vendor. "They wanted to move away from all those who knew what happened to Gudiya," her uncle said.

*Neha Dixit is a freelance journalist based in New Delhi.*

## **About 'One rescue and the multiple existential crises of policemen in Palwal'**

While India saw a change in its archaic rape laws, after the December 16 protests against the gang rape of a 23 year old paramedic that created global outrage, police reforms in India have been pending for over 100 years. This merit of this story lies in documenting the nuances of the approach of the police towards a minor trafficking victim who was raped several times over, her brother who was beaten up by the police for trying to look for her sister who was sold off as a bride and towards the anti-trafficking activist who struggles to get the police to register a complain to rescue the girl- all this just 50 km from the national capital, Delhi. The story was done undercover. The reporter posed as a volunteer of a human rights organization. With a mere reporting of the day at this police station, it elucidates on several nuances like religion, law, police, patriarchy, trafficking and rape. The story was widely read and was used in several researches to talk about police reforms.

# One rescue and the multiple existential crises of policemen in Palwal

In early August, a group of activists, lawyers and one journalist arrived at Sadar police station in Haryana. They demanded the rescue of an Assamese teenager who had been trafficked, raped, beaten and imprisoned by a local family. But it was never going to be straightforward.

By Neha Dixit | Yahoo News – Mon 23 Sep, 2013

- Shamsul, 20, had spent a month in Delhi looking for his younger sister Sakina.

He and his three siblings grew up in a small village in Kokrajhar district of Assam. They were brought up by a physically disabled father who earned his living by begging. Their mother had passed away three months after Sakina was born. After the ethnic violence in 2012 Sakina's three brothers, who worked as daily wage labourers, stopped getting work. They were Muslims in a Bodo-dominated village.

Theirs is one of the 11 districts in Assam currently receiving funds from the Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme. Since 1994, Kokrajhar has witnessed several bouts of ethnic violence between Bodo tribes and non-Bodo people.

In fact, the BJP and RSS have been claiming for the last 15 years that all the Muslims in this area are Bangladeshi. Posters and wall writings that read, "Bangladeshi Bharat chhodo," are as common in this area as they are in Delhi. In July 2012, there was another round of violence between Bodos and Muslims. Nearly four lakh people were displaced from over 400 villages.

With her old father now paralysed and her family barely managing two square meals a day, Sakina attempted to resolve the situation. Like several girls and young women who have left Kokrajhar in search of work, mostly as live-in maids in metros, she, too, got in touch with a 'John' – a generic name for the middlemen who take such girls to placement agencies in metros for work. In April 2013, she left for Delhi.

That's the last Shamsul had heard of her. At the time, Sakina was 16.

Three months later, Shamsul received a distress call from Sakina. She told him that 'John' had sold her to a family in Pingod village of Palwal district in Haryana as a bride. "She told me that she is beaten up day and night and four men of the family take chances to sleep with her. She cried as she asked me to come and rescue her," said Shamsul.

What Sakina and her family hadn't known is that such forced marriages have become a common practice in parts of Haryana, where the skewed sex ratio means there aren't enough wives for men. According to the 2011 census, the sex ratio in Palwal is 866 females per 1,000 males. (Kerala, with the highest sex ratio in the country has 1,084 females per 1,000 males. Uttar Pradesh has 908).

A 2013 [UNDOC report](#) quotes a study covering 10,000 households over 92 villages, which revealed that 9,000 women had been brought in from other states Haryana, most of them from the poorer parts of Assam, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and Odisha. Most of them are trafficked through the middlemen who promise jobs, like the one who had tricked Sakina and her family.

Shamsul says his father had not stopped crying ever since Sakina went missing. Now in June, when

they got the distress call, he urged Shamsul to leave in search of her. Shamsul sold the only half beegha of land his family possessed for Rs 80,000 and left for Delhi.

In the beginning, he stayed near the Old Delhi railway station. After several rounds of hiring Delhi-Palwal taxis for different sets of people who pretended to help him, paying them and surviving in Delhi, the money was almost over. He got in touch with his aunt Sameena who lived in Sonia Vihar, a very poor, immigrant-filled neighbourhood in northeast Delhi. Sameena was married to a mason and had lived in Delhi for some years.

Palwal district in Haryana is 60 km from New Delhi. After several visits to the Sadar police station in Palwal (under whose jurisdiction Pingod village falls), Shamsul despaired. “The first time I went, the inspector threw me out. He questioned my sister’s character and said that she must have run away with her lover,” he remembers.

After pleading and putting up with the police’s abuses, he managed to convince them to accompany him to Pingod village. They managed to trace Sakina but left her there. “She had cuts all over body and reduced to half the size she had been when she left home,” says Shamsul. When they left, she was further beaten up by the family for being the cause of bringing the police to their doorstep.

Sameena, his aunt, got in touch with a BSP MLA from the area, who in turn got in touch with a local journalist, who informed activists from Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA), an NGO that works for child rights. New plans were made to rescue Sakina.

### **At the Police Station**

3rd August. 11:00 am. When a team of two activists, two Supreme Court-appointed lawyers on child rights, Shamsul, his aunt, a few volunteers and I reached the Sadar police station, Station Head Officer (SHO) Dev Vart was engaged in a discussion with another police officer (then on leave) on how the number of women reporting cases of assault, violence and torture had risen since the December 16 protests.

SHO Dev Vart, around 50 years of age, spoke Hindi with a distinct Haryanvi accent. He sat behind a large table in a revolving chair with a towel draped over the back, a familiar sight in all government offices in India. The white wall behind him had pictures of Rajiv Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi and Subhash Chandra Bose, stuck close to each other. His phone rang every five minutes. His ringtone was ‘Aarti Shri Narayan ji ki.’

I asked, “Why have the number of women reporting cases gone up?”

He answered, “When women don’t want to cook the vegetables their husbands ask them to, they come to the police station to register a complaint.”

This moment of epiphany was interrupted by the entry of the rescue team. The sight of Shamsul set Dev Vart off, and he roared, “Why have you come again? And with this baraat?” He gestured at the rescue team “Didn’t I tell you to get police from your [own] state to rescue her?”

At this moment, Manish Sharma, who’s been an activist with Bachpan Bachao Andolan for the last 15 years, stepped in. Several conversations had sprung up in the wake of Vart’s outburst.

Manish told Vart that since the abducted girl was under his jurisdiction, it was the police force from his station that would have to rescue her. From then onwards, Dev Vart and, later, the investigating officer for the case, Jai Ram Singh, referred to Assam mostly as ‘Madras’.

Vart said, “Since the First Information Report about the girl going missing was filed in Madras, the

Madras police should come and rescue her.”

Manish corrected him, “Assam.”

Dev Vart replied, “That only. Ask the Assam police to come and rescue her.”

Investigating Officer Jai Ram Singh, well built, clean-shaven, in his 50s, entered. “We will rescue her. One hundred percent. Call the Madras police and we will go with them,” he said.

Ekta Dutta, one of the lawyers who accompanied the rescue team, a woman in her mid-20s, intervened with exasperation: “Sir, under the new POCSO (Prevention of Children from Sexual Offences) Act, the local police is supposed to take action whether the girl is from Assam or Madras. So it is you who has to rescue the girl.”

The POCSO Act was introduced in November 2012. It was radical for shifting the burden of proof to the accused, for the more heinous offences of sexual assault. Ekta pulled out a photocopy of the Act and handed it over to Vart. He brought the paper close to his face and squinted hard at it. He then said, raising his left eyebrow, “There are a number of girls sold in Haryana. Are we going to rescue all of them?”

Manish replied, “We have all the details about this particular girl, let’s try and focus on how to get her first.”

A moment of silence followed. Jai Ram Singh, by now sitting on the opposite side of the large table, looked into Vart’s eyes. They seemed to be thinking hard.

“But the girl is married now. We can’t get her from her husband’s place just like that,” Singh objected.

Manish, fed up by now, explained slowly, pausing after every sentence, “Sir, this is a case of abduction and continuous sexual exploitation of a minor girl... That is why the girl needs to be rescued.”

“Still she is 17 years, 2 months and married. And you have a school certificate for proof. That doesn’t work,” said Jai Ram Singh in a matter-of-fact tone.

Manish turned to Pramod, another lawyer who was part of the rescue team, to ask for a copy of the Juvenile Justice Act. He handed over a copy of the new Indian Penal Code (IPC) manual with changes in Section 370, after the Justice Verma Committee recommendation pushed the Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill, 2013.

This legislation provides for the amendment of the Indian Penal Code, Indian Evidence Act, and Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 on laws related to sexual offences. After the changes were introduced, Section 370 of the IPC has been substituted with new sections, 370 and 370A, which deal with trafficking of persons for exploitation.

Traffickers can be punished with imprisonment ranging from at least seven years to the remainder of that person’s natural life, depending on the number or category of persons trafficked. Employment of a trafficked person can attract penal provision as well.

Manish also opened the Juvenile Justice Act to point out that the school certificate is admissible as a proof of the date of birth. Dev Vart leaned sideways to take a look.

“But then again, Pingod is a notorious Muslim area. People will surround us and not let us out,” Vart

tried to pose a fresh objection. Manish responded with a provocative question, “If 500 people come together to create tensions in an area, will the police give up?”

More such calculated stabs at the policemen’s pride eventually instigated the police officer on leave, dressed in plain clothes, to ask Dev Vart, “Why don’t you call up the SP and ask? What is he there for?”

A long call followed. By now, the rescue team had nicely settled down in the huge office of the SHO. The volunteers washed their faces at the washbasin at the back of the office. Shamsul was quiet and nervous throughout this period.

While Vart was on the phone, an old man in his 70s in an old, soiled white kurta-pyjama entered the room. He held his hands behind him as school children do when told to ‘stand at ease’ by the teacher. The old man told Vart, “Sir, these people (pointing at the police constables outside) are not paying me for three bottles of mineral water and five cups of tea.”

An embarrassed Vart gave him his brief and angry attention. He said, “All that later. First get water and tea for everyone in the room,” and went back to the phone conversation, frantically nodding in the air every 30 seconds. The old man said, “Ji sahib,” counted the number of people with his index finger and left.

At this point, it’s important to recollect that the Justice Verma panel had criticised the Delhi police’s nit-picking attitude (in response to news reports that the police had wasted precious time deciding the jurisdiction while the December 16 gang-rape victim lay bleeding on the road.

The committee had recommended that every individual should be able to register an FIR at any police station, irrespective of the jurisdiction in which the crime was committed. However, these recommendations had clearly not travelled beyond the aggressive talk shows on news television and vociferous opinion pieces in print and online.

SHO Vart and his superior officer went back and forth for a while as Vart came up with various reasons why he shouldn’t conduct the raid.

The chai arrived 45 minutes later. This was when the long call ended. Vart hung up and announced, “Lets go to Pingod.”

## **The Rescue**

Two police jeeps – with Investigating Officer Jai Ram Singh, SHO Dev Vart, sub inspector Raj Kumar, a few male and female constables – and one minivan with activists, lawyers and volunteers drove swiftly towards Pingod village. It was now well past noon. We finally reached the house in which Sakina was suspected to be imprisoned.

Now it seems that in the time that the police were deciding what to do and drinking tea, the grapevine has alerted the village. We saw only two women in the house and neither of them was Sakina. The house had a little grocery store attached to it run by Sakina’s ‘husband’. The women in the family began telling long yarns about how Sakina had gone missing. They talked at length about how they missed her, loved her and wished she hadn’t gone.

The women constables went inside the house and camped on a jute charpoy with these two women. The policemen stood in the middle of the house near the cattle shed instead of looking around for her in the village. Investigating Officer Jai Ram Singh asked one of the women, “Where is the girl you got from Madras?” The woman, understandably confused, walked away from him.

Crowds gathered in the village. In the next 20 minutes, over 200 people materialized around the house.

The pradhan of the village arrived. Pingod is a Meo Muslim dominated village where caste councils play a major role in making decisions for the people. He was a man in his 70s. He wore a white kurta, white lungi, a saafa on his head and a long mehndi-dyed beard. He handed over a sheet of paper – glossy on one side with a blue border and yellow background – to Dev Vart. The writing was in Urdu. Vart passed it on to Raj Kumar. Neither could read Urdu.

They picked a teenage boy from the crowd and asked him to read. He told them that it was Sakina's marriage certificate. Raj Kumar warned him not to read in a hurry or mess around with names. The boy resumed reading.

Meanwhile, a loud brawl broke out between one of the neighbours of the target family and Sakina's 'mother-in-law.' The women constables tried to step between them. The reason for the fight soon became clear.

The neighbour, Reshma, told the police, "Sakina is beaten up day and night. She cooks for this family of 12 and takes care of the cattle. She broke her leg a couple of days back. She is made to sleep with four men of the family, her husband, her father-in-law's brother and two of her brothers-in-law."

Sakina's 'mother-in-law' replied, "So? We bought her for Rs 13,000."

At this point Sameena, Sakina and Shamsul's aunt, piped up, "The last time we came with the police to rescue her, they told us that since they had bought her for Rs 13,000, they'd return her if we gave them Rs 20,000. We agreed but they changed their mind."

Jai Ram Singh turned to the pradhan and said, "We will have to carry out the legal procedures now. Go and get the girl."

Within a few minutes, the pradhan returned from somewhere in the village holding Sakina's hand, followed by a group of young men armed with rifles. Sakina was a little less than five feet tall. Several cuts were visible on the parts of her face and neck that were not covered by the dupatta on her head. Her eyes were yellow, as if she had jaundice. She walked with a limp.

The pradhan made Sakina stand in the middle of the courtyard of the house. She broke down as soon as she saw Shamsul and began talking to him in their particular dialect of Assamese. Shamsul tried to calm her down as he wiped his tears frantically. She waved her hand in the air gesturing 'no'.

Sakina's aunt Sameena translated for the activists. After the last time Shamsul and the police had come to rescue her and left her behind, she had been beaten badly with slabs of stone and cut with broken razors. That's how her leg was broken and her face injured.

"Her husband has told her that if she leaves this time, they will kill Shamsul. They have also told her that I am taking her away to get her married to a physically challenged man for a big sum of money. That's why she is refusing to come with us," said Sameena.

All this while, the women constables stood away in the shade watching the spectacle. Sakina stood surrounded by the pradhan, the family that had bought her and tortured her, the pack of young men with guns and the activists. Manish called for a woman volunteer from the rescue team. Jai Ram Singh instinctively also called a woman constable. They both stood on either side of Sakina.

That's when the pradhan challenged Jai Ram Singh. Afterwards, this would seem like a divine intervention. He said to the policeman, "Singh, you will pay for this [interference]. This girl is now the village's property."

Singh's ego was once more lacerated. He responded grandly, "Mullah, you have crossed all limits. Don't think of yourself larger than the law. I will make you rot in prison for the rest of your life for imprisoning a minor." He then looked towards Manish expecting appreciation. Manish played along and reciprocated with a thumbs up.

Dev Vart now spotted another group of men walking towards the house with rifles. He quickly instructed everybody to leave. The police ran with Sakina towards the jeep. Shamsul and Sameena ran too. The villagers chased them but within 30 seconds all the policemen and women had packed themselves in the two jeeps, reversed them and zoomed past the village entrance. The rescue team ran towards the mini-van as the men of the village tried to get their own vehicles ready.

The police jeeps had vanished as the mini-van struggled to keep ahead of the five cars and several bikes from the village that followed it on the way to Sadar police station in Palwal.

### **Back to the Station**

When I reached the police station with the rescue team, Sakina was already seated in Dev Vart's room with 15 more people present. Manish told Vart with a smirk, "Sir, you ran away and left us to deal with them." He replied defensively, "Who is going to deal with those Musallahs (Muslims)? They start firing at the drop of a hat."

Manish smiled and seated himself next to Jai Ram Singh who had already started arranging A4 sheets under blue carbon paper to file the FIR. He roared, "Where is the girl's brother? Now that we have got her, he won't even show his face to thank us!" Shamsul, still drowning under the joy of finding his sister and the grief at her condition, walked up to Singh. He was teary. Sakina was weeping.

Singh said, "Behen\*\*\*\*, why are you crying now? Sit next to your sister."

All the police officers in the station inadvertently use 'Behen\*\*\*\*' (sisterf\*\*\*\*\*) liberally, regardless of the age or gender of the people around them. Vart asked the police constable in the station to call the person with the best handwriting. Singh said, "Ask Raj Kumar to come."

While everyone waited for the person with the best handwriting, Singh turned to me and said how "these women cases" were too much of a headache. I asked, "How many cases of rape do you get every month?" Vart interrupted, "At least 100. But I am telling you that 90 percent of these cases are false. There are so many laws for women. None for men." I nodded and didn't respond for the fear of Sakina's FIR not getting registered.

Raj Kumar arrived ready to write down the FIR. Singh began questioning Sakina in a reprimanding tone. They wrote down Sakina's details, her name, age, address. When he asked Sakina the name of her village, she replied, "Rana ka majra". Singh exclaimed, "Behen\*\*\*\*, what kind of a name is that?"

As Jai Ram Singh also wrote down details, the Hanuman tattooed on his right arm was difficult to miss. He asked Shamsul his caste. Shamsul replied, "Muslim." Singh got confused and said, "That's a religion." Dev Vart soothed him, "They all have the same caste. Write 'Muslim'."

By now, local reporters from Palwal newspapers had entered the SHO's room and begun taking pictures of Sakina from every angle. The police officers didn't protest. One of the volunteers rose to

tell them it's illegal to take pictures of the minor survivor or publish them, that it's a legal offence. Raj Kumar warned the reporter, "Do what madam is saying. Otherwise, she will get you raided too." They laughed.

As Singh took down the details, he launched into the old jurisdiction tirade: "We are registering the FIR but this is actually not a Haryana case. You should have registered a complaint in Delhi where she was initially brought from Assam."

Manish cut him short at the appropriate moment, "Sir, the recent Supreme Court judgment, in the case of a trafficked girl from Assam and rescued from Sonapat in Haryana, is applicable everywhere. Don't worry."

Two women in their mid-30s with resolute faces entered Vart's office. One of them, a woman in a white salwar-kameez, introduced herself to Dev Vart as "Surekha Dagar, Child Protection Officer, Palwal". The other, in a maroon salwar-kameez, introduced herself as "Leela Pandey, Prohibition Officer, Palwal".

Dev Vart told Jai Ram Singh with scorn, "PO is here."

Under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, the Protection Officer can help survivors in registering complaints, filing applications before the magistrate for orders, get medical aid, shelter, legal aid and counselling. The officer also conducts field inquiries on court orders and makes sure the court orders are enforced. Under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, the Prohibition Officer is responsible for preventing solemnisation of child marriages and creating awareness about the evils of child marriage.

The nature of these officers' responsibilities under the PWDV Act and PCM Act require effective coordination with the police, special cells for women and the office of the superintendent of police in each district. The SP's office is where the Protection Officers are located, along with their subordinate staff, to ensure effective implementation of the PWDV Act and PCM Act. Protection officers are trained by NGOs and employed on contract by the government.

Protection Officer Dagar asked Ram Singh, "Why are you asking the girl questions? Where are your women police officers from the Special Cell?"

Singh lied outright, "I haven't asked a single question till now, Madam."

Dev Vart told Raj Kumar, "Call one of them."

Raj Kumar asked with a smile, "Should I call that pehlwan (wrestler)?"

Singh said with a smile, "Call anyone."

Prakash Singh, former DGP, Uttar Pradesh and Assam, [wrote](#) earlier this year in Tehelka magazine: "In January 2013, the Justice Verma Committee placed emphasis on certain aspects of police functioning – the filing and registration of complaints, improvement in infrastructure at the police stations, adequate forensic support down to the district level, improving police welfare, community policing, performance appraisal based not on statistical figures but on yardsticks like public satisfaction, safety and security of women and success in preventing incidents of communal violence."

Following the committee's recommendations, some crucial changes were brought in laws related to sexual violence but police reforms, the most important cog in the wheel, continues to rust.

As the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative's analysis of the Supreme Court Directives on Police Reforms says: "The archaic Police Act of 1861 continues to govern policing in India, despite far reaching changes in governance and India's transition from a colonised nation to a sovereign republic. As policing is a state subject under the Constitution, states must enact their own Police Acts but most states have chosen to adopt the 1861 Act. Some states have enacted their own Acts but even these closely resemble the 1861 Act. This Act and the kind of policing culture that has been allowed to flourish in independent India, have led to countless abuses by police officers. The need for police reform has been acknowledged by successive governments. Since 1979, a number of commissions and committees have been set up by the central government to suggest ways to reform the police. Yet, the recommendations of these bodies have not been implemented and their reports have largely been ignored."

The day the four accused in the December 16 Delhi gang rape case were pronounced guilty, former Commissioner of Police of Delhi, Arvind Inamdar, commented on NDTV, "Police officers should be sensitised. When a victim/survivor visits a police station to register a complaint, the police officer should have a smile on his face. A police station should be a woman's *maayka*."

Recently, a journalist friend was driving back home in Delhi a little past midnight and found a policeman following her on his bike. She pulled up to find out why. He replied, "Because it's very late in the night and you are driving alone." She politely asked him to leave her alone. This was clearly a blow to his generosity. He grumbled, "These women are such a headache."

While we now waited for a woman police officer in Palwal, Singh told Dagar, "Madam, first of all you should ask for the copies of ration cards of all these people in the rescue team. They have created a ruckus here all morning." Dagar ignored him.

The woman police officer arrived. Dagar then asked Dev Vart, "Where is the public prosecutor who will take down her statement? Why haven't you called her till now? That's most important." Vart made a quick phone call. The old man who sold chai reappeared. He was instructed to get chai-paani for everyone again. This time he did not count the number of people.

The public prosecutor arrived 10 minutes later. Dressed in a black and white salwar-kameez, vermilion from forehead to crown, wearing a shiny mangalsutra and with a scooter helmet in one hand, she said, "Namaste, sir," to Dev Vart in a docile voice.

Now, Prohibition Officer Pandey took over. She told the public prosecutor to take Sakina to another room to take her statement. Sakina, Dagar, Pandey and the public prosecutor left for the next room. Vart and Jai Ram Singh also left elsewhere.

Suddenly, the village pradhan entered the SHO's room with 20 odd men, including members of the family who had 'bought' Sakina. They told Raj Kumar bullyingly, "The girl is married under the Islamic law. You can't impose the State law." Raj Kumar replied, "We will ask the girl. If she wants to go with you, we will send her."

Manish pointed to the photocopy of the Juvenile Justice Act once more and said, "She can't go even if she wants to because she is a minor who was married."

Almost an hour later, Sakina, Dagar, Pandey and the public prosecutor returned.

The public prosecutor read out Sakina's four-page statement where she narrated all that had happened to her over the previous months. Pandey reminded the public prosecutor to note that Sakina and the man were not married in the presence of a maulvi.

The men from the village, meanwhile, were hanging about in the compound of the police station.

The activists negotiated hard with the police to make the men wait outside the station, arguing that they were intimidating Sakina. Finally, after all the documentation was in place, Sakina and her family left with Dagar and police escort for medical examinations.

### **The Way Home**

After the medical tests, the next day Sakina was presented in court and sent off to Nari Niketan in Karnal, the Haryana government's only rehabilitation home for women. She was released a week later and handed over to Shamsul to return to Assam. Sakina is now back in Kokrajhar. She is living with her paralysed father, who has stopped crying, Shamsul, and his new wife. She has re-enrolled in school "to be able to read and write", as she puts it.

The man who brought Sakina from Assam and sold her has been arrested and awaits trial. But the family that bought, imprisoned and tortured Sakina have still not been charge-sheeted.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, in 2012, 1,939 people were arrested for abducting women. Of these, 1,878 were charge-sheeted in Haryana. Only 51 people were convicted in the whole year.

On 10th August, 2013, when Sakina was released, we waited outside Nari Niketan, a prison-like building with high walls and barbed wire in which 30-odd women are said to share a room. In June 2013, two girls, both the same age as Sakina, were found [dead in a bathroom](#) there.

As we waited that day in the SHO's office, Investigating Officer Jai Ram Singh with the Hanuman on his arm told me, "Madam, I keep away from women. They are the cause of all troubles."

I again kept quiet since he was officially required to escort Sakina to the railway station and she would be travelling in his car.

(Some names have been changed to protect identities.)

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