

**STORY STATEMENT-PRIYANKA DUBEY**  
**“THE MISSING GIRLS OF LAKHIMPUR”**  
**(INVESTIGATION)**

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**Missing Girls of Lakhimpur is a year-long investigation exposing for the first time a ‘three layered network of women traffickers and placement agents involved in trafficking, selling and forcing minor girls into a ugly web of bounded labour and unending sexual-physical exploitation’. With on-record NINE recorded confessions of women traffickers, the story for the first time puts the beautiful tea-gardens of Assam as one of fastest emerging capitals of ‘women trafficking in India’ and then the inescapable plight of these women as bounded labourers, prostitutes and rape victims. The story travels from New Delhi to remote villages of the Lakhimpur district of Assam (a north-eastern state of India) and then back to Delhi tracing missing girls, traffickers and illegal placement agents. I chronicled forgotten stories of numerous ‘tea-tribe’ families living in rural Assam who are waiting for their missing girls to return since many years and then scooped out on record video confessions of 9 women traffickers currently involved in trafficking and selling girls of Lakhimpur in New Delhi. After tracing down traffickers, placement agents for over a year, this investigation finally exposed how at-least 40 minor girls are being trafficked every month from this north-eastern district of India and how Lakhimpur is the New Emerging Women Trafficking Capital of India.**

## The Missing Girls Of Lakhimpur

*On an average, 40 girls disappear from this district in Assam every month. Priyanka Dubey tracks how it has emerged as the new hub of human trafficking*



**PRIYANKA DUBEY**

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**Vanishing act** Many of the missing girls from Lakhimpur district end up working as bonded labourers in metros across the country Photo: **Vikas Kumar**

**With** its tea gardens and paddy fields, [Assam](#)'s Lakhimpur district, located between the Brahmaputra and Subansiri rivers, is a picturesque place. But this pleasant picture hides a chilling reality. With around 40 girls going missing every month, this district with a population of 10 lakh has emerged as a hub of [human trafficking](#). An [investigation](#) by TEHELKA has blown the lid off a multi-layered network of illegal placement agencies based in New [Delhi](#) and Mumbai, and their local agents who have been luring girls

from the district into a quagmire of exploitation with promises of jobs, money, marriage, a life in the city or simply “a trip to [Delhi](#)”.

Almost every village in Lakhimpur has its share of stories of girls who went to [Delhi](#) and never returned. TEHELKA went to 10 villages and talked to girls who had returned after being exploited for years, and to the families of those who had died or are still missing. While some were pushed into prostitution, others were raped by their employers or by the owners of placement agencies.

Serophena Barla, 45, from Dulhat Bagan village under the Laluk Police Station, says her 15-year-old daughter Sonali\* went to [Delhi](#) with a local agent, Samuel Tarki, in March 2008. Serophena’s husband used to work in a tea garden. “We were miserable after the tea gardens closed down. That’s when Samuel took her to [Delhi](#), saying she would earn money and return after a year,” she says. “It’s been four years since I last spoke to her on the phone. Samuel says he doesn’t know where she is. It scares me to imagine what might have happened to her.”

At nearby Dolpa-Pathar village, Safeera Khatoon has been waiting for her daughter Shanu Begum since 2010. “Shanu had just turned 16 when Haseena Begum, who used to live in our village, asked me to send her to [Delhi](#) with her. I refused as there were other girls here who had gone to [Delhi](#) and did not return,” she recalls. “But one day, Haseena’s sister took my daughter to her place and from there Haseena took her to [Delhi](#).”

Safeera went to Haseena’s house several times to ask about her daughter, but her family refused to say anything. “I went to the police but they refused to register a complaint. Haseena hasn’t returned from [Delhi](#) either,” she says. With Shanu’s photo in her hand, she pleads, “Please bring my daughter back!”

The endless wait of mothers like Serophena and Safeera is only half the tragedy. Many girls who have managed to return say they were raped and tortured while working as bonded labourers in [Delhi](#), Mumbai, Ahmedabad and Chandigarh.

Rabia Khatoon of Lukumpur village, who returned from [Delhi](#) after four years, is facing a social boycott that has made life difficult for her. She was 15 in 2009 when Anita Beg, a local agent, took her to [Delhi](#), where she found herself trapped in a web of sexual, mental and financial harassment. “My mother had told me not to go. But one day when she wasn’t home,

Anita came and told me I could go with her for a trip to [Delhi](#),” says Rabia. “There were other girls with her who said they pay well in [Delhi](#) for very little work. I went along thinking I would be back soon.”

In [Delhi](#), Rabia was taken to a placement agency in Shakurpur Basti run by Mahesh Gupta. “I was sent to work as a maid at a bungalow in Punjabi Bagh. Whenever I asked to go home, I was told that I couldn’t go anywhere for one year. After a year, I was sent to Gupta’s office again. He didn’t pay me anything and sent me to a bungalow in Ahmedabad,” she says. “When I told my new employer that Gupta didn’t pay me and that I wanted to go home, he gave me Rs 11,000 and sent me back to Gupta. Of that, Gupta let me keep only Rs 2,000 and sent me to Guwahati.”

That was not the end of Rabia’s ordeal. Though she returned home at the end of 2011, she was trapped once again by the traffickers. A man called Walson Godra tricked her into believing that he was friends with Gupta and could help her get her money back. “He said it would take just one day,” she says. Godra took her to another agency in [Delhi](#) run by two men, Imran and Mithun. “When I called Walson, he said he had reached [Assam](#) and would come back soon. The next day, I was told that Walson had sold me off for Rs 10,000. I was forced to work at a bungalow in Rohini. I ran away after a month.”

Rabia went to the agency’s office and asked to be sent home. “But Imran called Mithun and three others and told them to take me away and do what they liked,” she recalls. “Mithun threatened me that if I didn’t agree to work, he would send me to a worse place. I had fever. On the pretext of taking me to a doctor, they took me to a brothel. When I refused to be left there, they took me to another place and sexually abused me for a week. Then they left me at the Old [Delhi](#) Railway Station. An auto driver helped me reach an ashram from where I was sent to [Assam](#).”

“Everybody knows about it now. My mother has suffered a lot of humiliation. I won’t even get married now,” she says in a breaking voice. “I haven’t recovered completely. My abdomen hurts all the time. I’m afraid I will never be fine again.”

In 2009, Suman Nagasiya of Silonibadi village was taken to [Delhi](#) by a local agent, Stephen, when she was only 15. “Suman died two months ago, just a month after she returned,” says her father Mahanand Nagasiya, 50. Women

from the neighbourhood told TEHELKA that Suman was sexually assaulted in [Delhi](#).

“Suman was a student in a nearby school. Stephen, who has taken several girls to [Delhi](#), wanted to take her there too. When I and her mother refused, he told Suman that other girls from the school were also going with them,” recalls Mahanand. “One day she went on a picnic with her friends and Stephen took her to [Delhi](#) from there. Later we were told that she worked at a bungalow in Gurgaon.”

Suman was seriously ill when she returned home this year. “Her employer sent her back with Rs 15,000 when she fell ill. We spent it on her treatment but she didn’t survive,” says her father. “They had done something terrible to her in [Delhi](#). She couldn’t even stand on her feet.” A boy from the neighbourhood told TEHELKA that Stephen had also taken his 11-year-old sister, Julia Khadiya, to [Delhi](#) four years ago. She hasn’t returned home.



In the dark The daughter of Dafli, a blacksmith, has been missing since 2011 Photo: Vikas Kumar

Another girl from the village, Lalin Horo, was 16 in 2010 when she was taken to [Delhi](#). She returned after two years. “We were in dire straits as there was little work in the tea gardens. Along with some other girls, I went with an agent Vijay Tirki to [Delhi](#),” she says. “He took us to Umesh Rai’s office in Shakurpur and I was sent to Shalimar Bagh to work as a maid for Rs 2,000 per month.” But she wasn’t paid even after two years. “Umesh took all the money. They were not letting me leave and didn’t even allow me to speak to my family,” she adds. Fortunately, Lalin’s father went to [Delhi](#) looking for her and managed to bring her back.

In 2011, Shivangi Khujoor and her sister Elema of Dulhat village, who were 16 and 17 then, were taken to [Delhi](#) by a relative, Kusma Tarki. “Kusma took us to Sri Sai Enterprises run by Srinivas. Elema was given work at the

office while I was sent to a house in Malviya Nagar, where I worked for four months,” says Shivangi. “My sister left after Srinivas sexually abused her. I learnt of it later when they asked me to work for him. He made advances at me too. I went to the police, who sent me home but didn’t arrest Srinivas.”

While Article 23 of the Constitution bans [human trafficking](#) and bonded labour and there are strict provisions against trafficking under the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1986, it was only in March that a clear definition of the crime was written into the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Following the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, based on the Justice Verma Committee’s recommendations, Section 370(A) of the IPC defines [human trafficking](#) as follows: “If a person recruits, transports, harbours, transfers, or receives, a person or persons, by using threats, force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power, or inducement for exploitation including prostitution, slavery, organ removal, etc., he will be committing the crime of [human trafficking](#).”

The horror that girls like Sonali, Shanu, Rabia and Suman have faced is a reminder that we are still a long way from ending [human trafficking](#). A confidential report released by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in response to an [RTI](#) filed in July last year backs the harrowing tales of these girls. It confirms that a large number of 10 to 15-year-old girls brought from the [Northeast](#) to [Delhi](#) and Mumbai are victims of trafficking.

According to the report, “Most of the girls are made to sign papers written in English, which they don’t understand. Their pay ranges from 2,200-4,500, but the entire amount is kept by the placement agency. These agencies are not legally registered and function under the Partnership Act. These girls are not allowed to talk to their parents nor are they given permission to visit any of their relatives in [Delhi](#). Many of these girls also become victims of rape and sexual violence. There is evidence that in most cases the local police are aware of these incidents of trafficking and the plight of these girls.”

Walter Fernandes, director of the Guwahati- based North-Eastern Social Research Centre, sees a connection between the closing down of many tea gardens in the [Northeast](#) between 2005 and 2010, and the rise of [human trafficking](#) from the region. “Families of the tea garden workers who lost their livelihood became easy prey for traffickers,” he explains. “Poverty compels them to look for work elsewhere and they trust anybody offering them an opportunity to earn money.”

According to the [NHRC](#) report, a growing network of agents in the region is the main reason for the rise in trafficking. Agrees Joseph Minj, a Lakhimpur-based lawyer who takes up cases of missing girls. “There is an agent in every village,” he says. “The lure of easy money makes many locals take up this illegal activity.”

Lakhimpur Superintendent of Police PK Bhuyan, however, denied there were any instances of trafficking in the district. “This indifferent attitude of the police is also responsible for turning Lakhimpur into the capital of [human trafficking](#),” says Kailash Satyarthi, founder of [Delhi](#)-based Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA).

In February, the BBA started a nationwide awareness march against the growing incidents of [human trafficking](#) in the [Northeast](#). The BBA also petitioned the Supreme Court on missing children and in a landmark judgment in May, a Bench headed by the then Chief Justice of India Altamas Kabir directed the police to register all cases of missing children with the assumption that they could be victims of kidnapping or trafficking.

“The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act and the Supreme Court’s decision make it mandatory for the police not only to register cases of missing girls but also to probe the functioning of local agents and placement agencies under Sections 370 and 370 (A) of IPC,” says Satyarthi.

Replying to a question during this year’s Budget Session in Parliament, Union Minister of State, Development of North Eastern Region, Paban Singh Ghatowar, agreed that an increasing number of children have gone missing from Lakhimpur. “But the police have traced many of them,” he said. “We have issued a notice that a complaint should be registered every time a child goes missing.”

But Satyarthi points out that traffickers are still shielded by politicians and the police. “Nobody wants female trafficking to stop. They all profit from it,” he says.

Though the government and the local police don’t have data on trafficking in Lakhimpur, **TEHELKA talked to nine traffickers who revealed that as many as 40 girls go missing every month from the district. They confessed to having taken around 187 girls to [Delhi](#) since 2005.**



**Silvester**

Photo: **Vikas Kumar**

## **1. Silvester**

A resident of Lakhimpur's Tunijan village, Silvester took as many as 45 girls to [Delhi](#) between 2005 and 2010 as an agent for the Sai Placement Agency run by one Srinivas in New [Delhi](#)'s Shakurpur locality. "When I started this work, I was being paid a commission of Rs 3,000 per girl," he admits. "By 2010, the commission had increased to Rs 6,000. Today, the rate is Rs 10,000." Silvester says there are hundreds of placement agencies in [Delhi](#) — more than 200 in Shakurpur itself.

Srinivas had told Silvester that they could make a lot of money if they sent the girls to foreign countries. "I think the girls are sent mostly to Arab countries as the demand there is high," he says. "Srinivas got Rs 2 lakh for every girl sent abroad. I never did it myself, but I know that local agents get Rs 50,000 for it."

Silvester quit working for the trafficking network in 2010. "Srinivas didn't pay the girls and their families came complaining to me. Then one also had to deal with the police," he says. However, he admits that the number of local agents in Lakhimpur has gone up over the years.

## **2. Vijay Tirki**

Vijay Tirki, 45, is one of the most active agents in Lakhimpur. Some of the girls he sent to [Delhi](#) are still in the clutches of placement agencies while others returned empty-handed after toiling hard for years. "I started trafficking girls three years ago. Many local agents were making a lot of money by taking girls to [Delhi](#). One of them gave me Srinivas' card and I contacted him," he says. "So far, I have taken a total of 13 girls to [Delhi](#)." Three of the girls he took to Srinivas' agency haven't returned yet. "Srinivas didn't pay anything to two girls and I can't contact the others. One of them

was sent to Chandigarh. They are not letting her go either,” he says. Later, he worked as an agent for another placement agency in Shakurpur run by one Umesh Rai. “One of the girls is still there,” he says.

### 3. Ajanta

Ajanta, 23, is the youngest of the traffickers who spoke to TEHELKA. “I went to work in [Delhi](#) for the first time when I only 15 or 16,” she reveals. “A local agent had taken me to Srinivas. He made me work for a year. I came back with Momin, an agent, and went to [Delhi](#) again with another agent Kusma. I worked there and made some money, so I started taking other girls along. Now I don’t work. I don’t like working. I only send the girls to one Sushant in Govindpuri. Some three months ago, I sent three girls aged between 15 and 22.”



**Samuel Tarki**

Photo: **Vikas Kumar**

### 4. Samuel Tarki

Samuel Tarki admits to having sent around 35 girls to placement agencies in [Delhi](#) between 2003 and 2012. He started trafficking girls after getting in touch with Srinivas’ placement agency in [Delhi](#). According to him, there are agents in every village and at least 60 girls are trafficked every month from the district. He told TEHELKA that the number of agents has gone up since the closing down of tea gardens in the region in 2003. “Fear of the police, though, has made their operations more secretive,” he says.

### 5-6. Kusma Tarki and Jewel Khujoor

The [NHRC](#) report mentioned in the story discloses that between 24 August 2008 and 19 April 2010, Kusma Tarki trafficked 53 children to [Delhi](#) by promising them jobs. A resident of Dulhat Bagan, she admits that she and her brother Jewel Khujoor did take these children to [Delhi](#). “I used to work

for Srinivas but left when my son fell ill. Srinivas paid me only 5,000 for a year's work, but told me that if I brought others from my village, he would pay me a commission," she says. Kusma reveals that besides local agents, girls already working with placement agencies are also asked to bring other children from their village in lieu of a commission. "There are so many of them who haven't returned home. Srinivas used to talk to Jewel about sending girls out of the country. I'm sure they do that. Perhaps that's what they did with my neighbour Sonali Barla who hasn't returned home," says Kusma.



**Stephen**  
Photo: Vikas Kumar

## 7. Stephen

Three years ago, Stephen used to send boys to Sister Jocelyn and Mahendra Nayak of Munirka in [Delhi](#) to be hired as security guards. "Then I started sending girls to Babita Enterprises in Shakurpur run by one Pravin," he confesses. "So far, I have taken about 22 girls to [Delhi](#)." (Stephen was later arrested from Sonapat, Haryana in a case of trafficking.)



**Vishwajit**  
Photo: Vikas Kumar

## 8-9. Vishwajit and Anita

In 2010, Vishwajit had brought a 17-year-old Suhani Lohar from Dulhat Bagan to Umesh Rai's agency in [Delhi](#). Later, Suhani was among six girls who were rescued during a police raid at Rai's office. Suhani told the police that Rai had sexually abused her. Vishwajit has spent three months behind bars. Anita admitted to having sent 10 girls from her village to Srinivas' and Mahesh Gupta's agencies in [Delhi](#).

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### **'The asking rate for a girl is Rs 40,000'**

*Pretending to be members of a middle-class family looking for a domestic help, TEHELKA spoke to several placement agencies in [Delhi](#). A hidden camera recorded a conversation with Rakesh Kumar, who runs Uttara Placement Agency in Shakurpur. EDITED EXCERPTS*



Rajesh Kumar Placement agent, [Delhi](#)

Photo: **Hidden Camera Grab**

**Please suggest a place where there is no hassle in getting a girl and the matter is fixed at once.**

Yes, absolutely, you will get a good response from Panna Lal. He returns the amount if the girl doesn't suit you. In Shakurpur, there are many who send the girl, take money and then help her flee. With Panna Lal, it's not like that.

**Ok. What is Panna Lal's address?**

There is a Shamshan Ghat to the left of Britannia Chowk. Take the turn next to it. It's right there in front of Barat Ghar. He always has girls.

**Where does he get the girls from? [Jharkhand](#)?**

He has girls from [Jharkhand](#), [Assam](#) and Odisha. He buys girls from more than half the agencies.

**How much is he going to charge? What about the girl's pay? She will have to do everything.**

His rate is a little high. He takes around Rs 35-40,000. If the girl is 'semi-trained', it would be Rs 5,000 for her.

**Is his rate the highest around here?**

Yes. He's the kingpin here. More than half the agencies sell girls to him.

**Earlier, we had brought a girl from Chirag [Delhi](#). We paid 30,000 for her. But she ran away within three months...**

We are not like those who provide the girl, take the money and then help the girl flee... Shakurpur is full of such cheats. Subodh, Montu Misra, Aalam, Anil, Umesh Rai and Pravin are all like that.

**The Chirag [Delhi](#) guy told us about Umesh Rai and Pravin. Can we get girls from them?**

They are crooks. All of them in Shakurpur are crooks.

**Where is their agency?**

Umesh's office was at M-680, right above my office. But he closed it down and went to some other place in the city. But Pravin still lives there. Let me tell you, if you come after the 20th of this month, you can take the girl from me. I will have girls after the 20th.

**You are from Mathura, UP, isn't it? How did you get into this business?**

I used to work as a scrap dealer in Himachal Pradesh. My uncle knew Panna Lal. Panna Lal often said that he wanted to open an office there. He asked me to work with him. So I joined.

**So, he sends girls to Himachal as well?**

They are sent everywhere; mostly Himachal and Srinagar. Shambhu is the one who sends them abroad. He prepares agreements of two years. Panna Lal operates within the country.

**Tell me of someone who could send a girl abroad. My sister needs someone to take care of her kid.**

The one I mentioned is good. Choose a girl and he will take care of all else. He has contacts. Otherwise you can wait. Before the 20th, you won't find a girl anywhere else.

**Why?**

There is police from [Jharkhand](#), [Bihar](#) and [Assam](#) here. Around 5,000 girls the agents brought have gone missing. They haven't returned home yet.

**Where do they go?**

*Arre*, it's nothing. The agents bring them and the agencies place them somewhere. Then we lose track of them. No one knows where they go.

***(Published in Tehelka Magazine, Volume 10 Issue 39, Dated 28 September 2013)***

STORY LINK : <http://www.tehelka.com/the-missing-girls-of-lakhimpur/>

## STORY STATEMENT

### 'Why No One Wants Policewomen in Latehar'

'Why No One Wants a Policewomen in Latehar' is the first and strongest part of my 'Three Part Investigative Series' on the multiple narratives of the awful situation of Indian Policewomen. This story was published on 'Yahoo Originals' (an exclusive section created by Yahoo News-India for producing original ground stories) on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2014.

But my work on this Three Months long pan India investigation started back in mid January 2014.

Latehar is small town situated in the conflict-hit Jharkhand state of India. A 27 year old female police constable was brutally gang raped in this Maoist-infested naxal zone in August 2013. The woman was a tribal, a widow, mother of two and was appointed on compensatory grounds after her husband died in a Maoist ambush. Adding to the horror was the circumstances on the night when she was raped. That night, she was coming back after collecting the dead-body of her sister and was travelling to her native village with her family for the cremation of her sister's body. In the middle of the dead night, she was attacked and gang raped by a bunch of gangsters while her family waited back with the corpse of her dead sister. Unlike December Delhi gang rape case, this case received very little media attention despite the brazen gruesomeness of the act.

Honestly, I was very much disturbed by the sad story of this policewoman and I wanted to pursue this story. But it took me 4 months to collect basic resources/funds for doing this investigation and lining up a network of sources in the deep conflict hit region. The whole point here was to get access to this police-woman because she was not talking to any-one. Because she was under pressure from the Indian police department and was asked not to malign the police department and not to speak to the media.

Her trauma was this: any ordinary woman can go to police if she is raped and at-least can criticize if the police does not help or investigates her case. But she herself being a policewoman could not criticize because she was

**under threat and pressure from her colleagues and only job was at stake. She was not speaking to the media at all.**

**She was a representative of Indian women- a question – if this is the condition of a woman in Indian Police, then you can imagine the situation and vulnerability. Also, she was a symbol of the situation of who are posted in deep interiors and work in Naxal/ Maoist hit conflict zones like Jharkhand State. I got information that at her work place, she was blamed for the crime that she survived. Most of her male colleagues made fun of her and bad-mouthed her as a woman of ‘loose character’. If she goes to the media to speak out, she loses her job.**

**It was a very delicate matter and a very challenging story. This story was basically a litmus test for me on the issues of what and how much to report in a rape case. I decided that the best way possible could be the most humane way of approaching the story.**

**It was very difficult to get access to rape victim, to make her speak, to gain her confidence and to write her story without making her any more vulnerable to threats and pressures from her work place. Also the other big challenge for me was to expose the deeply sexist environment she is enduring at her work place (Indian police stations) and to lay bare the deeply misogynistic and anti-women mindset of Indian police without letting any fall-out of the story come on the victim.**

**I did my homework and traveled from New Delhi to the Latehar Police Station (Jharkhand State) and posed as a writer working on Indian Policewomen. My attempt was to somehow spend long time at the police station and make the policemen speak. And few hours down my conversation with them, they did say many deeply offensive things about the victim and policewomen in general. All of that is in the story.**

**Then I traveled more deep to the Bhandaria Block of Latehar district of Jharkhand state to meet the victim. She is a native for a small tribal village of the Bhandaria block which happens to be one among the three most dangerous and intense Maoist-base dens in India.**

**I crossed intensely Maoist infested dense forest valleys to reach her village. I spent time with her and her family in her mud hut and slowly gained her and gave her courage to speak out. I had to become one among them to**

make her and her family feel comfortable and at ease. Then she finally gave me a detailed interview which lays bare the pathetic situation of women work force working in Indian Police.

I entered the world of Indian policewomen through the victim and was so moved by what I had found out that I decided to go more deep, investigate and do a complete series on the situation of Indian Policewomen. The fact that Indian media had completely neglected and this story was never told made me more firm to pursue the idea.

After all, the very pillar of Indian democracy- which is suppose to withhold law and work for the welfare of Indian citizens is deeply entrenched in hard core patriarchal values and has a very-very hostile behavior/approach towards women working in Indian Police. The plight of women working in Indian police was never ever reported in perspective.

So I spoke to a number of Indian policewomen, kept on traveling and taking interviews for three months. My work resulted in publication of a three part series on Indian Policewomen which was very widely read and shared.

The three parts of my Policewomen are:

PART 1: <https://in.news.yahoo.com/why-no-one-wants-policewomen-in-latehar-065157178.html>

PART 2: <https://in.news.yahoo.com/ladies--can-they-do-it--can-they-be-officers-061524184.html>

PART 3: <https://in.news.yahoo.com/is-the-indian-policewoman-a--showpiece--104421387.html>

I have submitted FIRST PART ([WHY NO ONE WANTS A POLCIEWOMEN IN LATEHAR](#)) of this three part series as my entry story for the The Kurt Schork Awards in International Journalism.

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## Why No One Wants Policewomen in Latehar.

Everyone in Latehar police station knows how constable Neetu Kumar was raped on the way to her sister's funeral. Even the ASI breaks into a grin when he says she did not resist her attackers. While the vitriol flows in Latehar on women's place in the police force and their supposed inability to handle work, no one is tackling the larger problem that should be most obvious - training, so crucial to the careers of their male peers, remains beyond the reach of women constables.

By **Priyanka Dubey** | Grist Media – **Mon 10 Mar, 2014**

It is a late February morning, and we are at the town police station of Latehar district, situated around 110 km away from Jharkand's capital Ranchi. The dark, damp and dingy interior of the police station is unusually quiet and deserted. We pass by an empty central desk, empty lock-ups and leaking taps on our way to the room of station in-charge Virender Ram.

Virender Ram hefts a heavy bundle of papers on the desk and says, "This is the case diary of her gang-rape case. She is a constable here and I know that you have traveled from Delhi to meet her, because you think she should get justice. We are all working towards the same goal. You know how detailed the case diary we have prepared is? Our investigation in this case is already being talked about in police trainings sessions. But *she* isn't interested. *She* is not talking to anyone. She is happy and normal. I feel she isn't that keen on getting justice for herself. Besides, she is on leave now."

In the Latehar Police Station, I go through the case diary and other documents related to what is now known here as the Neetu Kumar gangrape case. With every passing conversation about Neetu, the subtle whispered campaign against her is more and more evident. The personnel of this station have been maligning their own colleague for many months now.

On August 20, 2013, Neetu, a 27-year-old constable in Latehar district, was traveling in an SUV with her parents, brother and two other relatives from Ranchi to their village in Garhwa district. Neetu had been appointed constable after her policeman husband was killed in December 2011 in a [Maoist ambush](#)

of independent MP Inder Singh Namdhari's convoy. Two years after her husband's death, she was barely piecing together her life - the new job, her two children.

But in August 2013 it was no ordinary trip the family was taking. In the car was the corpse of Neetu's sister, who had been murdered along with her husband. The family intended to perform the cremation in their village, but as the grieving family drove down National Highway 75, they were to encounter a worse tragedy. Their car was stopped by a group of men who robbed the family and raped Neetu. Three days after the crime, Latehar Police arrested five men for dacoity and rape.

Virender Ram says, "They were all drunk. They blocked the highway and robbed ten other vehicles also. All of them robbed her family but only two were involved in rape. Her vaginal swabs were tested and the DNA proved that two of them were involved in the rape."

On paper, it seems as if her colleagues have treated Neetu with consideration. After the gang rape, Neetu and her family asked for security. The Jharkhand police then transferred her to the women's police station of Latehar district and gave her residential quarters on the police station campus. There, her colleagues told me that she was on leave and had gone to her village for a family ceremony.

It's been six months since the event. When I ask Ram, the man in charge of the station Neetu once worked in, about her work, he says, "Women constables here do regular duty. They are generally asked to come if there is any arrest involving women or for controlling women participants in public protests. Neetu was herself a constable here and clearly knew a complaint should be filed whenever a crime happens. But she did not come to the police station after being robbed and raped. Instead she went back to her rented accommodation in Latehar with her family."

Smirking, he expresses surprise that Neetu didn't come to the police station first to register an FIR. "When we got the information of these highway robberies and went to the spot, we found a ladies' purse and a gold chain lying

there. One of the constables found her passport photo in uniform from that purse and so we identified her. When the next morning she was asked about how her purse, ATM cards, gold chain and other material was found on the highway, only then she told us that her family was robbed and she was raped." The smirk widens into a smile when he adds, "There were no signs of protest or resistance. The accused told us during investigation that she was repeatedly asking them to do whatever they want to do but to spare her life."

He warns me that travelling to Garhwa district to meet Neetu will be useless. Then, almost chuckling, he sums up his sentiments: "You want to meet her and you came here because you feel that she is raped, something bad happened to her. We feel the same...but if you see her she looks absolutely normal and happy. There's no trace of sorrow or stress on her face. Don't write it like this, but I think her character is not good. You can go if you want but I'd say that meeting her won't be useful."

Despite the department repeatedly boasting about how everything is being done to ensure that Neetu Kumar gets justice, remains safe and keeps working, the undercurrent of hostility surfaces easily.

Assistant Sub-Inspector (ASI) Rameshwar Singh was one of the first police officers to reach the scene of the crime in the wee hours of August 21, 2013. On being asked about the case, the middle-aged man breaks into a similar indifferent grin. After a few minutes of casual conversation, he opens up about his doubts. "The incident happened around 1am, and we met her around 10 that morning, only when we called her. She is in the police force. Why didn't she come to us first? How could she go and sleep at her home after being raped? We filed the case, got her medical [test] done and did everything. But she wasn't keen to get justice because she is like that only. She did not even resist while she was being raped. Everybody around knows how many affairs she had. I can count them for you."

I try to unpack the implications of what Singh and his colleagues are saying. As investigators, they aren't denying that Neetu was raped. The allegations instead are two-fold.

One, Neetu's response during the rape was not what they think women should do when confronted with rape - flail, cry and resist even at the cost of their lives. They certainly should not try to negotiate.

Two, Neetu's response after the rape didn't follow their rulebook either. Death, violence, gang rape on the side of a road when her sister's body hadn't been cremated yet. Even under these circumstances, they would have preferred it if Neetu had trotted up to the station and filed an FIR.

Somehow these two allegations add up in the ASI's mind to being the behavior of a promiscuous woman.

At the Latehar police station, this ugly contempt was not limited to Neetu Kumar. In a conversation outside the police station, the ASI tells me about his views of women working in the police force. He says, "Like Neetu, most of these women constables come on compensation appointments. They don't work at all and get a salary equal to us. They are almost like a showpiece. Madam, you please write this with my name - that these women don't work but get equal pay. We have to take them to the sites of protest because only women can intervene with women protestors. But we have to keep an eye and take care of these constables too whenever we take them on any assignment."

He adds, "On the contrary, I think that all women should be removed from the police force. They don't have any purpose at police stations. They only create unwanted stress and problems. Whenever there is a women constable present at the police station, there is stress among policemen. We are not able to work properly. They do nothing but only distract, pollute the environment and so generally many people at police stations end up having illicit relations with them."

In the women's cell of the Latehar Police Station, situated in a small building 10 meters away from the main one, I met four women constables working under a male in-charge and an assistant in-charge. Since it was established in March 2011, the women's cell of the Latehar Police station has never had a woman in charge. Lal Bahadur Ram, the head of the cell, says, "Women do the usual *pehredari* and are taken to public protests to handle female protesters.

We cannot treat male and female officers as equals. We [men] have to keep an eye on our female staff. Whenever they are sent out on any assignment, they are always escorted by male colleagues. We do all this to protect them."

The women's cell has always been short of female staff. Station personnel say that this is because of the smaller proportion of female staff in the police overall. As Ram put it, "very few women apply and even fewer get through the physical tests".

Of the four women constables sitting quietly in the cell, two were appointed on 'compensation grounds' - appointed in lieu of their dead husbands. Nanika Koi, Leelawati Devi and Pramila Devi are natives of Latehar district and have only attended school up to Class 10. The fourth, Poonam Kumari is from the neighboring Garhwa district and has a Bachelor's degree.

They are quiet in the beginning, silent even about why they joined the service. Nanika and Leelawati say that they took up the job to run their households after their husbands died. They'd have taken any job, but this is the only one they got. Nanika slowly murmurs, "It never occurred to me that things like motivation count in one's life. I've never had the luxury to think about liking my job or about empowerment. I had children to feed. I had to work."

Pramila Devi, their colleague, says she has three children. Her husband was doing nothing. She had to do something to feed her family and a job as a police constable just came along. She smiles as she says, "Everybody in the thana knows my husband. He often comes here to pick me up and drop me, or even just like that. He is closer to my colleagues than I am."

Poonam is the only woman in the Latehar police station who talks about liking her work. Her face shines as she says, "I like to be in the police. I feel confident. I think I can do something for my country and earn my own money through this work. But we always go out with our seniors as the world is bad for women. No woman is safe, not even us. One of our colleagues was raped last year. So we try to be careful."

Since the [Sixth Central Pay Commission's recommendations](#) were accepted,

the take-home salary of these police constables falls between Rs 17,000 and Rs 18,000. Their basic pay is Rs 7,100, with a 100 percent dearness allowance, adding another 7100 rupees to their payment. They also get a food allowance of Rs 1,000, Rs 300 as medical allowance and other rotating allowances.

I ask if they mind being photographed. They pose happily inside the building. When I ask if they're willing to be photographed outside the gate of the women's cell, near the signboard, they're very reluctant. From the gate, they are in the line of vision of all the male officers of the main station and this, they tell me later, is what makes them hesitate.

\* \* \*

To meet Neetu Kumar, you have to cross a heavily forested Maoist stronghold past ruined and deserted roads to reach the Anda-Mahua forest range in Bhandaria block of Garhwa district. Neetu's village is on the Jharkhand-Chhattisgarh border near Jashpur. Amid the wedding celebrations of a relative and a huge crowd gathered around her mother's home, she was anxious and initially refused to meet me.

Surrounded by hordes of relatives, Neetu sits quietly on a plastic chair under the white-floral tent pitched in front of a pond and the wide open lane beside which her mud hut lies. A goods carrier loaded with wedding gifts such as a red almirah and plastic chairs stands in front of her and children dance all around. Dressed in a pink georgette sari and green bangles, Neetu comes to a corner of the open tent and sits with her child in her lap. Her brother and mother sit close by. She begins the conversation by saying she is afraid to talk to anyone at all about her situation - the complex predicament of a woman who faced sexual violence and happened to be in the police. She says, "Normal women can talk to the media, criticize the police and express themselves. But I cannot. If I said anything to anyone, my department would say that I am bad-mouthing the police in the media. And I have to work there. I have children to feed."

Her younger brother says quietly, "We didn't go to the police when this happened to her because like any other family, we didn't want the matter to

come out. It would bring a bad name to her and to us. And that happened. Her life isn't normal now."

Recalling the night she was attacked, Neetu says, "I have already lost my husband in conflict. That day my sister was murdered. Our family has seen too much violence. So when that day they dragged me out of the vehicle I went quietly. Those who ask me why I did not resist, would they have come to feed my children had the men slaughtered me? I wasn't in a position to resist. I have lost too much in life to resist. I wanted to live because I had children waiting back home." She cries silently and then begins looking up at the sky to calm herself. After a while, she gathers herself and speaks in a quiet rage about the complete absence of training that she or her female colleagues receive. They do 'regular duty' as ASI Rameshwar Singh said, but without the regular training that any man in the police gets, setting them up to fail.

While calming down the child crying in her lap, she says, "The other day, DIG *sahib* said to me that he will dismiss me because despite being a cop, I could not protect myself." She doesn't rage further about her superior officer blaming her for getting raped.

She continues, "I told him that I didn't know how to protect myself. I was never trained like that. We never held a pistol in our hands. We are trained only in holding a *danda* (wooden stick), and not even properly. Our training was never a matter of concern since most of us are not considered capable of doing any serious work. But how can we protect others or even ourselves without any proper training?"

When asked about her idea of justice for herself and her plans for the future, she looks up at the sky again. After a long pause, she slowly adds, "I don't want my rapists to be hanged because I am afraid that my family will be attacked in retaliation. I want them to be behind bars. And I want to live a normal, quiet and free life now. I want to do my work and raise my children quietly. And I think the one thing that I crave for now is normalcy. I want to be able to just live normally again. But I know this is not possible."

*(Neetu Kumar is not the constable's real name.)*

*This is the first in a three-part series on policewomen in India. Look out for Part II and Part III in the days to follow.*

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**LINKS TO ALL THREE PARTS OF THIS SERIES:**

**PART 1: <https://in.news.yahoo.com/why-no-one-wants-policewomen-in-latehar-065157178.html>**

**PART 2: <https://in.news.yahoo.com/ladies--can-they-do-it--can-they-be-officers-061524184.html>**

**Part 3: <https://in.news.yahoo.com/is-the-indian-policewoman-a--showpiece--104421387.html>**

**‘The Forgotten Rape Stories’ is a 3 months long investigation having original accounts of five rape survivors of India. The story lays bare the multiple legal, emotional, social, financial and psychological battles that these five rape survivors are still going through.**

All these cases hogged intense media headlines when they happened, but years after the crime...all of the victims are still enduring humiliating lives full of government negligence, multifaceted torture and the innate (awful) shame of being a rape victim in India.

I planned this story in context of the then up-coming judicial verdict on the infamous Delhi December Gang Rape case. At a time when whole national and international media was focusing on the December Gang Rape story (which was obviously very important ) I wanted to throw light on what happened to some of the most talked about, written about previous rape cases? Just to draw light on what is happening to these rape victims after the media frenzy was over.

The deeper idea was to spend time (a few days to a week) with each rape survivor, just live with her, get in her life, become one amongst her and her family and then write about the multiple battles she is fighting- **legal, emotional, social, financial, political, psychological along with battles against their own police and administrative systems. I wanted to investigate their present lives and through them expose the hostile fabric of multiple Indian systems (political-police-administration-health care- judiciary and society at large) and how it responds to a rape victim.**

**I traveled across 5 states of India and worked on investigating each of these 5 cases and putting maximum effort in gaining access to the survivor and to her living place for a longer time. The result was this 10 pages long (8500 words) cover story which was first published in Tehelka’s national Hindi magazine and then was translated and published on Tehelka’s English website.**

# The Forgotten Rape Stories

*Although Nirbhaya's rapists were sentenced to death, there are several other rape cases that grabbed national headlines where the victims still await justice.*



**PRIYANKA DUBEY**

September 18, 2013



Gohana, Haryana  
September 2012

Banda, Uttar Pradesh  
December 2010

Seoni, Madhya Pradesh  
July 2004



Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh  
May 2005

Delhi  
April 2013

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Gohana, Haryana | September 2012

**‘My in-laws felt that if I pursued the gangrape case, it would bring disgrace to them’**



After her gangrape, Ragini had to withdraw her statement from the court under strong community pressure. The court sentenced her to jail while the accused were let off, Photo: Vikas Kumar

We're in the Atil-Idana village that comes under the Gohana tehsil of Haryana's Sonapat district. A bunch of children are playing cricket in a field. When we ask them the address of Sunil of the *dhanuk* community, they exchange suggestive smiles and then point towards a house across the field. One of them, who turns out to be Sunil's relative, throws his bat on the ground and says, "Sunil and his parents are not home. The door will open only if one of us knocks." The boy brings us to Sunil's house. "Get the door opened, a lady is here," the 12-year-old boy calls, knocking at the door.

Two girls, aged between 10 to 12 years, open the door. In the courtyard, we see a shed for buffaloes behind which a girl veiled in a sari is washing clothes near the handpump. This is Sunil's wife, Ragini. The girls who opened the door are Ragini's 'family sentinels'. Ever since 28 September 2012, Ragini's in-laws keep a close watch on her. She is not allowed to talk

to anyone. She cannot answer the door nor can she receive a call if the phone rings. If it is hot inside, she is not permitted to even sit in the courtyard and every time she has to go to the lavatory, she must take someone along. They do not trust her and hate to even look at her.

Ragini's life was not always like this. She got married to Sunil last year and like any other young 19-year-old bride, she dreamt of a beautiful life with her husband whom she loved. But a horrific incident turned her life upside down. On 28 September 2012, Ragini was gangraped by four men for five days and four nights. She managed to escape, but the incident left her being called a whore, a thief, and a woman without character. Despite being the victim of such a heinous crime, the girl had to bear the brunt of familial and judicial neglect. Her story paints a distressing picture of the bleak future of rape victims.

Sunil is a hawker who sells utensils and his father is also a vendor. They are not at home today. Allowing me into her single-room house, Ragini tries to send the two 'guards' away by engaging them in some work. She whispers, "I must send them away, or they will tell my mother-in-law everything. I'll be in trouble. They always leave these girls to spy on me." When I tell her to share anything in her heart with me, she cries and says, "I only wish to die, *didi*. I would have killed myself long ago. But these people do not leave me even for a moment. I am helpless."

In September 2012, Ragini had gone to visit her parents for the first time after her wedding. Her parents belong to the *dhanuk* community and so their home stands at the furthest end of Banwas village. Coming under the backward class category, this community has traditionally done the work of cleaning the houses of upper-caste people and cutting grass. But Ragini's parents work as bonded labour and rear buffaloes on lease. Ragini's mother, Santosh, says, "We had saved money for years to marry our daughter. She had come home for the first time. Then, four boys kidnapped her from the railway-crossing near the village. She returned after five days in a bad condition. We wanted all the culprits to be punished. We even reported it to the police. But then the villagers and our community put pressure on us. We had no option but to withdraw the complaint."

This incident happened in the same month of September 2012 when 20 such rape incidents in Haryana had grabbed national headlines. Ragini says, "I had a neighbour Maphi, who owns a beauty-parlour and also taught me

sewing. On 28 September, she told me that my husband had called several times and wanted to meet me at the crossing. But he was not there.”

Instead, she was kidnapped by two men, Sanjay and Sunil, from Gohana Phatak. In a white car, they took her to an isolated room in the middle of a rice-field on Gohana-Khakrohi Road. Two other men were present there – Anil from Ahmedpur Majra and Shraavan from Hitadi. Ragini continues her story, “I was made to sniff something that made me unconscious. When I regained consciousness, I was lying in a room that housed a water pump in the middle of a field. They were upon me, biting and pinching me. They watched dirty videos on their mobiles, laughed and clawed at me. I was without clothes for four days. They took me to Kurukshetra and from there to Panipat. I was wearing some jewellery that I had received on my wedding – ear rings, anklets and a ring. They sold everything and handed me an old, torn salwar kameez. I begged them to leave me, but they only laughed at me. Somehow I got the opportunity and secretly phoned my father. The police came to rescue me. But by then, five days had already passed.”

Ragini and her family claim that Maphi was involved in the crime too, but they had to get her released. Santosh tells us, “After we reported the incident, we came to know that all the four boys were from our community. For the first three months, while supporting us, the villagers insisted that we get Maphi released, while the four boys should stay in jail. It became a matter about the honour of the village. As a result, we had to withdraw our statement against Maphi. Then we started getting pressurized to do the same for the four men as well. For 10 days, people from our community sat outside our door. The elders from the boys’ families also arrived. Then Ragini’s in-laws came too. They said that their son’s life was being threatened. A girl cannot marry again and her in-laws might not have taken her back. So we had to withdraw all the charges.”

Ragini says, “I was helpless. My in-laws felt that if I pursued the case, it would bring disgrace to them. My husband’s life was also in danger. Everyone said that if I wanted my in-laws to accept me again, I should change my statement before the court and say that I was not raped, that during those five days I was at my in-law’s place. I was told to state that the medical reports were such because I had been intimate with my husband. I did what I was told. Everyone was present there. I couldn’t speak the truth.” On 24 April 2013, additional district and sessions judge Manisha Batra sentenced Ragini to 10 days in jail and a fine of Rs 500 for giving a false statement in the court.

Vice-president of the Rashtriya Janvadi Mahila Samiti, Jagmati Sangvan calls Ragini's story a tragic example of the societal pressure put on rape victims in the absence of rehabilitation policies. She says, "It is one of the most heinous rape incidents. Even the judiciary could not see that the girl was under pressure and passed the verdict against her. Clearly, the ground reality is that even the new laws have failed to give justice to women."

Meanwhile, Ragini's nightmare continues.

When asked to lodge a complaint with the police, she says, "There is no question of it. Everybody here thinks I am guilty. They say that I knew those men and had run off with them to have fun. Even if I comb my hair or sit in the courtyard, my young sister-in-law and brother-in-law pass comments like 'Who are you enticing now? Haven't you been satisfied yet?' They call me vulgar and cheap. My mother-in-law taunts me for not bearing children. Even my husband doesn't understand. He also believes that I ran away willingly. I can't even breathe and you are talking of going to the police! What was my fault? I would want to see those criminals get a heavy punishment. But it's not in my hands. I am supposed to stay silent. So I stay silent."

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**Banda, Uttar Pradesh | December 2010**

**'People are not pleased that I am fighting so hard against my rape by the MLA'**



**Deserted by her family, Neelu has been fighting a rape case against a local MLA for the past two and a half years all by herself, Photo: Vikas Kumar**

**Dressed** in a black track suit with her hair tied in a bun, Neelu Nishad's personality has the same bitter contradiction as that between her small hut in Khati Bundelkhand and her attire. The contradiction in her personality has resulted from the social and judicial struggle she had been putting up for a long time. We are in Shahbazpur village in Uttar Pradesh's Banda district. Neelu belongs to a backward caste in Bundelkhand, and has been single-handedly fighting a case against a strong, upper caste, local politician. According to Neelu, BSP's local MLA Purshottam Naresh Dwivedi had raped her twice, gruesomely assaulted her and then with the help of his aides implicated her in a false theft case for which she was sent to jail. She was only 17.

There are several laws to protect the identity of victims in case of sexual violence. Yet this case is that rare rape incident which is known by the name of the victim. Her fight for justice against the ruling party's local MLA in one of the country's most backward regions, Bundelkhand, has rendered Neelu a strong person emotionally. But a little while later she reveals to us that she wants to live in another place, under a different identity. Expressing her desire to lead a normal life, she says, "I have nothing to do with these parties and politics. I only want justice and then I'll go somewhere far from here, where no one knows my name. So many people labour hard and live in

the cities. I'll work as a labourer and earn my livelihood." She turns silent. Evidently, this girl with an iron will is shattered inside.

On reaching the Naraini tehsil of Banda's Shahbazpur village, if you ask for Neelu's address, everybody has the same answer – the hut in front of which there is a group of five policemen and a guard. Neelu lives in a single-room hut. When we reach there, we find her listening to old songs on her phone. She turns it off saying, "I have a constant headache. To get my mind off the case, I listen to these songs." She begins by asserting, "Today I am 18 years and seven months old. When the incident took place, I was 17 years and two months old. My mother passed away when I was very young. My father was actively involved with the BSP for the past 17 years. He managed the affairs at the local panchayat level. Dwivedi was also an MLA from Naraini. Once he paid us a visit. He saw me and asked me to bring him a glass of water. When I brought it, he enquired in which class I studied. I said I didn't know and told him to drink water. He said to my father, 'Your daughter is so beautiful and doesn't speak much. Send her to me. We'll educate her, train her and get her married.' My father even took me to his house. But I refused to stay there. And since then he was after my life."

Because of poverty, Neelu had been sent to her maternal grandparent's house in Hamirpur village after her mother's death. After a few days, she was sent to live with her aunt in Lachchipur. In the winter of 2010, she was kidnapped for the first time from Lachchipur. She recalls, "I was asleep when I was picked up. They tied my hands, my feet and my mouth. Rajju Patel, Rajiv, and all of them were the MLA's men. They took me to Mahui jungle and held me captive there for three days. They kept me hungry and would torture me by thrusting my face in cold river water at night saying how dare I turn down the MLA's offer. My father first lodged a complaint with the Naraini police station and then at the Atarra police station. But his pleas went unheard. Then the MLA started working on his plan. He tricked my father into believing that I was kidnapped by goons. He told him that he could rescue me but on the condition that I should stay at his bungalow. He also told my father not to worry as he would get me married. The men brought me to his house. I was very ill. In my father's presence, he said, 'No more crying now. Cook food here, work for us. We'll find a groom for you and get you married. Work for him, and work for us.' At that time, we didn't realise what sort of work he was talking about."

On 8 December 2010, Neelu was recovered from Atarra village and started working for BSP MLA Purshottam Naresh Dwivedi. As her father,

Achchelal Nishad was a BSP worker, the family trusted Dwivedi. But the night between 9 and 10 December turned out to be a nightmare for Neelu. Recalling the assault, she says, “After work, I went to sleep. Suddenly he came and removed the sheet I was wrapped in. Then he said, ‘Didn’t you understand what I’d said?’ and asked me to remove my clothes. I begged him, ‘*Sahib*, beat me, give me trash to eat but please don’t do this, I am a daughter to you’. I kept crying but he tore my clothes with a blade. Then he began biting and scratching me like a beast. There were cuts on my face, my whole body was swollen and my feet were bloodied. Then abusing me, he threatened me to stay quiet about it or he would shoot me. I kept crying the whole day and the blood didn’t stop flowing. He returned in the evening and repeated his act. The next evening I called my father. He told me he’d come in the morning. But at night Dwivedi attacked me again and I somehow managed to escape from the back-door. It was so cold that I couldn’t even see the path. I spent the night hiding in a drain along the Turra road. In the morning, the MLA came looking for me with the police. When they found me, he sent the police away and his men started beating me like animals. They kicked and punched me. My entire body was covered in blood. Then one of them named Raavan tore my clothes and pushed the barrel of a gun in my urinary tract. I fell unconscious. Then the MLA took me to the police station. There I came to know that a false charge of theft had been levelled against me and at about 8pm, I was taken to the jail. The MLA threatened me that if I didn’t confess to the charge of theft, he would kill me. But in the court, I told the truth. The media also got to know.”

As the report made headlines, the case took a political turn. After speeches delivered by Congress and SP’s state ministers, the then Chief Minister Mayawati first expelled Purshottam Naresh Dwivedi from the party and a month later issued orders for Neelu’s release. She also ordered the state’s crime branch to probe into it. After the investigation was carried out, a chargesheet was filed against Purshottam Naresh, Raavan, Virendra Garg, Suresh Mehta alias Raghuvanshi Dwivedi, Rajendra Shukla and five other accused. On Mahesh Salve’s PIL filed in 2012, the investigation was handed to the CBI. In addition to all sections in the previous chargesheet, the CBI booked Dwivedi for rape under Section 376. Both Dwivedi and Raavan’s bail pleas have been rejected by the Supreme Court thrice. They are incarcerated in the Lucknow jail as the case is still going on at the CBI special court in Lucknow.

Several prominent leaders of BJP, Congress and SP have visited Neelu. They include Rahul Gandhi, Jaya Prada, Smriti Irani, Rita Joshi Bahuguna and Vivek Singh. Many parties also extended financial help. But in the course of this fight, Neelu has lost a great deal. Although her family stood by her in the beginning, today they do not want to even talk to her.

Almost breaking down, she says, “I am only waiting for justice,*didi*. Once I get it, I will go away. Nobody talks to me... my father, my brother, my relatives, my neighbours... no one. They have deserted me. They feel bad that there are policemen outside my hut, that politicians and media persons visit me. All of them think that I raised my voice too loud against the injustice done to me. But is there a softer way to protest against something like what happened to me? I have gone through so much to get justice. I was made to repeat my statements so many times, and I repeated them. The villagers and people from my community are not pleased that I am fighting so hard. But how can I not fight for justice after what they did to me? Even now, my body aches. In jail, the blood didn't stop flowing for 20 days. I went without food for 15 days. I didn't even get any medical treatment. The stitch marks are still there on my urinary tract. They tore apart my body. How can I forget it? Now, if I am left fighting this battle alone, let it be so. But I will fight it till the very end.”

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3) Seoni, Madhya Pradesh | July 2004

**‘We haven’t been able to forget how we were gangraped’**



**The influential Gowli community wanted to teach the Kosre family a lesson and so they gangraped their women. The three victims of the Bhomatola gangrape case relate what happened that night, nine years ago, Photo: Priyanka Dudey**

We're in Nirjhar village in the Seoni district of Madhya Pradesh, 900 kilometres from Delhi. Govardhan Kosre, a resident of the dalit colony in the village, waits for us impatiently. On reaching his five-room *pucca* house, we are taken to the innermost room. We're here to meet Radha Bai Kosre (50), Kaushalya Bai Kosre (50) and Maya Bai Kosre (30).

The Kosre family is not native to Nirjhar village. They arrived here from their native Bhomatola village in Bhom district nine years ago, after around 150 men of the Gowli community attacked their home on the night of 8 July 2004. These three women of the family were alone at home that night when a mob of 150 men broke open the door of their house, dragged them out and 16 of them gang-raped the women.

The Gowlis are a pastoral Yadav community who are essentially milkmen. There were 125 Gowli and 12 dalit families in Bhomatola at that time. On 4 July 2004, a minor girl belonging to the Gowli community named Santoshi Chandravanshi went missing. A little later, the Gowlis came to know that Govardhan Kosre's nephew, Nitesh Kosre, was also missing. Santoshi and Nitesh knew each other well as Santoshi used to visit the Kosre family.

Meanwhile, news spread like wildfire in the village that a dalit boy has eloped with a Gowli girl. Making it an issue of honour, the Gowlis plotted to gangrape the women of the Kosre family. After this incident, a steady rise in caste-based discrimination in Bhomatola forced the Kosre family to be rehabilitated to Nirjhar village.

Radhabai, Kaushalyabai and Maya are sitting quietly in the furthest corner of their house. They remain silent for the most part in the beginning. They only say that they wish to forget the incident and do not want to discuss it. But when they are told that their tale of horror would provide a strong case for how women around the country fall prey to caste-based violence, they consent to speak. Recollecting her village, Maya says, “Ours was not a usual dalit family. Unlike the rest, we had our own field. It received water directly from the canal. We even had fresh-water wells in our house. The men and women in our family did not work for the Gowlis. My husband was secretary in the panchayat. We wanted our children to get computer training. I think the Gowlis were annoyed with this. They never wanted us to have our own wells, our own field and work for ourselves. Dalits were supposed to be at their mercy. How could they bear to see us sending our children to school or one of us to be a secretary in the panchayat?”

When the girl and the boy went missing, we assured those people that we would help in looking for them. That night too, all the men in our house had all gone to Nagpur in search of the girl. But the fact is that it was never about the girl. The Gowlis had always had a grudge against us, we clearly felt it.”

She adds, “This incident gave them the opportunity they had been looking for. More than their girl eloping with our boy, it was a matter of showing the ‘right’ place to a prospering and strong dalit family living in a Gowli-dominated village.”

During the conversation, the three women start sobbing. Wiping her eyes with the corner of her soiled sari, Maya continues, “I had got married two months ago. On the night of 8 July, we were anxiously waiting for the men to return. The Gowlis had warned us that if we didn’t return the girl by 8 July, they’d ruin us. Tension had built up in the village right from the evening. But what happened was beyond our wildest imagination.” Maya was the youngest of the three. While Radha was gangraped by five men and Kaushalya by two, Maya was gang-raped by nine men. Recalling the events

of the night, Maya says, “It was around 11 at night when they began fiercely knocking at our door. In a short while, the door broke open.” Pointing towards Radha, she says, “First they dragged her outside, and then me and Kaushalya *tai*. There were many of them and we were dragged down the road in front of everyone. We cried, screamed and yelled, but nobody listened to us. Our clothes were torn, we were beaten and they abused us in vulgar language. Then they took my mother-in-laws to separate corners and took me to the other end of the village and raped us.”

It’s been nine years since the Bhomatola gang rape incident, but their wounds are still fresh. Kaushalya Bai says, “We’re alive somehow. Years may have passed, but we haven’t been able to forget how we were gangraped and how the entire village saw us being dragged on the streets in torn clothes. We haven’t been able to forget that night. We are dead on the inside.”

The 12 accused have been sentenced to life imprisonment in the gangrape case. But this has not eased the suffering of the Kosre family. Referring to the present state of the three women, Govardhan Kosre complains about the indifferent attitude of the state and central government. He has a long list of unfulfilled promises that were made to him. “We were uprooted from our village and given a piece of land outside Narjhar village. How could we live outside a village? We had to spend our own money to build a house here in the dalit colony. Our land, our canal, and our wells, everything was taken away. The land they gave us was barren. We haven’t yet received the compensation amount promised by the government. We asked for guns for our own safety, but all we got was a license. The women in our family were promised jobs but only Maya got a job of a peon in a nearby school.”

Govardhan says, “Now I feel that those promises were made because the case had made headlines. Our government and administration are insensitive towards rape victims. Especially when the woman is a dalit, they turn a deaf ear to the complaint.”

As Maya prepares to leave for school, she adds, “Everyone in the school knows why I got this job. Here, no man would take a woman back after something like this happens to her, but my husband accepted me. Meanwhile, this job is a struggle in itself, but I have to earn for the family. Every single day when I am on duty, I am reminded that I got this job because I was gangraped.”

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Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh | May 2005

## **‘I want to study further and become a judge. Then I’ll make sure to pass judgements on rape cases quickly’**

**Wearing** a green salwar-kurta, with her hair braided neatly, Zahira comes to meet us at a busy road in front of Lucknow Assembly. Carrying a bundle of books wrapped in an old plastic bag, she smiles enthusiastically on seeing us. In her smile, there is no hint of the horrific incident which took place one evening eight years ago when four men kidnapped her from an isolated road of a posh colony. Nobody could have imagined that the girl being dragged into the car would later be counted amongst one of the country’s most appalling gangrapes. Zahira was only 13-years-old when she was subjected to burns using cigarettes and wounded badly with the barrel of a gun.

Looking at Zahira now, on the face of it, one sees a strong person who is hoping to get justice. But the country’s legal system is testing her patience.



**Zahira was only 13-years-old when she was subjected a horrific gangrape. Despite an endless wait for justice, she has managed to remain steadfast while the main accused in the case is still free, Photo: Pramod Adhikari**

Zahira's poor family had migrated from Assam decades ago. Except for Zahira, who speaks in a pure UP dialect, many of her family members cannot even speak Hindi fluently. It takes us 30 minutes to reach Zahira's house. All this while, she is quiet. Then as if staring into nothingness, she says, "I want to study further and be a judge. Then I'll pass the judgements quickly in cases of other such girls. I often think that it's been so many years, why haven't I received justice yet?" She wipes the tears that silently flow from the corners of her eyes and goes silent.

Unlike other victims, she doesn't shout and cry narrating her tale. After the gangrape, the subsequent struggles with the police, judiciary and society, in addition to an economic and mental breakdown left the girl numb. But she still stands firm in her struggle for justice against the six politically connected men who barbarically raped her when she was 13.

We are in the drawing room of her house along with her parents. Three policemen are relaxing in a tent outside the front door. Zahira's father is a scrap dealer. To help the family out, Zahira also worked as a maid in some houses in Aashiana colony. On 2 May 2005, she was returning home from work in the evening along with her five-year old brother. As they reached the main road of the colony, four men came in a Santro car and dragged her inside.

Zahira recalls, "Before I could make sense of anything, they rolled the windows up and sped off. Initially there were just four men. Then at Nishatganj, two more joined in. The six of them tore my clothes. They were abusing me loudly and laughing. Then they started watching obscene videos on their mobiles. They made me watch it too, hit me and burnt me with cigarettes. They threw me on the floor beneath the back seat. They were all yelling loudly and took turns to scratch and pinch me. The more I begged and cried, the harder they slapped, punched and kicked me. They pulled at my hair and started plucking my nails. Then beating me, they raped me. They even had a gun and Gaurav Shukla and his friends hit me with the gun's barrel. Then they inserted it inside my urinary tract and burned the area with cigarettes. I was bleeding profusely and was almost unconscious. Then I remember the car reached a farm house. They pulled me out and dragged me in that naked state to a room. They threw me on the bed and all of them were on me. They were gnawing and chewing every part of my body; beating, abusing, burning me. Then I heard Gaurav Shukla talk to someone on phone. He was saying, 'If you've brought the girl, then kill her

after the work is done.’ I knew they were going to kill me too. But they left me to die on the roadside.”

In the Aashiana gangrape case, six men were arrested, including Gaurav Shukla, Faizan, Asif Siddiqui, Bhartendu Misra, Saurabh Jain and Aman Bakshi. The lower court sentenced Faizan to life imprisonment while Bhartendu Misra and Aman Bakshi were sentenced to 10 years in prison. Since Asif Siddiqui and Saurabh Jain were below 18 years of age, the court declared them as juveniles. But soon after this, both of them died in separate road accidents. Faizan, Bhartendu and Aman are in jail and have appealed against the judgement in the high court. But the main accused in the case, Gaurav Shukla, is free even today. Gaurav is a relative of SP leader Arun Shankar Shukla who is going to contest the 2014 Lok Sabha elections from Unnao. A close associate of SP supremo Mulayam Singh Yadav, Arun Shankar has a criminal background.

Madhu Garg, the UP head of Rashtriya Janvadi Mahila Sangathan, has been standing with Zahira and her family in their fight for justice for the past eight years. She says, “It is plainly a poor girl’s struggle against the political mafia of UP. With money and power, they have been dragging the case for the past eight years. Initially, they made every effort to prove the main accused Gaurav to be a juvenile. His school records were changed, a fake certificate of Chaya Public School was prepared and they even attempted to seize his birth certificate from Lucknow Municipal Corporation. Then his lawyers proved him a juvenile in a forged case, and tried to use the same judgement in this case.”

She continues, “They have been pressurising Zahira’s family for so long; sometimes with money, sometimes with threats. Every time the lower court passes a judgement, they approach the higher courts to challenge it. For the past eight years, the case has become centred on proving Gaurav a juvenile. His lawyer is known to drag cases for decades. He openly asks Zahira’s father in the court, ‘how long will you fight?’ Zahira has been summoned 26 times to face direct interrogation. She has been interrogated only five times. The courage of Zahira and her father must be saluted as they have faced the torment for eight years and are still standing strong. If it is taking us so long to get justice even with all the pressure that media and our civil society has put, one can imagine what the plight of hundreds of other victims must be, who cannot even come out in the open to speak of the violence done to them.”

When asked about the punishment her perpetrators received, Zahira doesn't respond. In his broken Hindi, her father replies, "You see, a woman has two separate holes for urine and menstruation to pass – the urinary tract and the vagina. When a barrel of a gun is inserted in your 13-year-old daughter in such a way that both the holes become one, and then the wound is burnt with cigarettes, what punishment would you demand for this? If your daughter returns home one night, her body burnt with cigarettes, slashed with blades, her nails plucked, and soaked in blood, what punishment would you ask for? No justice can ever reduce the pain. We die every day while Gaurav Shukla is free and married. No matter what they do, fill my house with treasures or shoot me, I won't back off. Even if I have to sell everything for it, I'll do it, but I'll fight till the end."

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**Delhi | April 2013**

**'Sheila Dikshit turned us away saying she gets 500 rape complaints every day, how many could she look into?'**



**Several politicians, including Sonia Gandhi, made big promises for Gudiya, but nothing happened. The five-year old is on her own now, Photo: Vikas Kumar**

We're in south-west Delhi's Dwarka. After a little wait, Gudiya's father arrives to meet us. Passing through a labyrinth of streets, we reach Gudiya's home. With two tiny pony tails on her head and a slate in her hand, Gudiya is playing with her younger brother and mother. She was in the hospital for four months during which she underwent six major surgeries. Her father tells us, "The doctors say she can go to school now. She is fine. Now, the only thing that worries me is to get them admitted into a school. When the media was talking about it, everyone made big promises. Sonia Gandhi herself came to visit Gudiya. She told us that the girl's health and education will be taken care of. Then another leader from Gandhinagar, Arvinder Singh also promised that arrangements will be made for our children's education. But we have not received anything from the government except for what was spent on Gudiya's treatment and surgeries."

The country-wide uproar at the 16 December gangrape in Delhi had not yet simmered down when on 15 April 2013, two men gangraped five-year old Gudiya and left her to die in a locked room. A medical examination revealed that the rapists had inserted plastic bottles and candles inside the little girl. Wiping Gudiya's face, her mother says, "When Gudiya went missing on 15 April, we registered a complaint with the police. But the police didn't listen to us. Had they searched the building only, her condition would not have become so bad. Instead, the police asked us for money."

Although a judicial action has been initiated against the two arrested rapists, Manoj Shah and Pradeep Kumar, Gudiya's family is still fighting on several different fronts. Five months since the incident, Gudiya's father says, "Sonia Gandhi met our daughter and left. She gave us an assurance but nothing happened. Then we approached Sheila Dikshit. She turned us away saying, 'I get 500 rape complaints every day. How many will I look into?' She told us to handle the matter on our own. The whole time, only the media and the Aam Admi Party supported us. The media has been with us all along. For the past five months, *India Today* is paying the rent of our room. A lady reporter has even agreed to teach our girl. But I'm surprised why the government is not helping us. We cannot even go back to our village because people have all sorts of things to say. Even in Delhi, we have moved houses four times since the incident."

After a pause, he adds, "After what happened to our daughter, it is important for us to educate her. If she doesn't study, who will support her later in life? She must learn to be self-sufficient. You know how our society treats rape victims, don't you?"

*(Some names have been changed to protect identity)*