

The Telegraph India

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Chain of girl murders defies furore and belies safe tag

15-year-old's body found in Murshidabad jute field

By REA

TIME CHRONICLE

11 suspected sexual attacks on girl students in Bengal (N. 24Pgs), June 7

11-year-old student, 20, allegedly gang-raped in Barasat's Kamduni village, protests. Eight of nine suspects. Family has turned down chief job and compensation offers (N. 24Pgs), June 10

11-year-old pupil allegedly gang-raped and way back home from school (N. 24Pgs), June 14

11-year-old Class VI student, eye gouged out, found in jute field. Family report awaited to confirm sexual assault (Murshidabad), June 15

11-year-old student, naked body of 15-year-old student found in jute field. Family accuses police of not accepting their gang rape-cum-murder complaint. Autopsy report awaited to confirm sexual assault

June 15: A 15-year-old schoolgirl's decomposing body found in a Murshidabad jute field this morning, lengthening the list of young students murdered in Bengal in the wake of public revulsion towards rapists and a furore over safety for women.

Controversy has broken out over whether the Class VI student was raped but the death is the fourth reported murder of school and college girls in the state in about a week. (See chart)

The girl's brother alleged the police had refused to accept his complaint of gang rape and got him to sign a blank sheet of paper, insinuating the cops might later just register a murder case. District police chief Humayun Kabir said a rape case had been registered and a rape case was started if the post-mortem report provided grounds for it.

But what has been undeniable is the alarming recurrence of brutalisation of girls in spite of what is being touted in urban areas as "zero tolerance" towards rape and other forms of sexual assault.

Sustained media attention and public protests may have led to increased documentation but rarely have so many students fallen prey in such a fashion in quick succession.

Social activist Bonani Kakkar voiced the frustration of many when she said: "What surprises me the most is why the voices of protest don't reach these men (rapists)? These criminals must think they can get away with anything."

Although Bengal has not witnessed anything on the scale of the Delhi protests against the December 16 bus gang rape, the past week has seen political parties, NGOs and civil society hit the streets demanding safety for women and punishment for sexual assaulters.

Criminologists and psychologists, however, suggested that rapists and murderers, spurred by psychiatric and social factors and emboldened by a tardy justice system with its low conviction rates, were unlikely to be deterred by protests.

Barindra Nath Chatteraj, professor of criminology at the National Institute of Criminology and Forensic Sciences, New Delhi, said a "public outcry against rape and the actions of rapists cannot be connected".

The perpetrators of rape are likely to be driven by a combination of individual and social factors, Chatteraj said. Such influences will not vanish even if there's intense public outcry, which, he said, is typically transient.

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Sociologist Prasanta Roy, however, said it was a "good development" that civil society had taken the protests into rural pockets. "Those resisting (compensation) offers from the government to hush up incidents of lawlessness will feel empowered," he said.

Others suggested that administrative steps, not public protests, were the key.

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Deepti Puranik, forensic psychologist and assistant director with Helix Advisory, a private forensic laboratory in Mumbai, said: "Our slow criminal justice system and low conviction rates probably contribute to the lack of fear of punishment."

THE TELEGRAPH

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"Rapists tend to exploit situations where victims are helpless and unable to retaliate," said Puranik, who specialises in lie-detection techniques. "They believe they can get away with it."

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But till now, the state government has tried to address the recurring wave of atrocities by offering compensation and asking ministers to go to their constituencies and counter the National Crime Records Bureau numbers and the Opposition's "*apoprochar*" (malicious campaign).

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The National Crime Records Bureau recently released data showing 30,942 cases of crimes against women in Bengal last year — the highest among states and Union territories.

If Bengal police chief Napanarajit Mukherjee dissected crime data earlier this week to suggest the situation has not worsened in the state, junior law minister Chandrima Bhattacharya went a step further today.

"Women are safest in Bengal compared with any other state," she said, wondering why there was no outcry when women were assaulted during Left rule.

The government reaction has drawn criticism. "The manner in which the government has been trying to deny these incidents is somewhat ridiculous.... It should have shown some empathy for the victims and their families," sociologist Roy said.

Former Calcutta police commissioner Prasun Mukherjee wondered: "When such gruesome incidents happen, what difference does it make to the public when you quote certain figures and say the crime rate has actually come down?"

Mukherjee added: "You have to take certain firm steps to avoid recurrences. Is one seeing such steps being taken?"

Left Front chairman Biman Bose blamed the spate of sexual attacks on the state government's "silence" and its "being in a mode of denial" about gender crimes. State Congress president Pradip Bhattacharya echoed him. The Congress has called a 12-hour Murshidabad bandh on June 19.

The body of the Murshidabad girl, missing since June 11, was spotted at 9am near her home at Sonadanga, about 50km from Behrampore town, after the stench alerted villagers. Her salwar and kameez lay a short distance away, villager Makail Sheikh said.

The girl lived with her mother. Her father died about 10 years ago while her 46-year-old brother lives separately in the same village.

"After I saw my sister's body, I suspected she had been gang-raped before being murdered," the brother said, pointing to a neighbour and unnamed accomplices as suspects. The police are looking for the 21-year-old neighbour, missing since the discovery of the body.

"The police refused to register our complaint after keeping us waiting for over four hours at the police station," the brother said as he broke down.

"I suspect they made me sign a blank sheet of paper just so that they can later claim that we only lodged a murder complaint."



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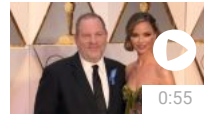
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