

VERY recently, some of us from the Joint Action Committee Against Rape and Sexual Harassment in Delhi went together to investigate two rape cases that we had read about in the newspaper. In both cases, when we went to meet the rape victim and her family, we had no pre-conceived notions in our heads as to what could or should be done. In one case, our presence acted as a catalyst—the local people got together and organized a mass protest in which the active participation of women was initiated by us though it then gathered its own momentum. In the other case, the victim's family itself came to resist any follow-up action. We want to share both the experiences with all of you—those women who are actively involved in organizing among women and those who wish to get so involved.

We came up against certain constraints that are inherent in the situation when women organize. But we also found that once women get together, aided by whatever combination of circumstances, any protest develops amazingly radical dimensions. All those myths that tell us we are passive, “backward” and “traditional” get exploded whenever women come together around their own issues. But our experience was that in particular situations, certain specific factors can come to be crucial pre-conditions for women to be able to get together and protest, and can also be crucial in preventing this from happening.

The first case was that of a 12-year-old girl, daughter of a school watchman and a domestic servant. She works as a maidservant. On April 22, at about 8 p.m., she was going home after having finished working in her employer's house when Suresh Kumar Sharma, a local ruffian, caught hold of her and dragged her into his tea shop. There, he and a crony, Mohammad Ishaq proceeded to rape her. After two hours, they finally let her go, warning her that if she told anyone what had happened to her, they would kill her. Dazed, bleeding and crying, the little girl

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*\*The Committee dissolved itself recently*

## Need to Re-evaluate Two Recent Rape Cases in Delhi

stumbled out onto the road where she was found by her brother.

This child lives and works in Sunlight Colony which is a resettlement colony set up during the 60s. Most of the residents are Christians. They know each other well and live as a close-knit community. The community as a whole is undergoing a process of upward social mobility. There is a high literacy rate and a vigorous sense of acquiring a voice and a status.

One very special feature of this case is the fact that the residents of the locality are united in their antagonism to the rapist. He is a well-known goonda who, under cover of running a tea shop, has established a vice den and has been allegedly selling charas and illicit liquor for the last 10 to 15 years. The residents complain that their children are being corrupted and the atmosphere of the colony is being polluted by the presence of Sharma's gang of unsavoury characters. About 17 cases have been registered against Sharma, involving excise, dacoity, kidnapping, rioting, causing grievous hurt and other offences. He has been convicted in four of these cases. Though he had been externed from the area, the fact that he committed the rape in Delhi shows with what impunity such men openly violate the law. In the past, the residents have repeatedly petitioned to have his den and distillery removed but their petitions have met with no response. They allege that the police are acting in collusion with Sharma.

The first time we visited the area, we met the girl's employer who is a very influential doctor and owner of the local

hospital. He insisted that we meet the office bearers of the shopkeepers' association. The attitude of these men was that Sharma's presence was a threat to the safety of their shops and their homes, that “the whole market is against him”, and that he should be removed. However, when we suggested that the women be involved in active protest, their reaction was: “Oh, all the women here are uneducated. What can they do, poor things?” We emphasised the various reasons why this issue could be taken up effectively only if women were in the forefront. But out of the many reasons we gave for this, the only one that appealed to the members of the shopkeepers' association, was the argument that women's participation might deter the police from reacting with too much ferocity. A meeting with the women was then arranged in the temple courtyard.

At this meeting, we found no passivity, no silence, no ignorance! On the contrary, there was unequivocal and very determinedly voiced anger, indignation, militance: “We will not let him escape this time.” Women spontaneously burst out with statements like: “These policemen—their uniforms should be torn off—only then will they get some sense in their heads!” The women showed us the locked gate of Sharma's house, told us how the whole family collaborates in running his very profitable racket and hinted at stories of other girls molested by him. When we asked about his wife, one woman said: “She is not allowed to set foot out of that house. She is a woman naturally, one woman will want to meet another woman.

But what can she do if she is not allowed to exchange a word with any of us ?” Mingled with this rage was the near-despair of : “Well, this kind of thing keeps happening. The police always do this, they can’t be stopped...”

In this meeting and indeed throughout the ensuing agitation, the contradiction between the men’s and the women’s ways of seeing the issue often emerged very sharply. The women were clear as to how this violence affected them: “Today it has happened to her, tomorrow it can happen to us, to our daughters.” Even within the family of the girl’s employer, we noticed this contrast—the women of the family were vociferously angry and despite their upper class back-ground, were eager to organize a protest demonstration.

On April 28, when a busload of people from the colony went to the lieutenant governor’s house to protest, the women displayed their anger by shouting slogans, milling together in front of the locked gates—while the men were constantly wavering between the excitement of yelling down the women and the awe of being in the presence of the “great man.” Several men tried to hush the women, glowering at them for their “unruly” behaviour and telling them to sit down and be quiet. In the words of one of them: “We are here to express our sorrow and make a request. We are not to make a noise or create a disturbance.” But the women could not be silenced.

When the commissioner agreed to meet only a deputation of five people, it was the women who loudly protested, saying: “What have we all come here for ? To look at his gates? At election time, they come begging for votes but don’t want to hear what we have to say.” The deputation went in but refused to speak with the commissioner unless everyone was allowed to go in. Once inside too, the women constantly confronted him with questions. The men tended to speak in hushed, polite tones, requesting that the illicit liquor distillery be removed. The women did emphasise the point that the issue was not their unique problem but

was a larger social issue.

How was it that this agitation was able to get off the ground so fast? One important fact was that the girl is a quiet, docile 12-year-old. In the words of some of the women : “She’s just a baby. She doesn’t know anything about sex. If she had been a young woman, we would never have taken up her case. Women have to create facades to cover up their doings. But this child really has been raped. Why, she’s such a kid that her breasts are not yet developed.”

Such sympathy, based on pity rather than on solidarity, was enhanced by the tight-knit nature of the community. It could find concrete form in action partly because of the support that came from the doctor’s family which is moneyed, influential and has political connections. When the F.I.R. was to be registered, the police, as usual, were callously indifferent. A constable reportedly arrived leisurely on a cycle and

weight behind the case that the police were unable to terrorize the girl’s family into silence.

The fact that the rapist is a universally hated man and has a long history of hostile



*Photographs by Urmila Dongre*



*Two snaps of the alleged rapist Sharma’s house :*

*Above : The iron gates and lock from inside even during the day—the house is protected like a fortress.*

*Below : The hand that protects. Congress (I) flag proudly flying atop Sharma’s house ,*

tried his best to dissuade them by saying: “What will you gain by reporting this? The girl’s izzat, will be endangered...” It was only because the doctor’s family put their

confrontation with the community who now see this case as a way of getting rid of him cannot be overlooked. If the men had not had an interest in the agitation

quite apart from anger at the rape; if they had not allowed, even encouraged the women to go, the demonstration would certainly not have materialized as fast as it did. As it was, many of the women could not join in because they had small children to look after, or had no one to mind the house in their absence.

The other case that we investigated was of a domestic servant woman in her early 20s. She lives in Khan Market which is an upper middle class residential colony. Her husband is a Class IV government employee and they have four children. They are one of the many unfortunate families who are unable to find a place to stay in Delhi and have to rent the servants' quarters in the flats of government officers, even though this free accommodation is not supposed to be subtle. In addition to paying high rent, they are often forced to work free for the officers' families and live under the ever-present threat of eviction.

This young woman was going to market with her children at 8.30 p.m. Three men who run a meat shop a few paces away from her home, caught hold of her and dragged her into the shop. She resisted with great spirit, screamed for help and managed to fight them off. Her clothes got torn and her earrings lost in the scuffle but she prevented them from raping her. Her family lodged the F.I.R. The attitude of the police was : "She's a loose woman. She used to go to this man on her own. This time there were three instead of one so she raised a hue and cry..."

We tried talking to the women of the locality. They are mostly wives of bureaucrats and the attitude of the first one whom we spoke to was: "Oh well, these low people, they have no morals. She must have gone to him of her own will. Besides, she dresses up like any of us—she looks just like you or me." This fact of a servant woman dressing neatly was mentioned by many as a dubious sign, one woman even hinting that she must be a prostitute to be able to afford such clothing. Some of the women in whose houses she works, said: "She talks and laughs with everyone very freely", as if normal interaction with the world is a crime

for a woman and almost amounts to inviting attack.

These women did see the butcher's shop and the gang around it as a threat to them but this did not make them feel sympathetic to the victim. Their analysis of it was: "Ever since these dirty (poor) people have come to live here, the colony is getting spoilt." One young woman was very sympathetic to the victim and wished to take action against the attackers but her mother-in-law immediately shut her up by telling her it was none of her business.

The isolation of the victim was thus near-complete. Her attackers were released on bail and she now lives in constant danger of another revengeful attack. Her mother was supportive to begin with but is now realising the problems that might arise if they enter into a situation of confrontation with the criminal gang. The woman's husband was unwilling to fight the case. In fact, he absolutely forbade her to meet us and said he might lose his job if his wife publicized this case. They were also insecure about being thrown out of their residence.

Working with the women in Sunlight Colony, we invariably came up against a situation of being asked: "You tell us what to do next" and somehow some of us took upon ourselves the task of procuring legal aid, pursuing the case in court and so on. This encouraged the dependence of the colony people upon us, gave them exaggerated hopes of getting justice done in this case because of our intervention. Thus we unnecessarily came to assume the role of those who could procure justice—a hope that was naturally belied when we came up against the legal machinery. There were endless problems in procuring free legal aid. A senior lawyer involved in such work was contacted. Some juniors were given charge but since they were not going to make much money out of it (even the amount charged as expenses was more than the girl's family could afford) they were less than casual in their attitude. This, combined with the functioning of the police and courts—sure enough, within days, the rapist was out on bail and acting as a threat to the

family.

This coincided with the Joint Action Committee becoming less and less active. The few who were active in this case also slowly lost interest and gave up contact with the colony residents.

At the end of all this, one is left uneasily wondering whether the colony residents would have perhaps been better off without our intervention ? Would they not now be considering us as just another set of people, who, like the police, the courts and the bureaucracy, let them down ? Would this not breed a certain cynicism with regard to mass action ? This has often been the history of middle class activists' involvement with working class struggles. It is time we seriously re-evaluated our own role, the responsibility our involvement with such struggles imposes upon us.

—Madhu Kishwar

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## WAVE

*i used to be a cold narrow brook  
running in the forests,  
mountains and valleys,  
i knew that standing waters die  
from within,  
i knew that joining the waves of  
the sea brings new life to the  
little brooks  
neither the long way  
nor the dark craters  
nor the temptation to stop  
running prevented me from  
moving on.  
now i have joined the endless  
waves  
i exist in struggle  
and my rest is in death*

Marzieh Ahmadi Oskooi  
(an Iranian woman revolutionary)