

India Women Choosing Sterilization Suffer Rusty Scalpel for \$10

By Andrew MacAskill
Bloomberg News

June 12, 2013 – Sumati Devi knew before she arrived at the grimy government clinic in northern India that she would be paid to be sterilized.

She didn't know that she would lie on an operating table with bloody sheets, that the scalpel used to open her up would be stained with rust or that she was supposed to first get counseling on other birth-control methods before giving consent to have her fallopian tubes cut and tied.

The main reason Devi had agreed to be sterilized at all was because the \$10 she received – equivalent to about a week's wages for a poor family – would help feed her three children.

"I did it out of desperation," said Devi, 25, as she lay on the concrete floor recuperating at the clinic in the state of Bihar. "We're so poor, we need the money. Health officials came to our home. They told us it would be best."

When it comes to family planning, women are on the front lines in India, which has carried out about 37 percent of the world's female sterilizations. Government-imposed quotas and financial incentives for doctors mean 4.6 million women were sterilized last year, many for cash payments and many in the unsanitary and rudimentary conditions that greeted Devi.



Patients get registered for a free sterilization procedure at the Mohan Lal Gautam District Women's Hospital in Aligarh, India. Photographer: Mustafa Quraishi/AP Photo

Vasectomies, by contrast, accounted for just 4 percent of all sterilizations.

"This is a sign of how downtrodden women are in India, that they don't even have control of their reproductive rights," said Kerry McBroom, the director of reproductive rights at the New Delhi-based Human Rights Law Network, which helped to file a court case against the government last year documenting abuse at sterilization camps. "Women are the easiest prey, whether it is government officials or their husbands asking them to undergo the operation."

Missing Targets

Devi's plight also highlights the failings of

India's main method for reining in its population. Despite the coercive nature of the program, India has missed every target in the past five decades to reduce its populace, which at the current rate will eclipse China's by 2021.

The emphasis on surgery is a deterrent for women unwilling to lose the option of having children when they are still young. Like Devi, the majority of women sterilized in Bihar have had three or more children. And India's decision not to pursue the more expensive option of teaching often illiterate women how to use pills or contraceptives means only about half of couples of child-bearing age practice modern methods of birth control, United Nations data show.

Strained Resources

India, which has 1.2 billion people, is adding on average 18 million more each year, more than the population of the Netherlands. One in five babies born globally starts life in India, straining supplies of land, food and water, and bloating an underemployed, poorly skilled workforce.

"A fast-growing population affects everything: the economy, the environment, quality of life," said Vishwanath Koliwad, secretary general of the Mumbai-based Family Planning Association of India. "More people means the fruits of our development are further divided."

At the clinic, held in mid-March in the town of Sonhoula, the 33 women who had registered for surgery lined up in the heat outside as guards carrying bamboo sticks watched over them. They were then led into a dimly lit room, with peeling paint on the walls and bare concrete floors, and placed on makeshift operating tables propped up with bricks.

Dressed in jeans and flip-flops, A.K. Das, the surgeon at the clinic, moved from one operating table to the next as he made an incision below the navel in each woman, then cut and tied their fallopian tubes. The patients were laid shoulder-to-shoulder on the floor in a separate room to recuperate.

Warm Water

Das, who spent three minutes on each operation, ran out of anesthetic with more than 10 patients to go, forcing him to use a weaker sedative. He said he's paid an extra \$2 per patient by the government for continuing to operate under these circumstances. In between each operation an assistant washed the scalpel in a tray filled with warm water.

"The surgical equipment is meant to be brand new, but look at this," he said, pausing during an operation to hold up the rust-stained scalpel he was using. "This is dirty and that will significantly increase the chance of infection."

According to United Nations data, 49 percent of all couples in India practice birth control. Of that group, about three-quarters do so by having the wife sterilized.

In neighboring China, the government has since 1979 used the threat of fines and the loss of social services to enforce rules that bar many urban couples from having more than one child. It now is beginning to ease the policy as the population ages and coastal regions face labor shortages.

Welfare Benefits

A majority of those attending sterilization camps in India are lured by incentives such as

payments or improved welfare benefits, offered by provincial officials under pressure to meet targets each year, said Abhijit Das, director of the Center for Health and Social Justice in New Delhi, an advocacy group. He isn't related to the clinic doctor.

"India has the most coercive birth control methods in the world after China," he said in an interview. "Family planning has become a system of quotas and human beings are the targets."

While the federal government formally abandoned numerical targets for sterilizations in 1996, that hasn't filtered down to all states. Most of the operations are performed in the first few months of the year – a period dubbed "sterilization season" – so as to fill quotas before the end of the financial year on March 31.

Sterilization Pressure

Health workers in Gujarat were threatened with salary cuts or dismissal if they failed to meet targets, Human Rights Watch said in July. Women are pressured to undergo sterilization surgery without being told they will never again be able to have children, the group said after interviewing 50 health workers. Three calls and two e-mails to the office of Gujarat Health Minister Nitinbhai Patel weren't answered.

States including Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab give priority to couples willing to undergo sterilization when doling out some benefits, according to a 2012 study by the International Institute for Population Sciences.

"We can't rely on just one weapon to win this battle," said Naveen Jindal, a lawmaker with the ruling Congress party who has campaigned on family planning since entering parliament in



A doctor performs a sterilization procedure on a woman in a clinic in Sonhoula, Bihar state, India.

Photographer: Andrew MacAskill/Bloomberg

2004. "Sterilization is too ineffective. When I go traveling around my constituency, I hear lots of people say they don't want the operation," said Jindal, who controls one of the country's largest steelmakers by value, Jindal Steel & Power Ltd.

'Rogue Operators'

S.K. Sikdar, who runs population control programs at the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, rejects the idea that women attend the camps under duress.

"There's no pressure, people are free to do whatever they like," Sikdar said at his New Delhi office. "There may be some isolated districts where there are overeager officials, but they are rogue operators."

Sikdar said sterilization is "one way" that the government is trying to reduce the population. "But we are promoting different birth control methods," he said.

India was the first country in the world to introduce a policy to deliberately reduce



Surgical instruments used in the sterilization procedure are seen in a tray in a clinic in Sonhoula, Bihar state, India.
Photographer: Andrew MacAskill/Bloomberg

population, beginning in 1952 as hunger mounted in the years following independence. A quarter of a century later, with the press censored and constitutional freedoms suspended by then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, a mass sterilization drive officially targeting men spurred allegations of abuse and coercion of the poor.

Virility Fears

Women are the focus of the sterilization drive because India has a male-dominated culture, said Sona Sharma, joint director of the Population Foundation of India, an advocacy group. “Men fear they will lose their virility or they will become weak if they undergo the operation,” Sharma said. “As the breadwinners they make the decisions.”

Sterilization has helped slow the birth rate. India’s population grew 17.6 percent in the decade to 2011, according to Indian census data, four percentage points less than in the previous 10 years.

The data mask wide regional variations. The number of people living in Bihar and Uttar

Pradesh surged 25 percent and 20 percent respectively in the same period.

States that have most successfully curbed population growth are those that have raised education levels, increased work opportunities for women and enabled access to a range of contraceptives, said Jindal.

Falling Fertility

In Kerala, where government policy has achieved almost total literacy, the population grew 4.9 percent, according to census data. Fertility has plunged in the past 40 years in the southern state to 1.7 children per woman from 4.1 children. The national rate is 2.6.

Interviews with medical personnel and non-governmental organizations show the extent to which state governments continue to pursue targets.

“At the end of the year we are judged on how many sterilizations we have done,” said M.A. Rashid, 63, the doctor in charge of the Sonhoula clinic. “If we don’t meet the target, we get a scolding. The government doesn’t want excuses.”

Farooq Khan, a government doctor in Sonhoula, said that financial reward was the main reason the women agreed to be sterilized. “It may only be a small amount, but for these poor people it’s enough that they are willing to give up their reproductive rights,” he said.

Lowest Income

Bihar, where annual per-capita income is the lowest in the country at \$420 and the illiteracy rate is the highest, intends to sterilize 650,000 women and 12,000 men annually, according to the state health ministry. This year the state is planning more

than 13,000 female sterilization camps.

For cash-strapped Indian state governments, sterilization is a less costly option than funding birth control programs via trained counselors and regular medications. All of the country's 28 states are estimated to have run fiscal deficits in the year that ended March 31, according to data from the Reserve Bank of India.

Federal budgets for education and welfare programs are also under pressure as India endures its weakest economic growth in a decade. The government says that by 2022, India needs 600 more universities and 35,000 more colleges, and must increase its power-generation capacity by 73 percent. A food program for the poor is being expanded at a cost of \$22 billion a year.

Same Needle

Ahead of their operations at the clinic, a medical assistant pricked each woman's finger, using the same needle on multiple patients, and squeezed out drops of blood to test for anemia. Each patient had a number written on her arm.

Flies swarmed through the windows of the Bihar clinic, landing on patients. Das, the surgeon, removed his surgical mask after several operations because of the heat. Health workers milled about without protective gloves, shoes or masks. When the electricity shut down, a generator was cranked up. Dogs walked down the corridors outside the recovery room.

The women had cotton wool taped over their wounds. Nurses stepped around those lying on the floor, offering painkillers to the ones who groaned in agony.

"The program should be voluntary," said Das, the surgeon, his face dripping with sweat as he ended his day. "There shouldn't be any targets. This isn't why we entered medicine. The entire system needs to be changed."

*—With assistance from Michael Forsythe in Beijing
—Editors: Mark Williams, Peter Hirschberg, Anne Swardson*

Women in India Targeted for Sterilization in Population Fix

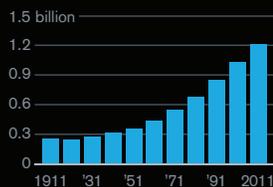
As India tries to control a rapidly growing population, states are offering payment or other incentives to women who agree to participate in a government sterilization program, a cheaper alternative to other forms of contraception.

GRAPHIC: ALEX TRIBOU / BLOOMBERG VISUAL DATA

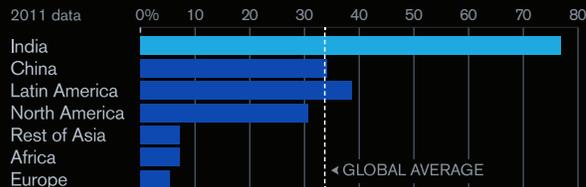
As population in India increases, female sterilizations take hold

Women in India accounted for 37 percent of the world's female sterilization procedures performed in 2011, according to United Nations data. In India for women who use contraception aged from 15 to 49, sterilization accounts for about three-quarters of total use.

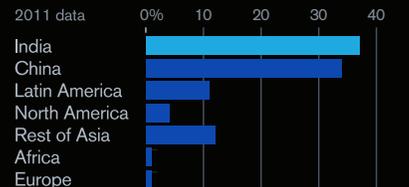
India population totals



Female sterilization as a percentage of total contraceptive use



Global distribution of female sterilization

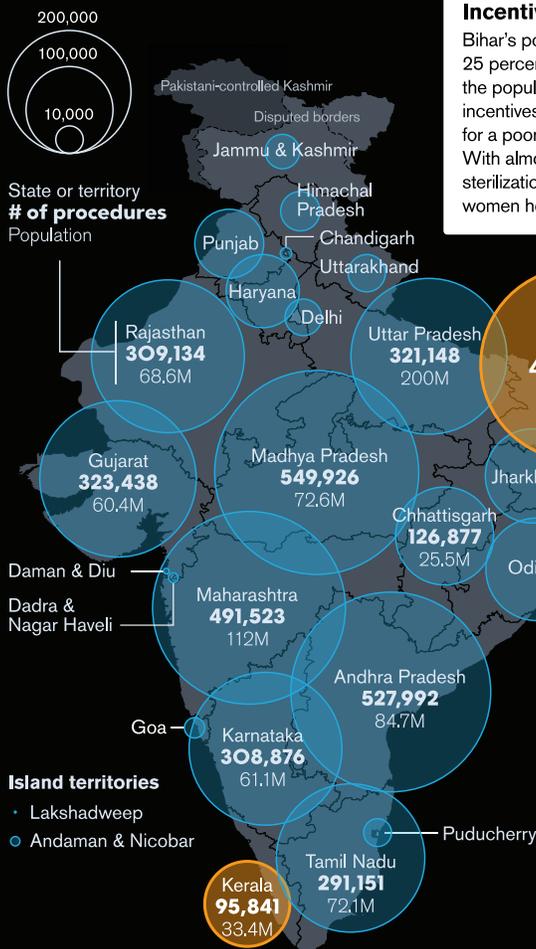


While India promotes sterilization to curb population growth, improving literacy has been more effective in some states

In the year ending March 2012, 4.6 million women in India participated in sterilization procedures. States that were most successful in limiting population growth from 2001 to 2011 tended to have higher rates of female literacy. On average, sterilization was more common in states with lower female literacy rates.

Female sterilization procedures performed in India in 2011, by state or territory

Number of procedures



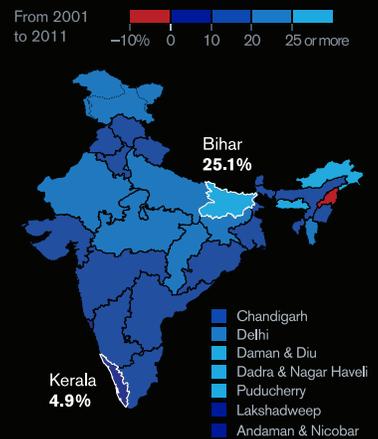
Incentives for sterilization

Bihar's population, 104 million in 2011, has grown 25 percent since 2001. In attempts to control the population boom, state officials have offered women incentives, including the equivalent of one week's pay for a poor family, to participate in a sterilization program. With almost half the women in Bihar illiterate, sterilization is seen as a cheaper option than teaching women how to use pills or contraceptives.

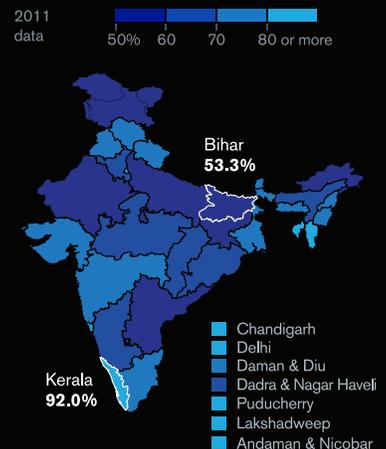
High literacy, slow population growth in Kerala

At 92 percent, Kerala boasts the highest female literacy rate in India. Birth rates are lower in the state than in the U.S., and population growth over the last decade was minimal. Fewer women in Kerala participated in sterilization procedures than in similarly populated states with lower rates of female literacy – Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand.

Population change, by state/territory



Female literacy rate, by state/territory



Note: 2011 total population figures by state include men and women.

Sources: Census of India, United Nations, India Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Maptell

Sold for Sex at Puberty Village Girls' Fate in Wealthier India

By Andrew MacAskill
Bibhudatta Pradhan
Bloomberg News

September 19, 2013 – Like many Indian girls, Suchitra was taught her future profession by her mother. In her village, there was only one path. Even before she'd reached puberty, Suchitra had learned different sexual positions and other ways to please a customer.

At age 14, a man she had never seen before showed up one day at the family's house near Bharatpur in northern India. At her mother's urging, Suchitra got into his car. Six hours later they reached their destination. It was a brothel in New Delhi's red-light district. She had been sent into sexual servitude.

"I always knew that this would be my life," said Suchitra, sitting in her wardrobe-sized room and wearing a low-cut green top and jeans, her hair pulled back in a tight bun. "I can never forget what I've done but it is the only way for my family to earn a living."

Suchitra, now 20, is from one of hundreds of villages in India where centuries-old tradition dictates that most girls enter into a life of prostitution. Rising wealth hasn't reduced the trafficking of girls for sex in the world's second-most populous nation: The number of child prostitutes is growing and the average recruitment age has dropped to between nine



Prostitutes wait for customers in a village red light district in Rajasthan.

Photographer: Kuni Takahashi/Getty Images

and 12 years old, according to the Delhi-based National Human Rights Commission.

"We are witnessing an unprecedented growth in prostitution," said K.K. Mukherjee, a sociologist who has studied sex workers for more than three decades and has written government reports on the subject. "It is being driven by rising levels of income but also by a change in sexual attitudes and the increasing migration of women to cities."

Trafficking Girls

Districts such as Bharatpur, where half of the women are illiterate, are breeding grounds for the



A young prostitute covers her face in a village red light district in Rajasthan, India.

Photographer: Kuni Takahashi/Getty Images

country's \$4 billion sex trafficking industry. India has 3 million sex workers, of whom 1.2 million are below the age of 18, according to a government estimate, and the South Asian nation traffics more women for sex than any other country.

The growth of underage prostitution in a country whose gross domestic product has risen on average about 8 percent annually in the past decade is testimony to the treatment of women and the power of caste in the world's biggest democracy. India, which carries out almost 40 percent of the world's female sterilizations, where a woman is raped on average every 21 minutes and where a third of all women are illiterate, is failing to change views that undercut the status of women.

Whole families from some castes at the bottom rungs of India's social hierarchy rely on income from their daughters' sex work, with fathers and brothers often acting as pimps. The girls often have their virginity auctioned to the highest bidder once they reach puberty.

Ignoring Rape

Suchitra, who is of the Bedia caste, shows

how the caste-based system determines access to occupations and social status. Rooted in religion, the millennia-old structure marginalizes certain groups, imprisoning women in a cycle of isolation and abuse. Many female members of the Bedia community, which numbers about 20,000, say they are treated like outcasts. They can't marry if they have worked as a prostitute, are refused service in shops, are called "whores" and are greeted with disinterest by police when one of them is raped.

"Caste remains a defining feature for most Indians," said Satish Misra, a political analyst at the Observer Research Foundation, a policy group based in New Delhi. "These attitudes bring an enormous cost in terms of a lack of social mobility and lost economic opportunities."

Cheap Perfume

A single bare bulb exudes dim light in Suchitra's room, just enough to see the black water stains on the peeling, faded pastel-green walls. Used condoms lie on the floor. The stench of urine, sweat and cheap perfume hangs in the air. Rats gnaw at piles of garbage in the corridors outside.

Suchitra, who would only give her first name for fear of arrest by the police, said she has sex with as many as a dozen men a day for as little as 100 rupees (\$1.60) a time. A concrete slab that takes up most of her room serves as a bed, where she sleeps and does her work. Customers have threatened her with knives, guns and beer bottles, she said.

Government officials and activists working to break the born-into-prostitution custom say that high levels of illiteracy and caste-based prejudice

make it difficult for the women to earn a living any other way.

“It is going to be very difficult to stop,” said Niraj Pawan, the top government official in Bharatpur, who is struggling to curb the practice among the Bedia community. “How do you convince these illiterate girls, with no skills, facing enormous family pressure to be a prostitute to take a job where they will earn a tenth of their current pay?”

More Income

Bedia women say they can earn between 1,000 and 2,000 rupees a day working as prostitutes. That compares with the average daily income in India of 188 rupees.

The Bédias trace their roots to a 16th century battle in Rajasthan known as the Siege of Chittorgarh in which the Mughal forces defeated the Hindu Rajputs. The losers fled into the forests where they led a nomadic life on the fringes of the law. As told by members of the Bedia community, their women were driven into prostitution by the ensuing economic deprivation.

Many of the girls who are raised as prostitutes are injected with the hormone oxytocin to make their breasts grow faster, Pawan said. Unlike in the rest of India, where there is a traditional preference for boys that has led to a skewed sex ratio, Pawan said the Bedia community prefers girl babies because they are a potential source of income.

Kidnapping Children

It was because she gave birth to a boy that Swati Kumari, a 25-year-old member of the Bedia caste in Bharatpur, said she endured



A prostitute stands at the entrance of her room as her customer sits on the bed in a village red light district in Rajasthan, India. Photographer: Kuni Takahashi/Getty Images

months of abuse by her husband and parents-in-law. She fled to her parents' house after she repeatedly had her hair pulled, was punched in the face and had objects thrown at her. She said her son also faced physical abuse from her husband and his family.

“I don't want to tell you all the things that they did to me,” said Kumari, sitting on a charpoy, or rope bed, in the courtyard of the home of her parents, who filed a complaint with the police over their daughter's abuse. “They told me that to make up for the loss of earnings I had to go work as a prostitute instead. When I refused, the torture got worse.” Kumari declined to provide contact information for her husband and in-laws.

To bolster their income, the Bedia, Nat and Kanjar communities are involved in trafficking rings that kidnap children from other communities, who are then raised in their villages, the United Nations said in a 2013 report. Some of the girls are sent to Mumbai and Middle Eastern countries to work in dance bars and escort services, the report said.

Forged Passports

Sex trafficking rings prey on the poor and illiterate among India's almost 600 million female population. The traffickers often operate with impunity due to poor police enforcement, compliant officials and ingrained traditions of caste, said Siddharth Kara, a fellow with the Carr Center Program on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

"Law enforcement officials are often complicit," said Kara. "They either take bribes or look the other way or just don't see it as something they need to be concerned about."

Two policemen were among six people arrested for operating an extortion and prostitution ring in Delhi, the police announced last month. A police team investigating a sex racket last year in the south-western city of Kochi revealed that about a dozen girls had been taken out of the country on forged passports to the Persian Gulf with the aid of local airport officials, the UN said in its report.

Police Role

"Official complicity in trafficking was a serious problem that remained largely unaddressed by the government," the U.S. State Department said in the India section of its 2013 human trafficking report. "Some corrupt law enforcement officers facilitated the movement of sex trafficking victims, protected suspected traffickers and brothel keepers from enforcement of the law, took bribes from sex trafficking establishments and sexual services from victims, and tipped-off sex and labor traffickers to impede rescue efforts."

The police regularly carry out raids to rescue women and girls trafficked into prostitution, said Alok Kumar, a deputy commissioner of Delhi Police who is responsible for the area that covers the capital's red light district. Kumar said he wasn't aware of the involvement of any policemen in assisting sex trafficking rings.

Krishna Tirath, the minister for women and child development, did not respond to emails, phone calls and visits to her office seeking comment. A secretary in the office of Nita Chowdhury, the top civil servant in the department, said she didn't have time to meet.

Rape Increase

In India it is illegal to live off the earnings of a prostitute, run a brothel or solicit for sex in public places. It isn't illegal, though, to take money for sex.

Parliament passed a bill in March that mandated tougher sentences in rape cases and broadened the definition of trafficking, after thousands of people took to the streets in December to protest the gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old Delhi student. A New Delhi court on Sept. 13 sentenced four men to death for the crime.

There has been a 16 percent jump in the number of reported rapes nationally in India in the five years ending in 2012, and a 902 percent jump since 1971, according to police records. The increase may be the result of growing confidence in reporting assaults, police said.

The changes to the penal code aimed at bolstering women's safety include allowing rape that results in the death of the victim to be treated as a capital offense. Lawmakers also mandated life imprisonment for police officers found to have aided in trafficking.

Purple Lipstick

The town of Bharatpur, located about 160 kilometers south of Delhi and the place where Suchitra was schooled in prostitution, is one of the main homes of the Bedia. The community has also spread out into the surrounding villages, located among rolling green fields.

At first glance Panchi Ka Nagla looks like many other villages in rural India, with its mud-brick homes, tea stalls and foraging goats. The women and teenage girls wearing bright purple lipstick and revealing tops suggest something different.

They loiter by the road running past the village, waiting for customers. Once the price has been negotiated, they head off to one of the houses or into the bushes with the customer. Children playing nearby watch the scene play out over and over. The village men lounge on cots on thatch porches, prodding their daughters and sisters to hook more customers.

Virginity Auction

“Of course it makes us sad that we have to force our women into this line of work, but how else can we earn this sort of money?” said Pratap, 30, who uses a single name and lives off the earnings of his sister, Manju, who was soliciting customers nearby. “It is easy for them. They don’t have to work hard for it.”

Manju’s virginity was auctioned for 25,000 rupees 11 years ago to a hotel manager from the northern city of Agra shortly after she had her first period at age 13. A ceremony called nathni utarna, which literally means “taking off the nose ring,” was held to signify that she was ready to enter the sex trade.



Signage warning of the penalties for trafficking minor girls hangs from a building on Garstin Bastion Road, the red-light district in New Delhi.

Photographer: Prashanth Vishwanathan/Bloomberg

Keeping the money from the auction sale is considered inauspicious, so a lavish party was held. Guests from nearby Bedia villages were invited and Manju was adorned with new jewelry and clothes, she said. The festivities culminated in a feast at which alcohol was served and a goat was slaughtered.

Marriage Ban

“The first time I was so scared, I cried a lot,” said Manju, spitting a mouthful of paan, a betel leaf concoction, onto the floor of her mud shack. A small woman with dark eyes exaggerated by the use of thick mascara, Manju said she has sex with about six men a day and doesn’t know who the fathers of her three children are.

The rules of Manju’s caste dictate that she will never be allowed to marry because she has worked as a prostitute. Women married to Bedia men usually come from outside the community and are exempt from working as prostitutes. A



Women look out the windows of a building on Garstin Bastion Road, the red-light district in New Delhi.
Photographer: Prashanth Vishwanathan/Bloomberg

Bedia girl can only begin sex work once she's had her period and Bedia men are prohibited from having sex with prostitutes from their community, villagers said.

"Of course it is very difficult to understand why you want your own daughter or wife to sleep with other men," said sociologist Mukherjee. "In a patriarchal society like India women are just considered a commodity to exploit and to earn you money."

'Good Business'

Stiffer financial penalties for running a brothel and successfully prosecuting sex traffickers would reduce the number of women drawn into prostitution, said Kara. The current penalty for operating a brothel is between one and three years in jail and a fine of as much as 2,000 rupees.

"Even if all the owners of brothels in which sex slaves were exploited were convicted each and every year, sex trafficking would still be a high-profit, minimal-risk venture," Kara said. "It is a very good business model" for the brothel

owners, he said.

Ultimately, the key to extracting women from a world of sexual slavery is schooling, said Soumya Pratheek, who works for Apne Aap, a Delhi-based group that campaigns against sex trafficking in India. Some 73 percent of children aged 11 in schools in the state of Rajasthan are unable to subtract and 79 percent can't recognize numbers between 10 and 99, according to the 2012 Annual Status of Education Report.

"The most important tool that we have is education," said Pratheek. "Girls must go to school. They need to know that their body is theirs. It is not something that other people can trade in."

Role Model

In Bharatpur, Kumari, who took refuge in her parents' home, said she is the first woman from the local Bedia community to finish college. After graduating with a degree in Hindi, Sanskrit and political science this summer, she said she wants to work as a teacher. Because she is from a low caste she won't be given a job at a private school and so will seek employment at a government school, she said.

"I want to be a role model in my community and show people that there is a way out," Kumari said. "I understand the pull of this tradition is very strong. But if women can get a good education and earn more money then maybe one day they won't be forced to work as prostitutes."

Like Suchitra, other Bedia girls also end up working on Garstin Bastion Road, the red-light district in New Delhi. The area, just a few minutes' walk from the city's main train station, is

home to shops selling water pumps, paint, tiles and toilet seats, as well as 92 brothels and about 4,000 prostitutes, according to data cited in the UN report.

Too Late

Hundreds of women stand on balconies behind black metal grills overlooking the mile-long road, beckoning to passersby to come inside. Customers walk through dark stairwells to reach the brothels. Signs on the walls carry a warning: “Beware of the pickpockets and pimps.”

The entrance to the brothel where Suchitra works opens onto a room with wooden benches, where the women sit talking and brushing their

hair in between soliciting customers. Men fasten their trousers as they emerge from adjoining chambers.

Suchitra, who was talking about the dangers of her job, suddenly broke off the interview to join a group of her colleagues trying to solicit a customer who had entered the brothel. She arrived too late and the man headed off with another woman.

“This is my life, I can never do anything else,” she said. “I just pray that one day other girls like me will be able to do something different.”

—Editors: Peter Hirschberg, Anne Swardson

Girls Kidnapped for Forced Marriage Suffer Rising Crime in India

By Andrew MacAskill
Bibhudatta Pradhan
Bloomberg News

December 18, 2013 – Rupsona’s kidnappers struck at dusk, when most children in her village in eastern India were outside playing and their parents were resting after tending crops all day. The 14-year-old student had just finished geography class and was walking home along a road lined with rice paddies when she felt a blade at her throat.

The man holding the eight-inch knife and his two accomplices were clear: If Rupsona didn’t quietly climb into a nearby car, they would slit her throat. When the door closed, she was beaten, groped and forced to swallow pills that made her woozy. Two car rides and a train trip later, she and her captors arrived at her final destination: the town of Kaithal, almost a thousand miles from her home. A man was waiting for her. He told her that his name was Sandeep Malik and that she was his wife.

Later she would learn he’d paid \$800 to have her abducted. On her first night in captivity, Rupsona said, Malik forced her to have sex again and again. The nightly abuse continued for fourteen months, until she escaped.

“Everyone knows he had sex with me, so I will never be able to get married again,” said



Rupsona at her parent's home in Malda district of West Bengal state after being rescued.
Source: Bloomberg TV

Rupsona, sobbing as she described her ordeal. “I am like a cracked egg.”

Now age 16, she sat on a traditional rope bed wearing a green tunic in her parents’ mud-brick home in the district of Malda in West Bengal state, where she was returned a year ago after being rescued by the police. “Every night I have nightmares. They may come again. What is to stop them?”

Lethal Equation

Rupsona’s abduction, verified by police documents, springs from decades of neglect of female infants and the growth of sex-selective abortions. That has produced the lowest ratio of women to men in India’s history and the lowest in

the world among major countries, after China.

A lethal equation in which new wealth has increasingly afforded greater access to technology means that female fetuses have never been at greater risk in India. With ultrasound equipment available to a growing number of people, couples that adhere to the Indian cultural preference for sons can abort pregnancies if they discover they aren't having a boy.

In an economy that's grown almost fourfold in the last two decades, young women are abducted mainly from the poorest states, where the sex ratio is more balanced, and transferred to richer regions. About 100,000 Indian women were trafficked for marriage last year. That's an increase of about 20 percent since 2006, according to New Delhi-based Empower People, a group that fights bride kidnappings.

'Scarce Women'

The declining sex ratio "is an example of how India's growing economy has aggravated entrenched social problems," said Ravinder Kaur, a professor at the Indian Institute of Technology in New Delhi who has studied bride trafficking for more than a decade and is writing a book on the subject. "To put it bluntly, what we are witnessing is a competition for scarce women."

Though bride kidnapping also takes place in other Asian nations, India stands out for its combination of rising wealth and reported abductions. In China, the Communist Party moved to stamp out trafficking of women for marriage after it came to power in 1949. In recent decades, as the sex ratio has become more unbalanced, official media cite reports of abductions for marriage, both in terms of females

being trafficked internally and into China from South East Asia.

Bride kidnapping has been practiced in Kyrgyzstan since at least the early part of the 20th century and although outlawed is still widespread. In India, bride trafficking was uncommon until about two decades ago, when the shortage of women became increasingly pronounced, said Shafiq Khan, the founder of Empower People.

Getting Worse

"Historically it was very rare," said Khan, who estimates that his organization has rescued about 400 trafficked women in the past seven years. "Now, in parts of the country it's accepted as normal and it is getting worse by the day."

Kidnapped brides and sex-selective abortions aren't the only manifestation of the brutal treatment of women in the world's largest democracy. In India, some girls are raised to become prostitutes, a woman is raped on average every 21 minutes, a third of all females are illiterate and millions of women lack access to the most minimal level of sanitary protection. The country also performs the most female sterilizations in the world.

The rape and murder of a 23-year-old medical student one year ago this month prompted a national outcry and a flurry of lawmaking. But little has changed for millions of women like Rupsona, who has been robbed of her future at a young age.

Tall and thin, her nose pierced with a gold stud and her hair tied with red ribbons, Rupsona spoke with long pauses as she recalled the day she was snatched. She was wedged in the car

between two of her abductors, who put their hands over her mouth to silence her screams and kept her from breaking free.

Flower Drawings

The men told her if she attempted to escape they would bury her in a nearby field and her parents would never find their daughter's body. Later they fondled her breasts and rubbed their hands between her legs. She was crying and calling out for her mother, Rupsona recalled, sitting in a room decorated with her drawings of flowers and birds.

Several weeks after she arrived in Kaithal, Rupsona was married in a modest Hindu ceremony attended by her husband's family and a few friends, who were offered sweets and cigarettes. When she objected to being forced into wedlock, Rupsona's husband barred her from leaving the house. Her routine started at 6.30 a.m., when she woke and made breakfast. The rest of her day was filled with washing, cleaning and other chores for her husband, his parents and a brother.

When the police found her, Rupsona was four-and-a-half months pregnant. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she explained how after her rescue she chose to abort the child she'd conceived with the man she was forced to marry.

Family Absconded

Police documents reviewed by Bloomberg News and interviews with officers confirm Rupsona's kidnapping. Efforts to track down the man whom police say paid for her abduction, as well as his family in Haryana, one of India's wealthier states, were unsuccessful. Neighbors



Rupsona at her parent's home in Malda district of West Bengal state after being rescued.

Photographer: Bibhudatta Pradan/Bloomberg

said the family had absconded after the November 2012 police raid in which Rupsona was freed.

Law-enforcement officials in Malda, the district where Rupsona was bundled onto a train to New Delhi after being shoved into the car, said two of the suspected kidnapers were long-time criminals wanted for other offenses as well, including armed robbery.

"The men are in hiding right now but they won't be able to do that forever," said Kalyan Mukhopadhyay, the top policeman in Malda, which has a population of about 4 million people and where fewer than one in four households have a toilet or electricity. "When they need money they will pop up and we will be ready."

No Forcing

Krishna Tirath, India's minister for women and child development, cited the government of Haryana in a parliamentary reply to questions in 2011 that there are no forced marriages in the

state, where Rupsona was coerced into wedlock. Tirath didn't respond to three written and three telephone requests for comment. Nita Chowdhury, the top civil servant in the department, didn't respond to three e-mails and multiple calls.

Montek Singh Ahluwalia, the deputy chairman of India's Planning Commission, which designs the country's social policies, didn't respond to three e-mails and two phone calls requesting comment. Pankaj Pachauri, communications adviser to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, referred to a 2011 Singh speech.

"It is a matter of deep regret for us that the sex ratio has shown a decline from the level of the last census," Singh said in the Aug. 15 address celebrating Independence Day that year. "It is not only necessary to implement the existing laws effectively but it is also essential to change the approach with which our society views girls and women."

Poorest Corners

Most bride kidnappings occur in the impoverished parts of rural eastern India, in states such as West Bengal and Assam, where male-female ratios are among the narrowest in the country, meaning a relatively greater supply of women. The victims are snatched or duped by trafficking rings with a promise of jobs, then sold into wedlock in richer states for between \$150 and \$4,000, police in West Bengal said.

So wretched are the lives of some of India's poorest women that being kidnapped and sold into marriage can constitute stability. Mariam, who uses one name and is in her early 40s, says she has been living with her husband in the

village of Gohana in Haryana since he paid \$240 for her 20 years ago.

It was the third time she changed hands. Orphaned at six, she had survived by begging for scraps of food outside restaurants with three brothers and a sister. When she was about 12, she said, a man in a truck told her that he had been sent by her aunt to collect her from the town where she lived near India's border with Myanmar. She believed him.

Wedding Ceremony

He took her to New Delhi and sexually assaulted her for several years, she said. She lived in his home after they were married in a wedding ceremony. When he tired of her, he sold her to another man, who abused her as well.

He eventually sold her to her current husband, a widower now in his 50s whose right side is paralyzed after an accident. She oversees the house and runs a small tea stall in the village.

"I look after my husband and do whatever he needs," said Mariam, wearing a faded olive-green sari with holes in it as she sat on an orange plastic chair in the sparsely furnished office of Empower People in the town of Nuh in Haryana.

Posters with slogans against trade in women covered the peeling yellow paint on the walls. "We can end bride trafficking with determined action," read one.

"After everything I have been through I am relatively happy and at least I am safe now," Mariam said.

The price for a bride is determined by the woman's age, perceived beauty and whether she is a virgin, the United Nations said in a 2013 report on human trafficking in India.

in 1994, they are carried out widely, especially by better-educated and wealthier parents, according to a 2011 study published in the London-based *Lancet* medical journal. It estimated that as many as six million female fetuses were aborted in the period from 2000 to 2010.

Ultrasound technology, which became more widely available in the 1980s, has spread to small towns served by traveling doctors who carry the portable machines from clinic to clinic, said Kaur.

An ultrasound machine can be bought online in India for as little as \$1,750 and clinics perform the tests for \$10 and up.

The Indian government has tried to limit the use of ultrasounds as a tool to determine gender by requiring official registration of clinics. The punishment for revealing the sex of a baby is a prison term of as much as three years and a 10,000 rupee (\$161) fine.

Biggest Increase

Yet enforcement of the law is weak: By 2011, 17 years after the law took effect, there had only been 55 convictions in a nation of 1.2 billion, according to data collected by India's health ministry.

Of all the increases in reported crime against women in the past decade, kidnapping is up the most. Those cases have risen 188 percent, rapes are up 57 percent and cases of abuse by a husband or his relatives have increased 110 percent. So-called dowry murders, in which a husband or his family kill the bride if the marriage gift from her parents is deemed insufficient, are up 33 percent.

The abducted women are called "paro," a



The road where Rupsona was abducted.
Photographer: Bibhudatta Pradan/Bloomberg

Ancestral Roles

"Most 'purchased brides' are exploited, denied basic rights, duplicated as maids, and eventually abandoned," according to the report. They are exploited "under conditions that amount to a modern form of slavery."

Figures from India's 2011 census show the number of girls born per 1,000 boys dropped to 914, from 927 in 2001 and 945 in 1991. The decline over the past three decades, when India's population grew by more than 500 million, has been most extreme in the richest states of the northwest, the census showed.

The traditional preference for sons in India is deep-rooted. Men are expected to carry the family name, care for parents in old age and light their fathers' funeral pyres.

Having a daughter is viewed as incurring a lifetime of debt because of the custom of dowry payments. Female infants are almost twice as likely to die before the age of five than their male peers, the UN said in a 2011 report.

Weak Enforcement

While India outlawed sex-determination tests

slang term for “bought women.” Those who fail to bear sons are often resold to other unmarried men at a lower price, according to Empower People’s Khan.

Falling Price

Ronak, who uses one name, said her price fell by a third each time she was sold. She has deep scars on both cheeks that make her look older than her 40 years.

A dark green sari wrapped tight around her thin frame, Ronak stood at the edge of a dirt road on the outskirts of the village of Akeda in Haryana. Her eldest son watched over her protectively as she spoke, interrupting when she was asked sensitive questions.

She recalled warning the second man she was forced to marry that she’d report him to the police after he made her repeatedly sleep with his unmarried brother.

“I thought ‘Why should women be treated like animals?’” said Ronak. “He would tell me ‘What will they do? They won’t listen to you.’”

She was first sold to a 60-year-old man in New Delhi after being lured away from her village in northern Bihar state with an offer of a job as a domestic servant and a monthly salary of 20,000 rupees. After her first husband died, she was sold to the second man.

Residence Permitted

When he died, Ronak was sold again, this time to a man in his 50s with four children. She lived with him for 15 years, until he died in 2011. After his death, the man’s relatives threatened to sell her for a fourth time but residents in her village intervened and the local leader ruled she



could stay in her late husband’s home.

“Usually when someone dies it is a day of sadness but for me it was a day of joy,” said Ronak. “All my life I have been treated like a slave and passed around like an object.”

As with Mariam, contact with Ronak was made with the help of Empower People. Rupsona was found via Shakti Vahini, a Delhi-based non-governmental group that fights trafficking and was involved in her rescue. Her parents gave permission for the interviews with her.

Indian law prohibits identification of a rape victim. Accordingly, Bloomberg News has not used the family’s last name or included other identifying details.

Pilot Project

In Malda, where Rupsona was put on the train to New Delhi, a police pilot project is underway that encourages people to provide anonymous tips to officers on kidnappings and the whereabouts of abducted women. The program is in effect in 55 villages in the Malda area and will be rolled out in 6,000 more by the end of next year, said Mukhopadhyay, the district’s police chief.

“We know that people know a lot about what is happening but they are reluctant to come to us with the information,” Mukhopadhyay said. “So we have found this is a useful way of extracting it

even in the remotest areas.”

It took more than a year in captivity before Rupsona’s husband made the mistake that allowed her to escape. Doing the washing one day, she discovered that he’d left his mobile phone in his pants pocket. She called her sister’s husband, though she was unable to tell him where she was living because she’d never been let out of the house.

He went to the police, who traced her phone. On Nov. 27, five officers burst into the home to find Rupsona pregnant and in the kitchen under the supervision of her mother-in-law.

Raid Video

In a video of the raid, Rupsona is seen clasping her hand over her mouth to indicate she had been kidnapped. The mother-in-law is shouting at the police that the family had paid 50,000 rupees for Rupsona and she was their property.

Since returning home, Rupsona hasn’t gone back to school. She has been treated as an outcast because she had sex with a man outside her community and because of the social stigma of having an abortion.

“People tell me I have brought shame on my family and the village,” she said, adding that she now wants to be a teacher so she can help others like herself.

“I’m ashamed about what happened to me and I want to protect other girls from going through this,” she said. “In India, girls’ lives are miserable. At every stage of life we suffer because of how men treat us.”

—With assistance by Henry Sanderson and Nick Wadhams in Beijing

—Editors: Peter Hirschberg, Anne Swardson

Policewoman Gang-Raped After Sister Dies Sees India Calamity

By Andrew MacAskill
Bibhudatta Pradhan
Bloomberg News

September 10, 2013 – A police officer who was gang raped three weeks ago as she escorted her sister's body to be cremated says the national outrage over the fatal sexual assault of a student in December has done little to change the lives of most Indian women.

The officer, who can't be named under a law that grants victims anonymity, says rapes occur with virtual impunity and many of those assaulted feel social pressure not to report the crimes. The woman was traveling with her family when she was pulled out of their car by men wielding axes and then repeatedly raped in Jharkhand state in eastern India, police said.

"It is a crime to be born as a woman in India," said the policewoman, 27, a mother of two girls and a widow after her husband was shot dead by Maoist insurgents in 2011. "You always live in fear as anything can happen to you at any time."

A New Delhi court found four men guilty today of gang raping and murdering a medical student in a case that shocked India. The attack on the 23-year-old in the capital last year spurred weeks of nationwide protests and triggered an unprecedented debate about sexual violence in



A woman walks past a graffiti against rape written on a wall in New Delhi.

Photographer: Sajjad Hussain/AFP via Getty Images

the world's largest democracy.

The guilty men may face the death penalty after an eight-month trial in a specially-convened, fast-track court. Arguments on the sentencing begin tomorrow. The victim, who suffered internal injuries from being repeatedly violated with an iron bar, died two weeks after the attack.

Juvenile Sentence

The family of the victim slammed a juvenile court's decision last month to sentence a teenager, who was under the age of 18 at the time of the attack, to three years in a reform home after finding him guilty. The punishment



Policemen escort suspects, their heads covered in black hoods, as they exit the Shakti Mills compound, the scene of a gang rape of a female photojournalist, in Mumbai on Aug. 28, 2013.

Photographer: Indranil Mukherjee/AFP/Getty Images

was the maximum allowed for a juvenile under Indian law.

The alleged ring leader of the December attack committed suicide in March after using a carpet to hang himself from a ceiling grill, prison authorities said. His family and lawyer said he was murdered.

Even after the assault in Delhi prompted politicians to pass a law that imposes tougher sentences on men who commit sexual assaults, India is struggling to tame the violent and chauvinistic attitudes that leave women vulnerable to harassment and rape.

“These types of incidents won’t stop,” the policewoman said. “I worry about what society my two daughters will grow up in. I worry about what will happen to them, what their future will be, who will give them security.”

Shot Dead

The officer was traveling along a highway to her village shortly after midnight on Aug. 22 with the body of her sister, who had been shot dead by criminals in Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand,

one of India’s poorest states, close to the border with Bangladesh.

A gang of five men blocked the road with boulders about 5 kilometers (3 miles) outside the town of Latehar, she said. The men ordered the six family members in their vehicle to hand over their money and gold. Frustrated with their lack of possessions the men grew angry and decided to rape her, she said.

Even after the woman said she was a police officer and her dead relative was in a car behind them, and despite pleas from her father and brother to spare her, two of the men took her into the woods close to the road and took turns to rape her, she said.

“They told us if I don’t go with them, we will have to take another dead body,” she said in a telephone interview.

Five men have been charged with rape and robbery, Alok Kumar, deputy superintendent of police of Latehar, said in an interview. The defendants are between 20 and 22 years old and have confessed to the crime, he said.

Abandoned Mill

The attack occurred the same night as a photographer working as an intern at a magazine was gang raped in an abandoned textile mill in Mumbai, an incident that triggered street protests and reignited the debate about women’s safety. The assault on the policewoman in a rural area received almost no media attention in the country.

“In urban areas there is at least a recognition that women should not be attacked,” said Jyotsna Chatterji, director of the Joint Women’s Programme, a New Delhi-based advocacy group

that promotes women's rights. "In rural areas there is a patriarchal mindset and that mindset has not yet been replaced by the constitution. So women are easy targets and have no voice to complain."

There has been a 16 percent jump in the number of reported rapes nationally in India in the five years ending 2012, and a 902 percent jump since 1971, according to police records. In the first six months of 2013, reported rapes in New Delhi soared to 806 from 330 in the same period a year earlier. The rise may reflect greater confidence in reporting assaults, police said.

Rural Rapes

About 75 percent of rapes in India occur in rural areas, according to research by Mrinal Satish, an academic at the National Law University in New Delhi who looked at cases in the *Criminal Law Journal* between 1983 and 2009.

Almost one in four men surveyed in six countries in Asia said they committed rape at least once, according to a study published in *The Lancet Global Health* journal today based on interviews with more than 10,000 men.

In Jharkhand, the police woman's late husband, a fellow police officer, was murdered when a convoy escorting a member of parliament was ambushed by Maoist guerillas who say the government is exploiting villagers to gain resources. Eleven police officers were killed in



A member of a social organisation Our City Our Right holds a candle during a silent protest following the recent gang rape and murder of a 20-year-old college student in Barasat, in Kolkata on June 15, 2013.

Photographer: Dibyangshu Sarkar/AFP/Getty Images

the attack. She was offered a job with the police as part of the compensation.

The woman, who says she identified the five men in a police lineup, returned to work two weeks after being raped. Although she says that the incident means she has been left psychologically scarred, she plans to use the incident to spur her to fight for the protection of other women.

"I am trying to gather my courage," the woman said. "I am a police officer, I should not be fearful, I have responsibility to my department and to society. It is my job to fight this evil."

—With assistance by Eva von Schaper in Munich

—Editors: Adam Majendie, Tony Jordan

Victims in Delhi Rape Case Are to Blame, Defendants' Lawyer Says

By Andrew MacAskill
Bloomberg News

January 10, 2013 – The lawyer representing three of the men charged with the gang rape and murder of a medical student aboard a moving bus in New Delhi has blamed the victims for the assault, saying he has never heard of a “respected lady” being raped in India.

Manohar Lal Sharma said his clients will plead not guilty to all charges today when they make their next court appearance. His comments come as Indians have reacted with outrage to the opinions of politicians and a religious preacher who have accused westernized women of inviting sexual assaults. Sharma said the male companion of the murdered 23-year-old was “wholly responsible” for the incident as the unmarried couple should not have been on the streets at night.

“Until today I have not seen a single incident or example of rape with a respected lady,” Sharma said in an interview at a cafe outside the Supreme Court in India’s capital. “Even an underworld don would not like to touch a girl with respect.”

Sharma’s comments highlight frequently aired attitudes toward women in India. Activists say reporting of sex crimes and police investigations

of rape are hindered by a tendency to blame the victim for not following the traditional, conservative social roles ascribed to women.

“This is the mentality which most Indian men are suffering from unfortunately,” said Ranjana Kumari, director for the New Delhi-based Centre for Social Research. “That is the mindset that has been perpetrating this crime because they justify it indirectly, you asked for it so it is your responsibility.”

‘Chant God’s Name’

A spiritual guru, Asharam, sparked an outcry earlier this week when he said the New Delhi victim was equally responsible and should have “chanted God’s name and fallen at the feet of the attackers” to stop the assault.

Mohan Bhagwat, the head of the pro-Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh that underpins the country’s main opposition political party, said rapes only occur in Indian cities, not in its villages, because women there adopt western lifestyles.

Sharma said the man and woman should not have been traveling back late in the evening and making their journey on public transport. He also

said it was the man's responsibility to protect the woman and that he had failed in his duty.

"The man has broken the faith of the woman," Sharma said yesterday. "If a man fails to protect the woman, or she has a single doubt about his failure to protect her, the woman will never go with that man."

Sharma, 56, a Supreme Court lawyer for the last two decades, says that his clients are innocent.

Courtroom Chaos

"This is a very complicated case and the matter has not been solved yet," he said. Police have said they have DNA evidence linking all six to the crime.

Ram Singh, the driver of the bus and the alleged ringleader, is struggling to communicate and fluctuating between crying and laughing, Sharma said. Sharma, who has also been appointed to represent Singh's brother Mukesh and Akshay Kumar Singh, who is unrelated, plans to challenge police over their handling of the evidence.

Sharma's appointment comes after chaotic scenes on Jan. 7 that forced the magistrate to order a private hearing over concerns for the safety of the accused. Sharma was one of two lawyers denounced by other advocates for volunteering to represent the defendants. Arguments and scuffles over his offer led the magistrate to order the court room be cleared and future sessions to be held behind closed doors.

The gang rape of the woman on Dec. 16 provoked a sustained and charged debate about the safety of women in the world's biggest

democracy. The brutality of the crime and allegations by the male friend of the victim that it took police 45 minutes to respond to calls outraged the nation.

Three Illiterate

The attack on the woman and her friend, which led to her death almost two weeks later, forced the government to address demands for swifter justice, safer streets and heavier sentences in rape cases. India's top court on Jan. 4 began considering demands for faster trials and the suspension of lawmakers accused of sex crimes.

Sharma said he met the defendants for the first time on Jan. 7 for 15 minutes and was due to talk with them again yesterday. The three defendants he is representing put their thumb prints on forms appointing Sharma as their lawyer because they are illiterate, according to a copy of the documents given to Bloomberg News.

Five of the six accused will be tried for abduction, rape and murder, among other charges, government prosecutor Rajiv Mohan said Jan. 6. The other, said to be a juvenile, has been appearing before a separate judicial panel.

The male friend of the woman who was repeatedly raped and brutalized aboard the bus last month has recounted the two-hour attack which ended with the couple being thrown on to the roadside, ignored by passersby and argued over by police.

Rape Trap

In a Jan. 4 interview with the Zee News television channel, the man, who along with the rape victim hasn't been officially identified, described how they were lured on to the bus

operating illegally on the night of Dec. 16 as they returned home from a movie theater in a southern neighborhood of the Indian capital.

The six men aboard the bus, “which had tinted windows and curtains, had laid a trap for us,” he told the channel. “They beat us up, hit us with an iron rod, snatched our clothes and belongings and threw us off the bus on a deserted stretch.” The woman, who was flown to Singapore for medical treatment, died in the hospital Dec. 29.

Sharma says there are number of discrepancies in the police’s version of the events, which he will reveal in court. The only example he was willing to give is the failure of the

police almost three weeks after the attack to determine whether one of the accused is a juvenile.

Sharma criticized the lawyers of a local district association who have said no advocates should represent the accused.

“These people are just seeking revenge,” Sharma said. “They are not seeking justice. A defendant has a right to a lawyer, this is a basic principle of a modern society.”

—Editors: Mark Williams, David Merritt, Sam Nagarajan