

# 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

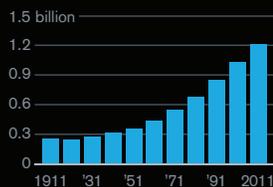
As India tries to control a rapidly growing population, states are offering payment or other incentives to women who agree to participate in a government sterilization program, a cheaper alternative to other forms of contraception.

GRAPHIC: ALEX TRIBOU / BLOOMBERG VISUAL DATA

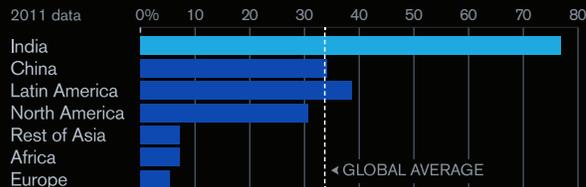
## As population in India increases, female sterilizations take hold

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.

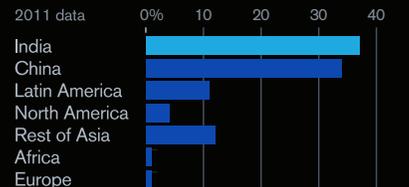
India population totals



Female sterilization as a percentage of total contraceptive use



Global distribution of female sterilization

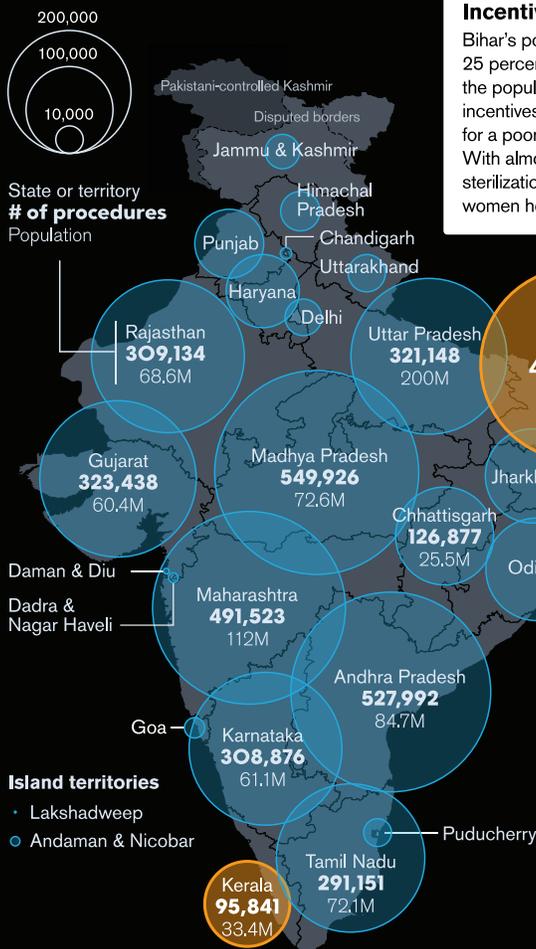


## While India promotes sterilization to curb population growth, improving literacy has been more effective in some states

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



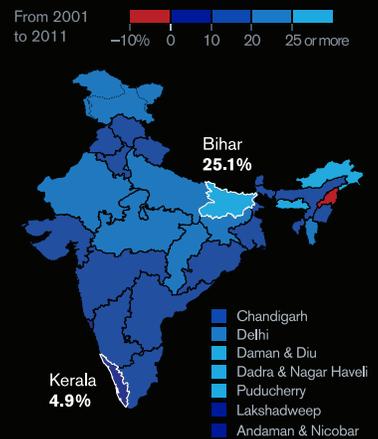
### Incentives for sterilization

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.

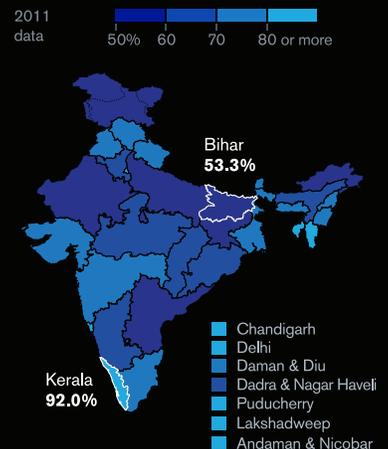
### High literacy, slow population growth in Kerala

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 kidnappers 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*

# Preschool Rape Case Belies Justice for India Women Born to Lose

By Tom Lasseter  
Bloomberg News

December 13, 2013 – The 3-year-old was limp on the family bed in New Delhi, staring at the ceiling. She didn't want to eat. She wouldn't speak. She barely moved. "Lying around, like a dead body," her father said.

She usually came skittering home from preschool full of joy, a whirl of noise and motion, giggles bouncing off the concrete walls. Her stillness worried her family. Then she vomited. After a doctor prescribed medicine for an upset stomach, she threw up again. Her mother peeled off her clothes to find splotches of what looked like blood inside her daughter's pink and white pants, and her genitals were swollen.

Shaking, her mother pressed her to talk. The little girl told her about a man at the preschool – "the uncle," she called him – who assaulted her in the bathroom and threatened to hang her from a ceiling fan if she didn't keep quiet.

It was devastating, and complicated. "This is a matter of our child's honor," the father said when his wife called him at work. He had to be careful. Reporting a sexual assault in India could bring shame. The preschool owner's family was rungs above his in social and economic status. The police tended to treat rape as trivial,



Anjali plays with the curtain at the entrance to her home in New Delhi. Photographer: Prashanth Vishwanathan/Bloomberg

especially if the accusers were poor.

At least, that was how it had been. This was December 2012, and the country was roiling after a brutal gang rape on a bus in Delhi. Pent-up outrage over routine sexual violence against women propelled thousands of people into the streets. Members of parliament demanded action. And the father went to the police. He wanted justice for his daughter.

## 'One Doubt'

The journey he decided to take would plunge him into a byzantine law enforcement and judicial system, and expose his family to the prejudice that defines life for women and girls at almost

every turn in the world's largest democracy. A skinny 35-year-old whose hair is shot through with gray, the father of two daughters, Kumar said he knew he first had to make certain his youngest understood the gravity of what she was saying.

"You can't ruin a man's life on the basis of one doubt," Kumar said. He and his wife, Kiran, asked that their full names and their daughter's not be published to protect the child's prospects in a society where girls can be shunned for having sex, even forced sex when they're just out of diapers. Indian law generally forbids identifying adult rape victims and all minors who've suffered sexual abuse.

Anjali – it means divine offering in Sanskrit – repeated the details, over and over, to her parents, to her grandmother. Kumar said doubt melted. "Imagine how painful that must have been," he said. Struggling to explain his feelings, he switched to English from Hindi. "Against humanity," he said.

### 'Devilish Thoughts'

It was Dec. 19. The gang rape victim was on a ventilator at New Delhi's Safdarjung Hospital. About 10 miles away, in a police station with paint peeling off the wall and old chairs jumbled on the roof, Kumar's trek through the system began.

At first, the process moved quickly. Anjali was interviewed by police officers, a magistrate, a therapist and a representative of the Child Welfare Committee. A doctor took vaginal and rectal swabs. The doctor filed a report noting that the child's hymen was intact, there was no history of "penile insertion" and there were no signs of external injuries. The report does note a history of "fingering & penile rubbing around external genitals (around vagina & rectum)."

Anjali identified Pramod Malik, the husband of

the woman who ran the preschool, as the man who "put his pee pee in my pee pee," in the words she used to police. Malik, then 40, was arrested. He signed a two-page statement at the station that said he "touched her private part with my finger and did wrong things" because of the "devilish thoughts" in his head.

### Anjali's Protest

On Dec. 21, the Hindustan Times ran a story on Anjali's case: "More shame: 3-year-old girl raped in playschool." The fury grew over the gang rape five days earlier, which happened one day before Anjali came home so quiet from preschool. Demonstrators faced off with police on the way to Rashtrapati Bhavan, the official residence of the president. Surgeons had removed much of the gang rape victim's intestines, which were destroyed by the metal rod her assailants thrust into her.

Anjali's case sparked a protest too that day in her neighborhood, which sits near a city jail and is cleaved by a sewage canal. Kumar met in the morning with elders at the local residents' welfare association, and they decided to confront Poonam Malik, the woman who ran the preschool. They wanted to know: How could she bring dishonor on the community by letting this happen?

She greeted them from a balcony of the family house – the school was on the first floor – defending her husband and yelling that the men below weren't without sin. "Haven't been bathed with milk" is the phrase Kumar said she used.

### 'Hang Him'

Soon at least 75 people had gathered outside, some calling for Pramod Malik to be executed. "Hang him," they shouted. Two men

tacked a piece of paper to the red door. “Not a play school, this is a rape school,” the script on the paper said. Nearby was the school sign, illustrated with a bunny rabbit and a clown juggling five balls.

A member of parliament, Mahabal Mishra, weaved his way through the crowd, his hand moving above his white hair in a flutter of acknowledgment. Kumar pushed forward. He touched his head to the MP’s torso in a gesture of supplication. As he was pulled away, Kumar’s finger shot up, wagging in Mishra’s face. He yelled, “I want justice!”

Kumar could see it happening. At 5 p.m., Poonam Malik, then 35, was charged with exposing a child to mental or physical suffering, which carries a maximum sentence of six months. The charge against her husband, aggravated penetrative sexual assault, a crime under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses Act, can be punished by life in prison. The law applies to penetration by any body part, not just the penis.

## Expressing Remorse

Poonam Malik signed a statement saying she hadn’t been at the preschool the day of the alleged assault but her husband had. He’d taken sick leave from his job as an associate to the president of a New Delhi research institute, according to the statement and to documents collected by the police. She expressed remorse, according to the statement, which ended with “I have made a mistake. Forgive me.”

The Maliks declined to be interviewed for this story. Their lawyer said that they are innocent and that the statements were fabricated by the police, written up after his



Anjali, center, plays as her mother Kiran, left, and father Kumar look on in a park in New Delhi.

Photographer: Prashanth Vishwanathan/Bloomberg

clients signed blank pieces of paper.

The head officer of the police station, Inspector Richhpal Singh, dismissed that accusation, though he wouldn’t discuss the Maliks’ statements specifically. “It’s the lawyer’s job to make such comments,” he said, wearing the dark khaki uniform and neatly trimmed mustache typical of New Delhi police officers. “Whatever the accused reveals is written down.”

## No Jury

Two months passed between the Maliks’ arrest and the formal presentation to the court of their charge-sheets – the documents accusing them of crimes. It was the beginning of a grinding process. A trial in India isn’t a contained event with consecutive days of testimony and arguments but a series of hearings, weeks or months removed from one another, frequently adjourned and postponed. There’s no jury. A judge decides the strength of charges filed and

weighs the merits of all evidence.

Prosecutors play largely administrative roles, making sure facts are presented and the law followed. Both accuser and accused are represented by their own attorneys. Kumar found a lawyer who agreed to volunteer his time. The Maliks hired one who said he has several clients facing rape-related charges.

Except in rare cases, trials last for years, in part because of a shortage of judges. India has 15.5 jurists per million people, while the U.S. has more than 100. To work through just the backlog of unresolved rape cases – 86,032 at the end of 2012 – the courts would have to decide more than 78 a day, every day, for three years straight.

### **Deeply-Rooted Attitudes**

After the preschool protest, Kumar and Kiran tried to take the advice of therapists. Don't dwell on what happened, they said. Hide or throw out clothes or books that were reminders of the preschool. Anjali didn't want to eat. Sometimes, her parents said, she would suddenly cry out, "He will kill me!"

They bore the days and nights, grief-stricken about Anjali and worried about the effect on her older sister. Outside, they faced deeply-rooted social attitudes about rape. People talked behind their backs, Kumar said. A month passed. Then he lost one of his two jobs, on the day shift in a pharmacy.

Kumar had missed too many days ferrying Anjali to police appointments and counseling sessions. "I was not doing the work properly," he said. "I was late all the time."

While he held on to his overnight job at a hospital pharmacy, making about 9,000 rupees

(\$147) a month, that relative good fortune was tempered by his family getting kicked out of the house they'd been renting.

### **Steady Work**

Kumar didn't believe the landlord's explanation of needing the space for a relative; he said he thought the decision was fueled by discomfort about the rape case and the visits by police. Later, he said, the family moved a second time to get away from gossiping neighbors.

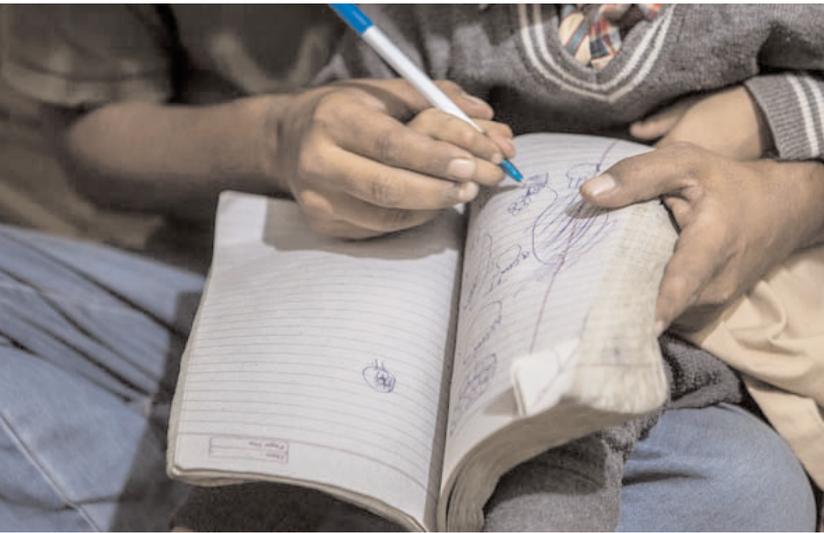
At the end of February, Pramod Malik was granted bail. By then, Kumar had found a new daytime job, as a middleman for wholesalers and small shops. He pedaled his bike from seller to buyer with the goods – bug repellent, shampoo, diapers, laundry soap – strapped to the frame with a black rubber tire tube.

At the pharmacy job he lost, he'd earned about 12,000 rupees a month. While this business brought in less than half that, it was steady work and he said he hoped to turn it into more. He and Kiran wanted better for their children. He said that's why they'd decided to send Anjali to the preschool, to give her an advantage.

### **Counting Pills**

After college, Kumar hadn't aspired to being a delivery man or counting out pills for a living. He'd planned to continue his studies and find a position as an accountant. He still keeps his documents from the University of Calcutta, which show he earned a degree in commerce in 1998, in a bag under the bed at home.

He became a pharmacist's assistant because his younger brother was still in school and his



Kumar helps his daughter Anjali draw in a notepad at their home in New Delhi.

Photographer: Prashanth Vishwanathan/Bloomberg

parents had spent their savings on his sister's wedding, he said. "It was my first duty to give bread and biscuits to my family."

In March, Kumar learned his family would be awarded 25,000 rupees from a victim compensation fund. A letter from the Delhi State Legal Services Authority said the payment was made on the advice of Singh, the commanding officer at the police station, who'd said they were "living in miserable condition."

At first Kumar was suspicious. "We don't want money for our child," his wife recalled him saying, "we just want justice." She said he calmed down after they met with legal services officials and learned accepting the money would have no effect on the case. They put it aside for Anjali's wedding.

## Two Strangers

On the first Saturday in March, as Kumar was making his delivery rounds, a motorbike sideswiped him. He tumbled and hurt his hand, but his bicycle wasn't badly damaged.

A month later, two strangers visited him at the hospital pharmacy. In the graininess of a security camera frame, their faces are hard to make out – a man is beside Kumar, another is following. One mentioned the bike accident, Kumar said, reciting what he heard: "You were saved last time but next time we're not going to let you go." They told him to drop the rape case, he said. Frightened, he filed an application for police protection for Anjali.

The application included the license plate number of the men's car, and Kumar later gave police a copy of the security camera image. Singh said the application was transferred from his precinct to the one where the hospital is. The head officer at that station, Inspector Pramod Gupta, said he wasn't aware of Kumar's request.

The Maliks' lawyer, Vinay Sharma, said they had nothing to do with any attempts to intimidate Kumar. "Whatever allegations are leveled, they are false, totally false," he said.

## 'Old Scores'

Leaning forward in his chair, Sharma said Anjali's allegations were fabricated too. She'd been put up to it by her family, he said, in an attempt to extort money after a dispute over the monthly tuition of 500 rupees at the preschool.

"It is a big problem now," because of all the attention paid to the gang rape case, Sharma said. "These days many false cases of sexual harassment are lodged by the parents of the minor children to settle their old scores."

Sub-inspector Kusum Lata, the investigating officer in Anjali's case, voiced a similar sentiment. Ever since the gang rape, Lata said, there's been a flood of complaints, and it's difficult to sift

through what's genuine and what's not.

"A lot of women register sexual assault cases against people they want to get even with," she said. "I shouldn't say this, but about 80 percent of the cases are based on revenge."

Asked if that includes Anjali and her father, Lata said, "that can only be decided on the basis of statements in court. I can't say such things about a child's case."

### **Bus-Stop Beating**

The weight of summer settled on New Delhi, and the narrow alley outside Kumar's home filled with clouds of flies. On one of the main room's dirt-streaked walls, the telephone numbers of the local police station, child welfare and aid groups were scribbled in pencil. They were for his wife, he said, should someone threaten her while he's away.

Kumar was anxious every night when he left for his shift at the hospital. On a Thursday about three months after the strangers visited him there, he caught the bus as usual, rode north and got off at the Metal Forging stop to transfer to the No. 108. He strolled over to a clutch of vendors, and asked for 5 rupees-worth of fried lentils. Someone yelled that the No. 108 was coming. That's when the group of people approached him.

A woman began to shout. Bystanders told police she yelled that Kumar was trying to rape her. The men pounded him with their fists. Reeling, he said he heard one say, "You are the only earning member of the family and we will make sure you're behind bars." Kumar was detained and accused of attempting to assault the woman.

### **No Link**

Interviews with witnesses persuaded police

that he wasn't guilty, said Inspector Raman Lamba, the head officer of the local police station at the time. "They all support the version of the man, that this is just a collision" – two people bumping into each other – "that there was no molestation," the inspector said from his office, the door open to a hallway where a pair of lizards climbed the walls.

Kumar filed a complaint with the police saying he suspected the incident was designed to keep him from going to court for his daughter's case.

The officer assigned to the bus-stop beating, Sub-inspector Ram Gopal, said no link was found with Anjali's case. Gopal declined to discuss his investigation. Lamba said the men and woman involved in the beating wouldn't be pursued because the injuries they inflicted on Kumar were "not serious."

### **'Totally Broken'**

Kumar was demoralized. He'd filed a sexual assault case on behalf of his daughter and then he himself was accused of attempting to assault a woman.

"He came to my office and said, 'Sir, I cannot fight any longer,'" said D.S. Rawat, the head of a neighborhood charity who befriended Kumar. "He was totally broken." Kumar had made the mistake, after all of the attention paid to the gang rape, of thinking that "their case would be treated the same way," Rawat said. But "such cases happen in every corner of the country, all the time."

Rapes are vastly underreported in India, as they are around the world. Though the numbers are rising, up 902 percent between 1971 and 2012, Indian government data show there were 24,923 reported last year, in a country of more

than 1.2 billion.

“The whole thing is so traumatic and it takes so long that people feel that it’s better to keep quiet and forget all about it and carry on with life,” said Enakshi Ganguly Thukral, co- director of the HAQ Centre for Child Rights in New Delhi, an advocacy group for young victims of sexual abuse that helps train law enforcement and court officers. “There is no guarantee of justice at the end of the day.”

## **No Interest**

Rajat Mitra, a psychologist and director of a trauma counseling center in New Delhi, said sexual predators know it. He interviewed about 200 men charged with or convicted of sex crimes between 2000 and 2005. He said the men were consistent: They didn’t think anyone was interested in solving rape cases.

“One of the major things that came across from the pedophiles and the rapists was that, ‘We can get away,’” Mitra said. They told him that either the woman wouldn’t file a complaint “or the victim will not be believed.”

The gang rape, and the death of the victim 13 days after the attack, spurred some change. The Indian Parliament revised the country’s sexual harassment and assault laws, imposing harsher penalties on men who attack women and on police officers who fail to properly act on rape reports.

## **Long Time**

The accused in the gang rape were tried under the country’s fast-track system and convicted in September, nine months after the crime. Four men were sentenced to death by

hanging; they later appealed. A juvenile was sentenced to the maximum three years. A sixth defendant was found dead in his cell in March.

Anjali’s case dragged on. One day at the end of August, she was passed out in the middle of the family bed, wearing black shorts and a red shirt with a silver stripe. Kumar scooped her up in his arms and moved her to a pillow so that visitors could sit with him on the bed, which takes up most of the main room.

“My child has been questioned over and over, again and again,” Kumar said, looking down at Anjali and the skinny legs sticking out of her shorts. He sounded tired, and said a moment later, “This incident took place a long time ago.”

The fan creaking overhead hardly stirred the air, and sweat trickled down Kumar’s forehead. Roaches crawled on the walls, the bed, the floor and the Mickey Mouse sheet draped over his stock of wholesale goods in a corner.

## **Weak Heart**

Anjali turned over. Her father paused. Had she been pretending to be asleep? A few minutes later, the girl quietly slipped off the bed and walked out of the room.

A tear welled as Kumar talked about the next hearing. “If you don’t want to give justice to such children, then why file cases in the first place?” he said. “Just say that your children were born to be assaulted and leave it at that.”

At a courthouse on the western edge of the New Delhi a few days later, Kumar sat in front of a pillar mounted with security cameras. He wore his usual outfit of a short sleeve blue cotton shirt, jeans and brown sandals. He didn’t peer through the window in the door to see what was

happening in the courtroom. “I don’t want to watch,” he said. “My heart is too weak.”

Kiran was inside with Anjali, who sat atop a table before the judge’s bench. The girl’s eyes were wide under dark hair shorn in a bowl cut. To Anjali’s right was the family’s attorney, to her left three lawyers for the Maliks.

## **Mostly Silent**

The lawyers began to wave their arms in disagreement, leaning toward each other with scowls or smirks. Anjali disappeared from view as the cluster of their black suit jackets closed in. At the back of the courtroom, the Maliks stood behind a cloth screen hung on a white metal frame.

It was Sept. 4, the seventh scheduled hearing so far, according to lawyers on both sides, and the second time she’d testified in court about what happened in the preschool bathroom on Dec. 17.

Kumar’s father, Ashok, said it was crushing for his son to have worked so hard to give his daughters opportunities only to face tragedy. “He doesn’t talk freely with us about this, but he is in mental anguish,” said Ashok, who works at the family’s tea shop with his wife on an alley beside the sewage canal.

Anjali, now 4, goes to a different preschool

and walks home with her mother. While her sister bops around the house and makes jokes, Anjali often just watches, mostly silent.

## **Back Home**

In late November, Kumar walked out of his neighborhood, past the hodgepodge of houses wedged between shops with mobile phone displays, old sewing machines and caged chickens. He crossed the sewage canal as narrow lanes opened to streets big enough for a car, under thick webs of crisscrossing phone and power lines.

He continued for several minutes, until he got to a nicer district, which he said he rarely has time to visit. His daughters and wife met him at a park. The girls ran together in the grass. Their father watched them, and smiled. He said he’d pursue the case for Anjali, however long it took. In four days, it will have been a year since his daughter came home such a different little girl than she’d been in the morning.

With the sun dipping down, Kumar gathered his family. It would be getting dark soon, and they headed back to their rooms on the alley.

*—Editors: Anne Reifenberg, John Voskuhl*

# Denial of Menstrual Hygiene to Indian Women Holds Back Economy

By Natasha Khan  
Ketaki Gokhale  
Bloomberg News

July 25, 2013 – Sushma Devi, a mother of three in Northern India, stores her “moon cup” on the window sill of the mud-brick veranda that shelters the family goats.

In a village where few have indoor toilets and the Hindi word for her genitals is a profanity, 30-year-old Sushma struggles to talk about how she manages her period and the changes brought by the bell-shaped device she inserts in her vagina to collect menstrual blood.

“It’s a thing from hell,” she says of the malleable, silicone cup, which she received from a Massachusetts Institute of Technology research group. “I have to keep it far from the house, from where I pray.”

Across the world’s largest democracy, where a decade of economic growth nearing 8 percent a year has tripled per-capita income, millions of women are held back by shame around their most basic sanitary needs.

Teenage girls and young women are encouraged to go to school and enter the workforce, yet have little access to the infrastructure and products – separate bathrooms, sanitary pads – that will help them succeed. Taboos around sexual health reflect a level of discomfort with the female body that



Cloth sanitary napkins are shown to village women in Rupaspur, around 60 kms from Agra. Many Indian women make do with little more than scraps of old cloth when menstruating, often risking their health, say aid workers trying to make clean and cheap sanitary napkins available.

Photographer: Manan Vatsyayana/AFP via Getty Images

affects women’s contribution to the economy and marks India as the third-worst nation in Asia for gender inequality.

“When our periods start, it becomes much harder,” explains Sushma, who wears a faded floral-patterned sari with silver toe rings and colorful glass bangles jangling on her arms. She was 15 years old when her mother showed her how to use fabric torn from discarded saris to handle her monthly period.

## **Economic Impact**

Until a team of researchers from MIT’s Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab taught her how

to use the menstrual cup, which she washes and re-uses, she'd sneak out at night to bury her soiled rags in the dirt.

For Sushma and many others in India, puberty didn't just mark the process of becoming a woman. It brought a source of humiliation and an obstacle to learning.

"Many girls, when they get their period, say it means the end for them," says Lizette Burgers, who headed Unicef's water, sanitation and hygiene program in India from 2004 to 2011. "It's taboo to talk about it."

Persistent differences in women's health, education and economic participation can only become detrimental to India's growth, the World Economic Forum said in an October report on the global gender gap. Giving women more opportunities could boost the country's economic growth rate by about 4 percentage points, Lakshmi Puri, the assistant secretary-general of UN Women, estimated in 2011, according to a report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

## **Gang Rape**

India ranked equal to Congo on the United Nations Development Programme's gender inequality index for 2012. Female participation in the labor force was 29 percent in 2011, 2 percentage points below Sudan and less than half of China's 68 percent, according to World Bank data. Only 65 percent of women can read or write, compared with 82 percent of men, according to India's census data for the same year.

The vulnerability of women attracted international attention last December when a female medical student was gang-raped aboard

a bus in New Delhi one evening. Her death sparked nationwide demonstrations calling for a government and police crackdown on sex crimes.

Sushma says she was never molested when she left the house at night to bury her rags, though she knows women who were and she felt exposed and fearful.

"I've always struggled to understand why there is such little attention on this issue that impacts dignity, education, health and women's involvement in the workplace," says Virginia Roaf, an adviser to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to water and sanitation.

## **Old Rags**

Of the 355 million reproductive-age women in India, only 12 percent use absorbent pads or another sanitary method to stem the blood flow during their periods, a report by AC Nielsen and Plan India found in 2010. The rest tend to rely on old fabric, husks, dried leaves and grass, ash, sand or newspapers.

Menstrual cups, designed to be re-used and collect rather than absorb blood, have been around since the 1930s. Brand names and manufacturers include Diva International Inc., maker of the DivaCup; Mooncup Ltd., the U.K. company that was first to make the device with silicone; and Mumbai-based MediAceso Healthcare Pvt., supplier of the device Sushma uses.

The consequences aren't just economic. There's a public health toll. India accounts for 27 percent of the world's cervical cancer deaths, according to World Health Organization data. The incidence rate there is almost twice the global average, and doctors studying the disease say poor menstrual hygiene is partly to blame.

## Cringe Factor

The homespun solutions raise the risk of vaginal infections that can suppress the reproductive tract's natural defenses. A weaker immune response can compromise the body's ability to fight the sexually transmitted human papillomavirus, the microbial cause of most cervical cancers, says Robert Tindle, an emeritus professor of immunology at the University of Queensland in Brisbane who has studied HPV.

There isn't good data to show the role menstrual hygiene plays in the prevalence of cervical cancer in India, according to Rajesh Dikshit, chief of epidemiology at Mumbai's Tata Memorial Hospital, India's biggest cancer treatment center. Some analysis points to a link by way of clean water access, he says.

"Where there is no water in India, there are very high rates of cervical cancer," Dikshit says. "Where you have water, you don't have the cervical cancer."

## Busting Myths

Kimberly-Clark Corp., Procter & Gamble Co. and other makers of feminine hygiene products are working to wrench open a market that could be worth billions. Things are moving slowly.

Sales of sanitary protection products in India reached \$236 million last year and that number will probably only swell to \$442 million by 2017, according to London-based researcher Euromonitor International. That compares with a projection of \$13.2 billion that year for China, which according to the United Nations has 42 million more women.

Procter & Gamble, the maker of Whisper sanitary pads, found by working with local



Sustainable Health Enterprises (SHE), with technical assistance from North Carolina State University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has designed the SHE LaunchPad, a menstrual pad that utilizes patent-pending technology to transform agro-waste, in this case, banana fibers, into highly absorbent material without the use of chemicals.

Photographer: Elizabeth Scharpf/SHE via Bloomberg

schools to educate girls and their mothers about feminine hygiene and biology that they were "busting myths and cultural superstitions," says Shweta Shukla, a spokeswoman based in Mumbai. Kimberly-Clark is also conducting awareness programs for school-age girls to help them understand the changes the body undergoes at puberty.

"Women asking for more comfortable desks is one thing," says Clarissa Brocklehurst, a water and sanitation consultant in Ottawa who headed Unicef's water, sanitation and hygiene division in New York until June 2011. "Being forced to speak out about an issue that everyone gets a bit shy and cringing about is another."

## School Dropouts

Companies tend to focus on schools because that's where the exclusion begins. At

least one in five girls drop out when periods begin, according to research by AC Nielsen and Plan India, a New Delhi-based non-profit organization. Those who persist typically miss five days of school each month due to inadequate menstrual protection.

“The schools they study in, the spaces they play or relax in, the markets, farms and offices they work in, do not design facilities with this simple and recurrent biological need in mind,” Chris Williams, executive director of the Geneva-based Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, wrote in a May note.

Procter & Gamble’s Shukla says the Cincinnati-based company has worked to bring sanitary napkins “out of the closet” by showing actual pads in advertising instead of relying on euphemisms, and encouraging retailers to move the packs from the back of the store to the front.

## **Banana Pad**

Besides Procter & Gamble and Kimberly-Clark, India’s health ministry is working to bolster awareness by selling pads at a subsidized rate of 6 rupees per pack of six to adolescent girls under the brand name Freeday.

There is also research into cheaper products better suited to developing countries. New York-based Sustainable Health Enterprises has developed technology to make a sanitary pad with cheap local materials such as banana stem fibers as the absorbent core.

And the research team from MIT’s Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab last year introduced the moon cup – a device used by a handful of environmentally conscious women in the U.S. and Europe – to Bihar, where 54 percent of the

population lives below the poverty line, more than in any other Indian state.

The lab dispatched 50 field staffers to a district called Jehanabad, an expanse of green paddy and wheat fields dotted with tiny mud-hut villages outside Bihar’s capital, in SUVs to reach villages so remote many weren’t connected by roads.

## **No Praying**

The workers often had to walk the final 3 to 4 kilometers (2-2.5 miles) of dusty terrain to meet the research team’s goal of introducing the cup to almost 200 women. More than 40 percent of the women approached had never seen a sanitary absorbent.

“Going to these villages is like going back in time,” says Vivian Hoffmann, an economist and the lead researcher on the project investigating whether the menstrual cup can become a viable alternative to pads and rags for rural women. “There’s a real gap in the literature when it comes to this population. So if we’re going to find an impact from menstrual hygiene anywhere, we’re going to find the impact here.”

Menstruating women can’t perform religious rituals, touch idols, pray, visit temples, cook, serve food and touch drinking water in many traditional Hindu homes because they’re considered impure. Sushma, who says the cup has improved her life and stoked envy from other women, will still cook but not pray.

A few households in rural Uttar Pradesh, the state just west of Bihar, have a separate area for menstruating women to sleep, according to a report from Unicef.

Sushma isn’t ready to ditch the taboos she grew up with. While she says she will discuss

these issues with other women, and has showed them her cup, she goes out of her way to keep her husband and sons in the dark.

“We absolutely don’t talk about it with men,” she says, protectively cupping the head of her 6-year-old son. “It is dirty. Why should they know about it?”

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