

Another day, another rape

Mari Marcel Thekaekara (March 7, 2011)

Every day three Dalit women are raped. I read this statistic for the first time when I was on my way to the Durban Racism conference in 2001, writing articles for the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights. It is hard to absorb, even harder to internalize, because it seems so utterly impossible that something so outrageous could be true. When I incorporated this statistic into articles, people challenged me. Where did you find that figure? Statistics are easy to manipulate, you should get your facts right.

In December 2010, I visited Uttarakhand with Santosh Samal of the Dalit Foundation, Delhi. I was keen on meeting Dalit Foundation fellow Prem Pancholi and others in their own state, on their own turf and record stories of their work on Dalit issues. Uttarakhand is utterly beautiful. The scenery is proverbially breathtaking with the majestic Himalaya Mountains providing a perennially present, stunning backdrop. The people are charming as hill people mostly are. Ask anyone in Delhi and they will tell you, you can trust hill folk. They are loyal, simple, good people, not crafty like city *wallahs* (person in charge of something)..

Yet here in Uttarakhand, for the first time, I get a different perspective what it is like to be a Dalit. And even more difficult, what it is like to be a Dalit woman in this magical mountain state.

Prem Pancholi, Dalit activist and journalist takes me to visit a child who was almost raped.

From the verdant hillside, I see a tiny figure herding a cow home. I think it's a little boy. I'm wrong. It's a little girl, 8-year-old Nirmala¹. Haircut absolutely short like a boy, tattered jeans, grubby shirt. Not anywhere close to a Garhwali (Dalit sub caste) girl, even now, when you meet the weirdest western clothes in the remotest villages of India.

In June 2010, little Nirmala was watching the vegetable field, guarding against monkeys raiding the tomato crop. Her aunt Sangeeta had wandered away to fetch water. From the hill nearby, 18-year-old Kailash saw her alone. He lured her to the tiny hut above the cattle shed. Then attacked the child, tearing at her clothes. Nirmala fought, struggled, screamed. Which brought her aunt running and saved her from actual rape. But nothing has happened because Nirmala is a Dalit child and the perpetrator is a dominant caste Pandit youth. Kailash's mother and father, and sundry relatives arrived in a group screaming expletives, yelling that they would finish off these insolent Dalits who dared to complain about their son. The village *pradhan* (head) stopped them attacking the family. "This is a terrible sin," the shocked *pradhan* decreed. "If this was my son I would have killed him with my own two hands." The next day, Nirmala's grandfather Premchand phoned his son Vineet and Vineet contacted a BSP (Dalit party) politician. The attack became a major local issue. Many newspapers flashed the story. Pressure to arrest Kailash mounted. The

¹ All villagers' names in this article are changed to protect their privacy

police went to the village but did not arrest him. Rumours of huge bribes were whispered. Vineet recounted the story: “For three days, a *satya narayan pooja* (religious ceremony) took place with the perpetrator's family worshipping in the local policeman's house. We held a press conference in Musoorie. But nothing has happened. Chargesheet, but no arrest.”

The story emerged in pieces from Nirmala's grandfather Premchand and her uncle Vineet. The anger in the younger man is palpable. The old man is fatalistic, resigned. For him rape and violence are inevitable, a part of life. He has lived with violence all his 70-odd years, as have generations of his Dalit ancestors for hundreds of years before him.

Unbelievably, the story is even more shocking than I expected. I have to curb a rising irritation with the old man. Often I have to ask for clarifications. I haven't quite understood him. He grumbles, or so I think. But it's just his way of talking, a subservience born of centuries of feudalism. His wife Sushma has a beautiful face. Like a classic painting. Lined and careworn by years of hard work. Life in the mountains is hard. Fetching water and firewood up the hill. Eking out an existence from subsistence farming on tough, unyielding terrain.

I remark on her beautiful face. The old man laughs, “Beautiful?” “Yes.” “An old woman is beautiful? She looks like a monkey. We are all animals here, buffaloes and monkeys. Just look at our life. In my old age I can barely manage to feed myself. But I have to feed this child. Is it easy? No, but what can I do, we just carry on. My daughter is married and gone. She cannot help it. She had to leave this child here. Which husband will accept a bastard child?”

I am puzzled.

Vineet begins to narrate the story. And slowly this truth-is-stranger-than-fiction tale unravels. 'My sister Bina was a young girl, about 19 or 20 in 2002). She was about to be married when she was raped by two upper caste boys. I was only a boy. It was 9 or 10 years ago (Vineet is about 18 years old now). My father tried to protest. Went to the *patwari* (revenue inspector). The *patwari* talked to people and said to my father, “It's done. What is the point of creating trouble now. Making a fuss will be bad for the girl, her reputation will be ruined”.

The *patwari* insisted on effecting a compromise. The villagers said, “If you create a fuss we will drive you out of the village, beat you up... you will learn your lesson then. “My father was not happy. But he was old, poor, illiterate, a Dalit. What could he do?”

Bina was married off and in seven months she gave birth to a child. The in-laws were furious. They said, “She has brought shame on our family, on the entire village.” They began abusing her, she was not given food, beaten up, ill treated. They told her, “You should go and jump in the river, better you die than live in shame.”

Bina sent a message to her father. He came to her in laws village. Pleaded with them to keep her. But they shouted at him too. “What kind of girl is this? Bringing a bastard child into our home. Have you and your family no shame? She should go and drown herself in the Yamuna river rather than disgrace everyone. We will not tolerate her here.” So my father brought her back home with the baby.

From Sahranpur, there was an older man, about ten years older, unmarried. He agreed to marry Bina. She was very beautiful. But of course without the baby. He wanted to start a fresh life with a clean slate. So little Nirmala was left with her grandparents. A cruelly orphaned, unwanted, child.

And eight years later history repeats itself.

But this was not the end of the story. There was still more to come. One of the more militant Dalit activists Raju, then told me, almost casually, “This happens in every village. My sister was raped too. Gang raped. They wanted to teach me a lesson. They thought I was getting too big for my boots. Writing atrocity stories in the papers. Creating trouble. So they caught my sister and raped her. What could I do? I knew the local Sub-Inspector of police. He was a Dalit. So he caught the rapists. Beat them up properly, so they would never forget it all their lives and got compensation out of them. With that forty thousand rupees I managed to marry off my sister. Otherwise who would have married her??!”

What shocked me even more than the rape was that an activist could react in this manner. At this point, the main concern was getting the girl married, hushing it up so society would not know. I took the group to meet Margaret Alva, Governor of the state, herself a really feisty woman. Margaret Alva has always been gutsy, supportive of Dalits, Adivasi, NGOs. She said, “When this state, Uttarakhand was formed, I heard about countless rapes during the agitations and protests leading up to the formation of the state. I insisted that justice should be done. So provision was made to pay compensation to women victims of violence and rape. But the women would not come forward to sign the forms and take the money because they were ashamed of having their names out in the open. Now you tell me, where are the women’s groups who should be dealing with this?”

I had always considered the Bihar states - Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh - the worst states for atrocities against Dalits. Not the seemingly peaceful, utterly beautiful Uttarakhand. But beneath the benign exterior, in two days, I discovered how deceptive appearances could be. That shocking rape statistic suddenly became real. Three Dalit women raped in India every day? I have seen their faces, and Manjula Pradeep, director of Navsarjan Trust in Gujarat, also fighting for Dalit women’s and girls’ rights, tells me this is just the tip of the iceberg. Most rape stories don’t make it into the statistics. But that’s another story.