BANDEEP SINGH

Five rapes rocked Delhi and Mumbai in the past month.

Most dangerous: Delhi, 266 rape cases in 2002.

Also unsafe: Chennai, maximum crimes against women.

Becoming insecure: Mumbai, 127 rapes in the past year.

Other unsafe cities: Bhopal and Hyderabad.

RAPE!

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV and Methil RENUKA

Dehradun, August 24: Raj Kumar Sharma, an additional commissioner of police, rapes his caretaker's wife Babita, 27. Sharma had sent the victim's husband out on an errand before assaulting her.

Delhi, August 19: A 32-year old woman is dragged into a car by four men who gangrape her and then dump her at an isolated spot. A day later, a female student is forced into another car and gangraped.

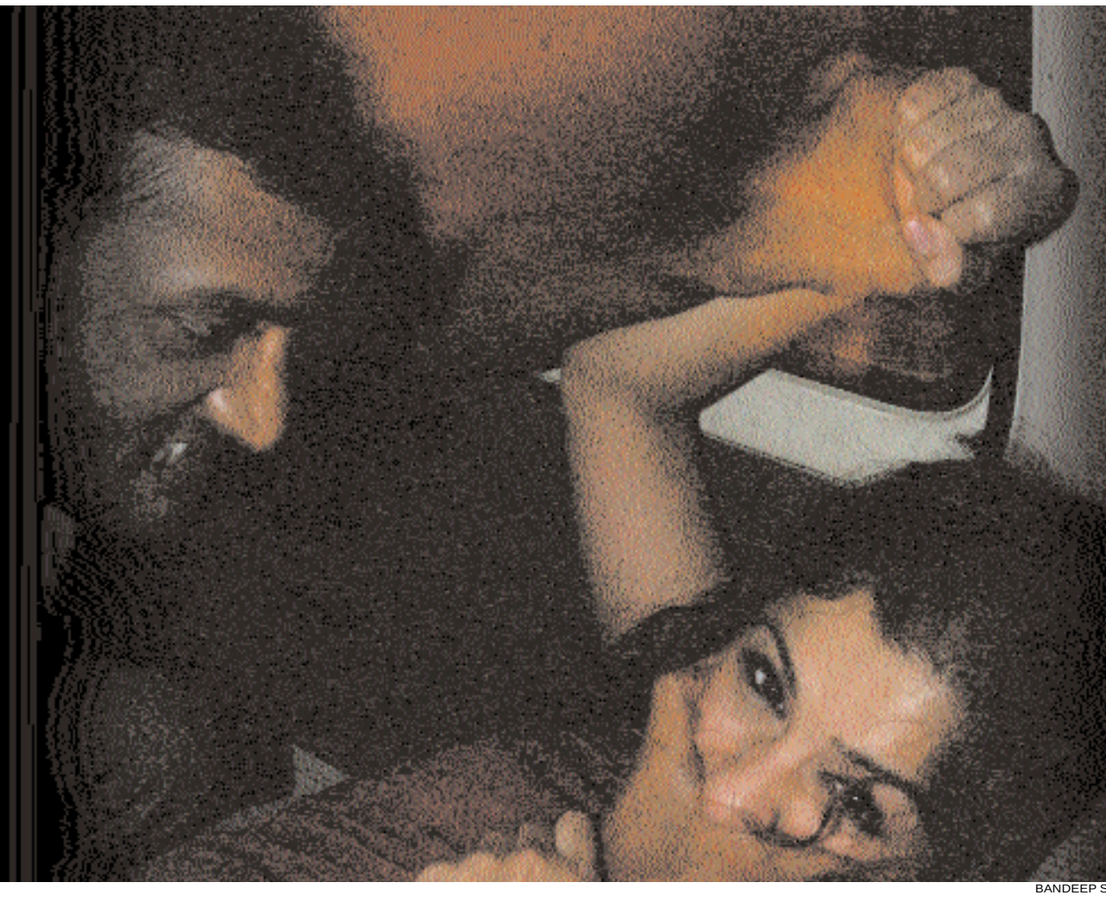
Mumbai, August 15: A drunken Salim Khan rapes a 12-year-old mentally challenged girl on a suburban train between Churchgate and Borivili while seven passengers in the compartment watch.

Delhi, July 29: Four men drag a woman into their car and drive away. They use the victim's mobile phone to summon a Qualis—with tinted glasses and more room—and then gangrape her.

THE litany is relentless and gets more frightening by the day. A suburban train rape in what is considered the safest city in the country for women. A senior police official committing a crime he is sworn to prevent, groups of youth driving around the capital, their repressed libidos finding brutal release in helpless women on their way home from work or in a college campus. The mean streets of urban India are getting meaner, while young women are stalked

PROFILE of a rapist

RAPISTS are described as "heinous, cold-blooded men" with a lunatic urge to control women by hurting them. But in sharp contrast is sober looking Narendra, 37, in Delhi's Tihar jail. He looks like an ordinary man, he could be your neighbour. "Rapists don't have *filmi*, violent looks," says O.P. Mishra, superintendent of the jail. Narendra is serving a seven-year sentence for raping the assistant of a doctor he used to visit when he worked as a medical representative. He shrugs in total denial of his crime. "I did not do it. I was framed." Is Narendra the product of a dysfunctional family who became an offender because of repressed sexual urges? Or is he someone blinded by rage and lust in a single overpowering moment? It could be either. Or neither. Like Narendra, rapists cannot be defined. His parting shot gives him away. "Sometimes women create situations where a man has no choice."



BANDEEP SINGH

THE LAW on rape

SECTION 375 of the Indian Penal Code defines rape as "sexual intercourse with a woman against her will, without her consent, by coercion, misrepresentation or fraud or at a time when she has been intoxicated or duped, or is of unsound mental health and in any case if she is under 16 years of age." Section 376 defines the punishment for rape. If rape is proved then punishment can be up to seven years of rigorous imprisonment for raping an adult and up to 10 years for raping a minor. Criminal Procedure Code amendments have made all rape trials compulsorily in-camera (where only those directly connected are allowed) and where it is obligatory to protect the identity of the victim. Many years ago, Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani had promised that rapists would be given the death sentence. But the proposal remains what it was: a promise.

by fear—and depraved men.

The tragedy lurks not so much in the crimes but among the perpetrators. Last week, a news channel and a national newspaper sent women reporters on the streets of Delhi with hidden cameras. In broad daylight, men driving past stopped at regular intervals, making overtly sexual comments, gestures and invitations. The appalling aspect: they were mostly middle-aged, middle-class men going home to their wives and families, people we interact with every day, shopkeepers, junior executives, small-time businessmen. It is a shocking indictment of the urban Indian male. National crime records reflect the social degeneration. Almost 75 per cent of rapists are married men who have sex regularly at home.

The statistics are equally grim across the country's urban centres: sexual crimes against women are on the rise. The irony is even more tragic. The new-found freedom of Indian women, which gives them social and financial autonomy, may actually be the sum of their worst fears. India's overcrowded metros are straining at the seams but there's always a welcome mat for desperation and depravity. It comes as no surprise that a recent survey by Team C-Voter, a private research group in Delhi, found that 86 per cent of women don't feel safe in the city. Almost one-third of those polled knew at least one rape victim and three out of every 10 rapists are either friends or relatives of victims. And here's the most damning statistic of all. According to a study done by the World Health Organisation, every 54 minutes a woman is raped in India. Another by the Centre for Development of Women's Studies (CDWS) gives even more disturbing statistics. It says 42 women are raped every day in India, one every 35 minutes!

That would be alarming enough were it not for the fact that a large number of cases involving sexual molestation go unreported. A field study conducted in 2000 by the Chandigarh-based think tank, Institute of Development and Communication (IDC), on atrocities against women found that for every reported rape case, as many as 68 rapes went unreported, while for every FIR filed on molestation 374 remained unreported. "The assertion of female identity is still viewed through a Stone Age prism and misconstrued as an expression of sexuality," says IDC Director Pramod Kumar.

THERE lies the rub. As many as 52 per cent of the respondents in the IDC survey squarely blamed the victims for inviting the rape/molestation by their "improper" dressing, conduct and mobility. Similarly, 54 per cent attributed rape to the influence of alcohol rather than deviant male behaviour. More outrageous is the statement of Delhi Police Commissioner R.S. Gupta. "Crime against women will drop by 50 per cent if they are careful in the way they dress, if they know their limits and if they do not exercise unsafe behaviour," Gupta said.

Coming from a man who heads the police force in the capital, it bespeaks an insensitive attitude. Yet, it reflects the urban male psyche. Sociologists and psychologists attribute this to the fact that India has for centuries been a patriarchal, male-dominated society. Lust in males who live in crowded homes and have little opportunity to interact with women, combined with the innate urge for an expression of power and domination, is a deadly cocktail being brewed in millions of houses across the country. In India, that finds an outlet in the ultimate act of male domination—sexual assault.

The rise in the number of rape cases is a reminder that any change in India's urban milieu is largely superficial. People may wear fancy clothes, drive sleek cars, live in snazzy homes and have well-paid jobs but the same intellectually limiting cultural fixtures remain wired into their behaviour. Today's male may come in better packages as a father, lover, husband or boyfriend, but inside he is still an uncouth voyeur who, for the sake of blind lust or power games, will violate the fundamental rights of the other sex and subject them to a lifetime of humiliation. Contemporary women who frequent pubs, clubs and salons or social service institutions to empower themselves and the rest of the society, are still battling to breathe freely in a masculine universe.

The deluge of studies and statistics on crime against women in India is sickening. Delhi rules as the crime capital of the country, with Chennai following close on its heels. According to the National Crime Reports Bureau, the number of rape cases in India increased from 15,468 in 1999 to 16,496 in 2000, a jump of 6.6 per cent. The National Commission for Women (NCW) says it receives complaints of sexual crimes against women every day. Between April 2001 and March 2002, it received 741 complaints from Delhi and 1,748 from Uttar Pradesh, another state with a dubious record. Rape isn't the only serious sexual crime against women. Sexual harassment at the workplace, marital rape, eve teasing, outrage of modesty by touching, pinching or pulling at clothes and attempt to rape are some of the other crimes that women are commonly subjected to.

THE figures expose the ugly underbelly of Indian urban society. The psyche of the modern man resembles that of his prehistorical counterpart who realised that his sexual perversions could serve as a weapon to generate fear and exercise control over women. Dr Suruchi Pant, consultant, Institute of Social Defence, who did a thesis titled "Understanding Rape", says that rape is always more than just rape. "It is a symbol that this society allows victims but not survivors." She adds that the blame of the crime is pinned on the victim and the attitude of men, women, parents and neighbours to rape victims left her numb. Says Delhi-based criminal lawyer Meenakshi Lekhi: "Sadly, we are still in a medieval society where liberty means availability."

This confusion is a serious one. Freedom in exercising choice in clothes, relationships and social habits of women are viewed as "asking for it". Sample these comments: "So what else does she expect if she dresses like that?" "If she is so bothered about her dignity, why doesn't she sit at home?" "If women decide to go to pubs and return late, they will naturally be in trouble." Women say they experience disgusting disbelief when men, instead of confronting powerful cultural changes they witness in women, are propelled to "punish them for it". Punish women for what? For having their own cars, for taking their own decisions, for earning for themselves or choosing to move out of control orbits that men have drawn for them? Or for wearing backless or spaghetti tops?

What is scary is that women don't know whom to trust. Studies reveal that men who befriend them and become their confidants often turn into rapists. The Delhi date rape case in July is the most recent manifestation. How to recognise a rapist is a question that women are asking themselves with

42 women are raped every day in India, one every 35 minutes! 85 per cent are raped by men known to them.

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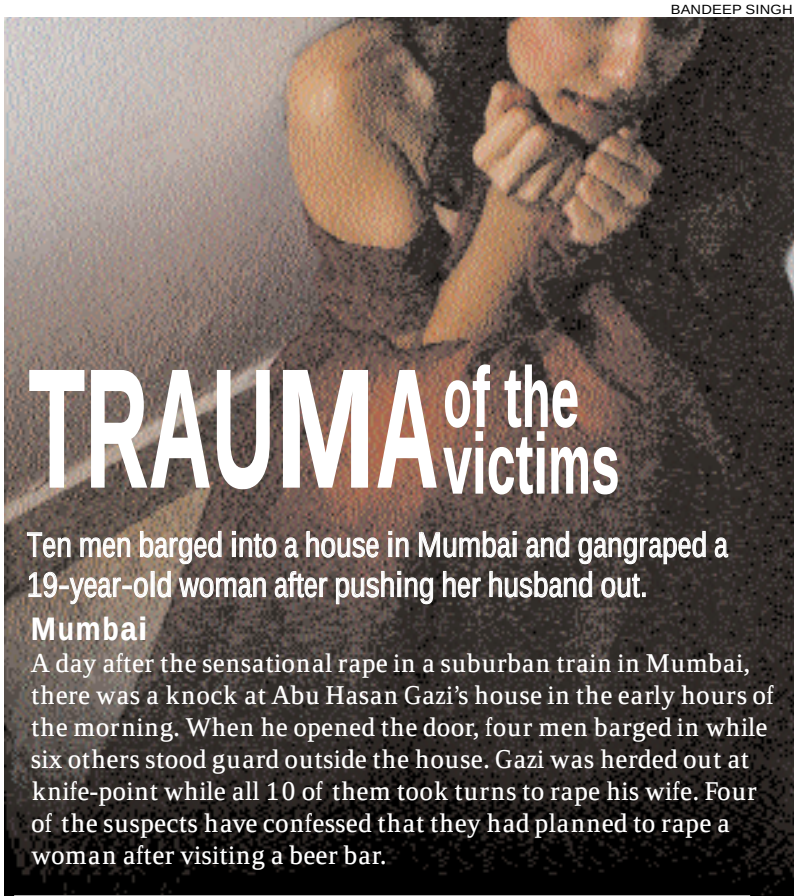


TRAUMA of the victims

Ten men barged into a house in Mumbai and gangraped a 19-year-old woman after pushing her husband out.

Mumbai

A day after the sensational rape in a suburban train in Mumbai, there was a knock at Abu Hasan Gazi's house in the early hours of the morning. When he opened the door, four men barged in while six others stood guard outside the house. Gazi was herded out at knife-point while all 10 of them took turns to rape his wife. Four of the suspects have confessed that they had planned to rape a woman after visiting a beer bar.

College student was illegally detained in police station and raped by the policemen on duty.

Chennai

When Chennai college student Joy Immaculate went to the Pulianthope police station with a minor complaint, she was illegally detained and sexually assaulted by the policemen on duty. The case led to a landmark judgement by the Madras High Court that barred policemen from taking women to police stations. The verdict made it mandatory for all allegations of custodial rapes to be given cognisance.

26-year-old woman is gangraped twice. She names the son of a police officer and son-in-law of a local politician in FIR.

Jaipur

A 26-year-old woman was gangraped in September 1997. She had hardly got over the trauma when she was again gangraped by four people in May 1998. In the FIR, she accused the son of an additional superintendent of police and the son-in-law of a local politician. After women's groups protested, the then chief minister Bhairon Singh Shekhawat constituted a Special Task Force to investigate the case. The case is still pending.

increasing anxiety. Oddly enough, rapists elude definition or a clear personality profile. In broad terms, they may be men who thrive on the thrill of abuse. On screams of frantic, terrorised women. Men who have an urge to teach women a lesson by "manly behaviour".

In one of the most unusual studies, Dr Stanley L. Brodsky of the University of Alabama, US, showed convicted rapists videotapes of nine different forms of resistance, all reconstructed from case histories. The highly aggressive rapists said they were sexually excited by resistance and may have been dissuaded by passivity, crying and other signs of weakness. But an equal number said that the "weakness" of the victims also increased their sexual excitement.

IN India, however, a rape victim's real weakness is forced on her again and again. It begins with the humiliation at the hands of a rapist, then the embarrassing and shameful journey that her parents, family, neighbourhood, police and finally the law subject her to. Her contribution to the crime is repeatedly suggested. As Ritikaa Khunnah, project coordinator at Sakshi, a violence intervention centre for women in Delhi, says, "It does not end with the dastardly act. The victim is raped every time she has to relive it." Secondary victimisation, the term used for post-rape trauma, often ends up coagulating the effect of the initial crime. "Numbness, denial, hatred and self-doubt, disinterest in relationships, general mistrust of men and sometimes complete withdrawal from life resulting in serious depression are only some of the effects that rape victims suffer," says Dr Neena Bohra, head of psychiatry at Delhi's Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital.

Even men and women who are far removed from such sexual violence but remain silent on such issues shoulder some of the blame. In both Mumbai rape cases, especially the one in the train, a group of people watched in silence while the drunken man raped the girl. Javed Ahmed, joint police commissioner, law and order, Mumbai, says, "The city has been forced into deep introspection. Unless there is active public participation, any effort on the part of the police is incomplete." Brinda Karat, president of the All India Democratic

Out of every 100 rape cases, only 10 are reported.

Out of every 100 accusations, only 5 rapists are convicted.

NARENDRA BISHT

"Crimes against women will halve if they are careful about what they wear and know their limits."

R.S. GUPTA,
Police Commissioner, Delhi

SIPRA DAS

BACK TO BASICS: Male attitudes haven't been able to keep pace with women's choices

Women's Association (AIDWA), adds. "The greatest matter of concern is the eroding role of citizens. Silence has to be recognised as an abetment to crime," she says.

What also cripples the process of the rape victim's chances of surviving the trauma is the sniggering, lascivious attitude of the police. The protectors of law inadvertently rape the law when they put a rape victim to shame by their judgmental appraisal of her "character" while lodging the FIR. "The women constables are the worst offenders. They discourage victims from filing complaints," says Asha Latha, secretary of AIDWA's Delhi unit. In fact, some male police officials have worked doggedly to see that rapists are convicted. But they are so few that the pervading image is that of an insensitive, sexist policeman.

Nothing illustrates this more than Delhi's Police Commissioner Gupta's statement. Going by his argument, demure, docile women in saris or burqas who know their "limits" (whatever that means) will bring about a dramatic drop in the number of rape cases, something that even the police, the judiciary and social forces haven't been able to achieve. Gupta admits that the police may have been insensitive in some cases but argues that it is only a part of today's urban Indian society that celebrates skimpily clad women in its newspapers and where rape is sensationalised by the media. "Imparting lessons in gender sensitivity is an every day task in all our police stations, not an incidental attempt," he says.

ADMITTEDLY, there have been some revisions in the procedure. Unlike earlier, no questions can be asked at the time of lodging an FIR if a woman says she is raped. And soon after, informs advocate Lekhi, "women are to be examined by a female doctor and escorted by a female constable". But these procedures are seldom followed. "Many police officers don't know the requisites of the law themselves," adds Lekhi. And attitudes seldom change. "There is no such thing as a crime-free society," says Vimla Mehra, joint commissioner of police of the Crime Against Women Cell of Delhi Police, dismissing the recent episodes as "freak cases". Whereas Pradip Sawant, DCP, detection crime branch, Mumbai, explains it away by saying, "It is very tough to get evidence in rape cases."

However, some change seems to be under way. The Mumbai Police are being sensitised to attend distress calls on priority. They are also creating awareness through posters where women are advised on how to deal with the situation. The Delhi Police too is on a similar exercise. It now has a special helpline number for women in distress (3317004) manned by an all-women staff. Also, whenever a rape is reported, the police are supposed to call an NGO representative for immediate counselling and comfort of the victim.

By the time the law takes its course, most women have had enough. Though in-camera trials are now obligatory and only the people and officers directly concerned are allowed in, they are not easy by any standard. "There is no provision to make the presence of a woman public prosecutor mandatory," says advocate Ranjana Kaul. Also, "defence lawyers do their best to confuse the rape victim and that is where the uncomfortable questions come in," she adds. Flavia Agnes, lawyer and president of the Mumbai-based Forum for Oppression Against Women, says that in her 20-year career she has seen very few middle- and upper-class women actually daring to report rape given the legal procedures involved. This is especially true if they are raped by a family member or a powerful personality who is capable of manipulating the system. "Even the Supreme Court has considered the victim's 'character' before deciding on the sentence for the rapist," says senior lawyer Kamini Jaiswal.

■ RAPE IN CINEMA

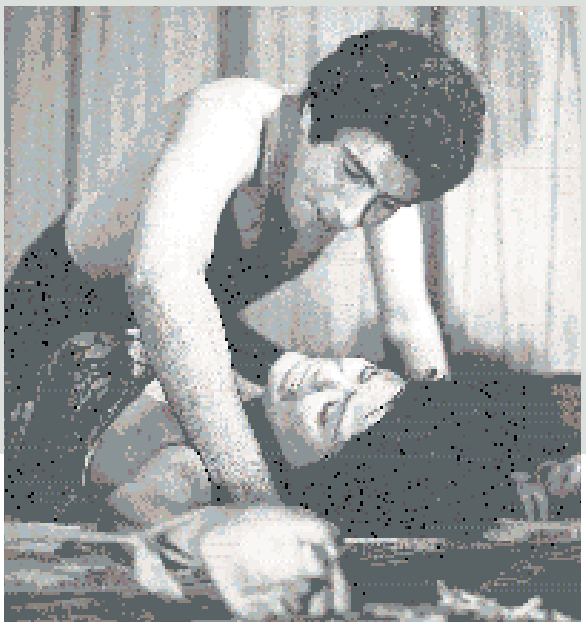
SEX on the screen

THINK FILM RAPE. AND YOU WILL RECALL RAJ Babbar's lustful machinations on Zeenat Aman in B.R. Chopra's *Insaaf Ka Tarazu*. "It is over 20 years old," says Babbar, "but still relevant." It is. Not much has changed. The stereotypes are still reinforced: a disgraced sister, a girlfriend in distress, a macho male, a salivating villain.

The rapist is never a hero. Yet, popular perceptions of rape are drawn from him. Rape victims are still a cinematic cliche: Kajol in *Dushman*, Rekha in *Lajja*, Aishwarya Rai in *Hamara Dil Aapke Paas Hai*, Nandita Das in *Bawander*. Even Ekta Kapoor's TV soap *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* had it.

The question whether the great Indian rape scene has a subconscious bearing on society is not new. Victimisation of women in cinema is still debated. "The portrayal of women needs to be looked at," says NCW's Poornima Advani. "Why are they projected as sex objects?" asks AIDWA's Brinda Karat. "Some ads are demeaning. Why use women to sell every damn product?" Agrees Delhi lawyer Meenakashi Lekhi: "When you expose the young to sexuality like on FTV, you expose them to what they can't deal with when they are still experimenting with their bodies."

"Though films depict rape," says Tanuja Chandra, director of *Dushman*, "it is only a vague approximation of the horror. Not showing it will also not help." The media has always been a convenient whipping boy when it comes to social issues. Unlike in films, however, the debate is nowhere near "The End".



TIPPING THE SCALES: Raj Babbar and Zeenat Aman in *Insaaf ka Tarazu*

So how do women get out of the clutches of this hydra-headed monster? Poornima Advani, chairperson of NCW, says there are serious questions to be addressed. "How gender-sensitive are the law enforcement agencies? Instead of woman's police stations, why not women's desks at every police station?" she asks. Obviously, educating the judiciary is half the battle won. So Sakshi is working with a core group of judges to sensitise them and improve the environment in courts.

SEXUAL crimes against women will not decrease unless the abuse cycle is broken and interrupted at every stage. Right from sensitising young men to affect attitudinal changes, to curbs on pornography and sensitising the law and judicial environment, the task seems herculean. "Pornography works as instruction, and rape becomes the practice," says a psychologist. More than anything else, the families of the victims need to be informed that reporting a crime and seeking redressal are not only important but crucial. Also, as Tihar Jail Superintendent O.P. Mishra points out, there need to be safeguards that prevent the misuse of the law on rape.

After the recent incidents, NCW wants to open complaint cells in universities with regular meetings on sexual assault. It is also looking at institutionalising a curriculum on gender sensitisation of police officers and gender awareness weeks in police stations. There are NGOs which disseminate handy information for all. Like, report a rape immediately because delay may spoil invaluable evidence like semen stains. A woman constable has to accompany the victim to a government hospital. Medical examination will include a vaginal or swab test. Once an FIR is lodged, the investigation should begin. All evidence must be produced within three days.

Even after the National Commission for Women Act, 1990, many states do not have women's commissions, leaving thousands of women without an effective redressal mechanism. They need to be empowered to effectively counter the growing menace.

There are no clear solutions to what is a serious and growing social threat. There's no easy way to treat the Indian male's psyche when he perceives nothing wrong with his gender bias and macho attitude. When seven people can sit in a train compartment and watch a drunken lout rape a helpless 12-year-old girl and do nothing, the societal fault lines run too deep for band-aid solutions. More policing is hardly the answer: in case after case, it's the policemen who encourage rapists by their attitude. Segregating women in safe compartments, safe zones, safe clubs and bars is turning the solution on its head: they offer survival at the cost of freedom and choice and give the male even more of a superiority complex. The goal, say sociologists, should not only be to sensitise men but also to bring up boys to treat women as people instead of "objects". Some journeys defy the map. This seems to be one such journey.

—with Sheela Raval, Kavita Murlidharan, Stephen David, Ramesh Vinayak and Subhash Mishra

Police records show that 80 per cent of rapes are planned.