

Is rape becoming an epidemic in Gujarat?

A report on the gang rapes at the PTC College, Patan reveals a growing incidence of sexual abuse in Gujarat's educational institutions and elsewhere across the state, indicative of a far deeper malaise. This however has evoked no genuine concern, condemnation or corrective action from the ruling BJP or their local hero Narendra Modi. On the contrary, the Gujarat government appears suspiciously keen to shield the culprits and is using every possible means to stifle protests for justice.

BY DWARIKA NATH RATH

THIS is not the gruesome saga of gang rape as perpetrated on Bilkees Bano and many other hapless Muslim women during the Gujarat genocide in 2002.

It is the story of a girl from a poor Dalit family, a student at the PTC (Primary Teachers' Certificate) College in Patan who became a victim of gang rape by six lecturers at the college she attended. The lecturers at the PTC College, Patan, who were empowered to conduct internal assessment, took advantage of the victim's poverty and raped her 14 times over four-and-a-half months on the college campus and during an excursion that students were taken on as part of their internship.

Like other incidents of this nature, this incident too would have been dumped and forgotten within the four walls of the PTC College in Patan had the young victim not fainted in the college prayer hall on January 31 and but for the support she received from Bharati Patel, a female lecturer, backed by 97 courageous female students and their guardians. This incident shook the entire state as students and others in Gujarat came out spontaneously to express their anguish. The people of Patan were enraged and demanded that the offending lecturers be given exemplary punishment.

The current minister for revenue and former education minister in the state cabinet, Anandi Patel, who is said to

be a close confidante of the chief minister, Narendra Modi, hails from this electoral constituency. It was during Patel's tenure as education minister, over the last 10 years, that Patan witnessed growing incidence of sexual exploitation of its female students.

Situated on the outskirts of Patan city, the PTC College, Patan is run by the government's District Institute of Educational Technology (DIET).



The victim

The victim belongs to an impoverished Dalit family from Jetalvasana village, Visnagar taluka in Mehsana district. Her father is a daily labourer. A very bright student, she secured 89 per cent in the Class X examinations and 70 per cent in the Class XII examinations under her own steam, without any ex-

tra tuition or academic assistance. As she continued to shine academically, her family, with five children to raise, opted to pull their son out of school so that she could continue her education. The victim wanted to become a doctor but because of their poor finances the family decided that she should enrol in the Primary Teachers' Certificate course so she could train to be a teacher and ultimately be self-employed. She was admitted to the PTC College, Patan on July 24, 2007.

When the girl sought admission to the PTC College, Patan her father appealed to a lecturer at the college, Prof Baloch, for financial assistance. Baloch assured him of help and asked another lecturer to look after the girl. Little did father and daughter know that their vulnerability would soon lead them to this gruesome turn of events.

The victim hoped to become a teacher after she finished her college course. Innocent as she was, brought up to respect her teachers, she had no inkling of what lay ahead, the crimes she would be subjected to by the very teachers whom she considered her gurus. Fresh-faced and naive, she, like so many other girls in Gujarat, was unaware that the college she had joined was in fact a world of sexual predators.

The culprits

On September 11, 2007, not long after she was admitted into college, Prof Ashwin Kumar Parmar summoned the victim to the Educational Technology (ET) room after recess. Expecting nothing untoward, she went to meet him in the ET room as asked. Ashwin Parmar and two other lecturers, Manish Parmar and Mahendra Prajapati, were already there. As she entered the room, Ashwin Parmar closed the door behind her. He then ripped off her clothes and raped her. The traumatised victim was then raped by the two other professors present in the room. The three men, who had also taken nude photographs of the victim on a mobile phone camera, threatened her with dire consequences if she breathed a word to

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anyone. They now had the girl in their clutches.

Fifteen days after the first incident, Prof Manish Parmar called her to the college laboratory where professors Kiran Patel and Suresh Patel were also present. In the laboratory, Manish Parmar and Suresh Patel raped her and a sexually impotent Kiran Patel sexually abused the victim.

From December 31, 2007 to January 11, 2008 students of the college were taken on an excursion to Khumbhwa village as part of their internship. Here, professors Suresh Patel, Kiran Patel and Manish Parmar raped the victim at 8 p.m. on New Year's Day. Before leaving Khumbhwa on January 11, the men raped her again at 3.30 a.m. in the dead of night after a cultural programme had concluded.

Later that month, following the gang rapes by the five other lecturers, the victim was then raped by Prof Atul Patel, the kingpin, the most influential man of the lot. On January 25, 2008 Atul Patel raped the victim in the college computer room. He threatened to kill her if she dared to expose the truth.

During this period of time, when she was being repeatedly subjected to gang rape, the traumatised victim often lost consciousness. To discredit any overt indications of the victim's distress that could raise suspicion, on September 13, 2007 the lecturers took her to a witch doctor who was asked to exorcise the 'evil spirit' that had possessed her. They took other girls along with them on the visit in order to engender the belief that the victim was possessed by evil spirits.

Staff at the PTC College, Patan

Prof Mahendra Prajapati: MSc, BEd

Prof Atul Patel: MSc, BEd, MPhil, PhD

Prof Suresh Patel: MA, BEd (Social Sciences)

Prof Kiran Patel: MSc, MEd, PhD (Mathematics)

Prof Ashwin Parmar: MA, BEd, LLB (Psychology)

Prof Manish Parmar: Degree in Art, Drawing teacher

Prof Bharati Patel: She was appointed lecturer at the PTC College, Patan in 1997 but was transferred to the PTC

College in Palanpur in 2001 after she complained to the director, Gujarat Council of Educational Research and Training (GCERT), about the sexual exploitation of students on February 27 that year. She was later reappointed to the PTC College, Patan. Bharati Patel was also threatened by male lecturers at the college.

Jashoda Joshi: The hostel warden Jashoda Joshi advised the girls to 'get used to it' and rebuked them when they complained about the sexual harassment they were subjected to. Joshi was more concerned about the girls' menstrual cycles and took them to a male doctor, Lalit Modi, for check-ups at night. In the wake of the Patan scandal it was revealed that the lecturers visited the girls' hostel on the pretext of giving them extra tuition and thus entered their rooms. When students' guardians attempted to draw the warden's

after the lecturer's role in the Patan gang rapes became public.)

Prof Manish Parmar, a relative of current education minister Ramanlal Vora, moved around the college campus armed with a knife. The girls were terrified of him. Unlike other lecturers, who grade students on 50-100 marks, Manish Parmar, a drawing teacher at the college, was empowered to grade students on 250 internal assessment marks. Manish Parmar is said to have shortlisted 10 girls on the campus to 'choose the best' for himself. To draw up a list of the top ten he used a mobile phone camera, video cameras, from which he uploaded the images onto a computer so that he could identify the best girls. This process began as soon as students were admitted into the college. His sexually exploitative behaviour intensified during the college's educational tours off campus. A complaint had been filed against Manish Parmar with the head of

The lecturers drew lots to decide which one of them would be the first to rape the victim. They carried condoms with them. After each incident of gang rape they forced the victim to take a strong dose of an anti-pregnancy pill. They photographed the rapes on their mobile phone cameras and on video cameras as well. These actions, their premeditation and attention to detail, indicate the behaviour of experienced rapists with hardened criminal minds

attention to this, she responded by saying that the girls concerned were of immoral character.

Prof Atul Patel, the kingpin of the Patan sex racket, is known to be close to Anandi Patel and even led her election campaign in 2002. He is said to have been the one responsible for Prof Bharati Patel's transfer following her complaints about the sexual harassment of students in 2001. Complaints were made against Atul Patel as well but he managed to suppress all of them. In the recent case not only was he party to the gang rapes but he also threatened to kill the victim if she revealed the truth. Atul Patel was a recipient of the All India Ramanujan Maths Club's Best Maths Teacher award. (The award was reportedly withdrawn

the GCERT more than seven years ago, on October 17, 2000, but no action was taken against him. He was known to brag that no one could do anything to him as he enjoyed influential support.

Students of the college recounted that the lecturers often told them to 'give us a smile and get marks'. They even asked the girls to apply honey on their lips.

Principal KT Purania, who was principal of the PTC College, Patan when the scandal broke, had only recently taken over the post from JN Chaudhary who was known to be hand in glove with the accused lecturers. But Purania himself is not free of the taint of sexual misconduct; there were complaints made against him during his tenure as principal at Palanpur. There is a long-stand-

ing nexus between male lecturers and the management, and the authorities who turn a blind eye towards cases of sexual abuse.

The lecturers drew lots to decide which one of them would be the first to rape the victim. They carried condoms with them. After each incident of gang rape they forced the victim to take a strong dose of an anti-pregnancy pill and took care to shave off the victim's pubic hair so as not to leave behind any traces of semen. They photographed the rapes on their mobile phone cameras and on video cameras as well. These actions, their premeditation and attention to detail, indicate the behaviour of experienced rapists with hardened criminal minds.

Public outrage

On January 30, 2008 the victim finally told a friend about the gang rapes. The next day, on January 31, the victim fainted in the prayer hall, leading to much speculation and conjecture. She was taken first to a psychiatrist and then to a gynaecologist by Prof Bharati Patel and other students where it was confirmed that she had been subjected to rape. The girl was traumatised, fainted time and again and was terrified at the very sight of a lecturer. As news of the gang rapes spread, it roused the other hostel inmates, students who had also been molested and abused by the six lecturers at various times under threat of being denied internal assessment marks. Ninety-seven students signed a memorandum of complaint to the principal on January 31, 2008.

On February 1, the principal of the PTC College, Patan went to Gandhinagar to place this complaint before the authorities. He was assured that an investigation would be carried out to look into the complaint on February 5. The students however were doubtful that any administrative measures would be taken against the lecturers by the authorities in Gandhinagar, as similar complaints in the past had been either suppressed or withdrawn.

Acting on the advice of Prof Bharati Patel, the students immediately informed their guardians about the incident. Shocked and enraged, parents and guardians rushed to the college. On

the morning of February 4, students of the PTC College, an angry crowd assaulted the accused lecturers with sticks and bricks and damaged their motorcycles. Had the police not intervened, the crowd may well have lynched the accused – the students and their guardians, Patan's citizens were in no mood for mercy.

As tempers boiled over, 25,000 people in Patan joined a protest rally on February 5, demanding action against the accused. A bandh was called and the town of Patan remained closed for two days. People could not believe that such gruesome incidents of gang rape were possible, not in Patan, the ancient capital of Gujarat, where people still take great pride in their his-

The students' guardians believe that sexual exploitation has been rampant at the PTC College, Patan since Anandi Patel's tenure as education minister. Patel has however dismissed the charges as politically motivated allegations. She said, moreover, that when she was education minister 'no complaint of sexual harassment had ever reached her'. Needless to say, her statements have little credibility today

tory, their society and their culture. So great was the public outrage, they demanded that the six lecturers be handed over to them. If the authorities were not inclined to punish the guilty, the people of Patan would do it for them.

Following the public outcry, the victim's statement was recorded in the presence of the district superintendent of police, Raghvendra Vats, resident deputy collector MD Modia, senior lecturer Bharati Patel, one doctor and a few other students. The victim was sent for a medical examination. She was said to be in a traumatised condition and screamed whenever she was touched. She was taken to the Civil Hospital, Ahmedabad where she had to wait for three hours in the casualty department and a further three hours until doctors attended to her. Although the Patan gang rape incident received wide media coverage and supposed government attention, the victim was shabbily treated. At the hospital she was the

object of curiosity rather than serious medical attention.

Shortly after the gang rapes at the PTC College, Patan came to light, the National Commission for Women (NCW) visited Patan to inquire into the incident. The NCW concluded that this was no isolated incident; this victim was not the only girl who had been subjected to rape. The commission also made the following recommendations:

➤ There should be no male teacher or male staff member on the campus, not even peons or sweepers.

➤ The victim's statement should be recorded before a judicial magistrate under Section 164 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) to avoid distortion under any political or social pressure.

➤ The state government should provide security to the victim and support her until she is properly rehabilitated.

➤ The victim should receive financial support from the government until the trial concludes; the compensation amount of Rs one lakh announced by the state government was inadequate.

➤ The DIET-run PTC girls' hostel in Patan should not be vacated as this would adversely affect the students' education.

➤ Adequate police security should be provided on the college campus to ensure that classes could be conducted without any hindrance.

➤ The state government should submit to the NCW copies of the accounts, statements by 98 girls that were submitted to the college and to education department officials.

➤ The state government should submit to the NCW a report on the case within seven days (mid-February) and expedite the deliverance of justice.

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The six lecturers, who were also suspended from their duties, were arrested on February 4 under Sections 376 and 506 of the Indian Penal Code (punishment for rape and punishment for criminal intimidation respectively) and later remanded to police custody by a local court. Results of semen tests, conducted to match samples from the accused with samples found at various locations where the crimes took place, have since proved conclusive. On February 7, the victim's statement was recorded by a judicial magistrate under Section 164 of the CrPC.

Desperate for redress, on February 7, students of the PTC College, Patan and their guardians went to the state capital, Gandhinagar, but were not allowed to meet either the chief minister Narendra Modi or the education minister Ramanlal Vora. The education minister's personal assistant attempted to trivialise the issue, brushing off the Patan incident as nothing out of the ordinary, 'it goes on'.

The sexual harassment of girls at the PTC College, Patan is by no means a new phenomenon. The students' guardians believe that sexual exploitation has been rampant at the PTC College, Patan since Anandi Patel's tenure as education minister. Patel has however dismissed the charges as politically motivated allegations by people who cannot tolerate the BJP's victory in Gujarat. She said, moreover, that when she was education minister 'no complaint of sexual harassment had ever reached her'. Needless to say, her statements have little credibility today. During Anandi Patel's tenure as education minister, 28 students of the PTC College, Patan had, in fact, filed complaints of molestation against lecturers who used internal assessment marks as a threat. In 2004, a student, Daksha Parmar, had filed a complaint against Manish Parmar, an accused in the current case, but the case was closed by the then principal, JN Chaudhary.

Taking cognisance of reports about the Patan gang rape case, the National Human Rights Commission issued a notice to the Gujarat government and sought a reply within four weeks (in mid-March). Referring to this move, the commission's chairperson S. Rajendra Babu said on February 11 that if the allegations were found to be true it amounted to serious human rights violation.

A warped system

The system of internal assessment followed in many of Gujarat's colleges,

total marks a student can secure in a year at the PTC College, Patan, for example, which is why they are so vital to students and become a tool whereby lecturers can coerce students to do their bidding or else risk examination failure. Following reports of a case of molestation of a student at a private PTC College in Rajkot in 2005, it was recommended that the internal assessment system at PTC colleges be scrapped. It was suggested that the percentage of internal assessment marks be reduced from 40 per cent to 15 per cent or 10 per cent but the proposal was shelved.

PTC colleges in Gujarat have mushroomed in recent years. After the National Council for Teachers' Education (NCTE) introduced the policy of self-finance for colleges offering the Primary Teachers' Certificate course, self-financed institutes have also proliferated across the state. Today there are 431 PTC colleges in the state, most of which are self-financed. Running a PTC college is big business in Gujarat. There are also as many as 3,000 management seats in colleges where lecturers are empowered to grade students on internal assessment marks that constitute as much as 40 per cent of the total. It is this very empowerment through internal assessment that has given lecturers the freedom to sexually abuse their students.

Seeking economic independence, more and more girls in Gujarat today enrol in various professional courses in the hope that this will provide better opportunities for employment.

Currently, there are 16,000 students enrolled in Gujarat's 134 PTC colleges for girls. Most of these colleges have no female lecturers or even female hostel wardens. Yet it is compulsory for girls to stay in hostels. As compared to govern-



the importance of internal assessment marks that are doled out at the whim of lecturers, has come in for much criticism over the years.

Internal assessment marks constitute as much as 40 to 44 per cent of the

ment colleges, the tuition and other expenses at self-financed colleges are very high. There is no economic help offered or any scholarships available to poor students keen to pursue a higher education. Any such policies only exist on paper. Much hyped programmes like *Beti Bachao* (Save the Girl Child) and *Kanya Kelavani* (Girl Child Education) that constituted Narendra Modi's *Jaago Gujarat* (Arise Gujarat) campaign are a mere mockery.

It has always been a matter of great concern that male lecturers were allowed to teach at the PTC colleges for girls. When questioned, the authorities said there weren't enough female lecturers to fill the posts. If this was indeed the case how did they manage to send six female lecturers to the PTC College, Patan after the six male lecturers were arrested? And if the so-called shortage of female lecturers applied only to self-financed PTC colleges, why did government or DIET-run PTC colleges for girls employ male lecturers as well?

Contrary to the claims made by Anandi Patel and her successor in the education ministry, Ramanlal Vora, there is no dearth of available female lecturers suitable for posts at the DIET-run PTC colleges. As is true alas in other areas of Indian governance or misgovernance, appointments to lecturers' posts are often made on political grounds.

There are 16 DIET-run colleges for boys and six for girls. Of the 68 lecturers appointed to the six colleges for girls, only 25 are female. However, of the 158 lecturers appointed to the 16 colleges for boys, 45 are female lecturers. There are 70 female lecturers in all, most of whom are posted to urban centres. They would be more than enough to fill the posts in the DIET-run colleges for girls. And yet, despite repeated complaints of sexual harassment by male lecturers at the girls' colleges, the authorities did not ensure that female lecturers were appointed to these colleges.

Many believe that there are many more 'Patans' in the state, sordid tales of sexual exploitation that have been taking place for several years. Girls are asked to 'get used to it' and when

such incidents are reported, the reports are ignored. Students are afraid to come out in the open and invite the wrath of their lecturers. For if they do so they may well be denied the marks they deserve which may lead, in turn, to their not getting their degrees and ultimately, a job. This is thought to be especially true of PTC colleges. Incidents similar to the recent one took place as far back as 22 years ago when 15 girls at a college in Patan's Meghraj taluka became victims of sexual abuse at the hands of lecturers who often came to work drunk. Fifteen police cases were lodged at the time. However, the cases were ultimately suppressed and the girls were not given their degrees. A more recent incident involves students of a self-financed women's college in Palanpur being sexually harassed by a lecturer, Prof Kanu Patel, during college excursions to Goa and

Flouting Supreme Court directives

It is a popular misconception that Gujarat is a safe place for women. This may be true on paper but only so long as the many incidents of sexual abuse and rape that do take place remain unexposed. Every attempt is made to suppress the truth in order that the image of the state appears spotless. Completely unmoved by the gang rape incident in Patan, the Government of Gujarat has done little following the exposure of this shocking scandal except to order a magisterial inquiry into the incident and promise the victim Rs one lakh as compensation. The Supreme Court's 1997 judgement in the Vishaka case (*Vishaka & Ors vs State of Rajasthan & Ors*) laid down specific guidelines for the prevention of sexual abuse at the workplace, including the establishment of complaints committees at all workplaces to address cases of sexual harassment and abuse as well

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Maharashtra in 2006. He threatened the girls, warning them not to report the matter, and when a female lecturer protested, she was harassed.

If sexual harassment is so prevalent in the DIET-run colleges in the state, there is no telling what the situation may be in self-financed colleges that are often run by influential persons in power. Reports of incidents of sexual harassment from some of these institutions were so shameful that three self-financed colleges, in Kheda, Sabarkantha, Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar district, had to be closed down. A thorough investigation by a people's committee must be conducted into the functioning of all self-financed colleges in Gujarat. Statements from girls studying there must be recorded by an appropriate women's body and effective measures must be taken to prevent sexual harassment as per the Supreme Court's recommendations in the Vishaka case.

as the disciplinary action to be taken against offenders. Barring a few exceptions, most workplaces and institutions in Gujarat do not have the appropriate complaint mechanism for redressal of complaints.

Among other things, the Supreme Court had recommended that all complaints committees must be headed by a woman; that women should constitute at least half of such a committee's membership; that the committee must include a third-party representative from an NGO or any other agency conversant with the issue of sexual harassment (to prevent undue pressure from within the organisation with respect to any complaint); and that the committee must submit an annual report on sexual harassment to the appropriate government authority.

The Supreme Court guidelines as to what constitutes sexual abuse include: 1. Physical contact and advances. 2. A

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demand or request for sexual favours. 3. Sexually coloured remarks. 4. Showing pornography. 5. Any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature.

The question of a magisterial inquiry

Although the Gujarat government ordered a magisterial inquiry into the Patan incident, to be conducted, under existing procedure, by the Patan district collector, no terms of reference were outlined for the magisterial probe. The government order did not specify any terms and conditions under which the inquiry should be conducted. No specific review of the internal assessment system, which has proved to be a formidable tool frequently misused by the accused lecturers in Patan and elsewhere, has been ordered.

There is good reason therefore to doubt the outcome of the magisterial inquiry and every reason to believe that it will meet the same fate as many inquiries before it and do little to uncover the truth, bring justice to the victim or prevent similar incidents in the future.

In the immediate aftermath of the Patan exposures there were protests throughout the state by an outraged public and many more protests were planned. But the legal procedure will take its time and as the initial furore dies down the victim may well be left to face the trial alone as the gruesome incident passes from public memory. This has often happened in the past when no administrative action is taken against the accused. The accused lecturers in the Patan case must be blacklisted by the education department and their degrees must be derecognised by the universities concerned as is done in the case of offending lawyers or doctors. Such a move would reassure the victim that she has the state's backing, that she is not alone; it would encourage

the victim and her supporters to continue their fight and face the trial with hopes of justice.

The role of the BJP: Whither the moral police?

When the Patan scandal first broke, the BJP was conspicuous by its silence. The party found it hard, perhaps, to believe that less than two months after a resounding victory in the assembly elections, following their propaganda of



a vibrant Gujarat, their slogans like *Beti Bachao* and *Kanya Kelavani*, a scandalous tale of sexual exploitation that had been going on for years would be so nakedly exposed and this, from the high-profile assembly constituency of Patan.

The sangh parivar and its outfits were absent from the scene. The chief minister, who poses as a saviour of the people, avoided visiting Patan altogether. Education minister Ramanlal Vora and

social justice minister Fakir Vaghela avoided meeting people when they visited Patan after the scandal erupted. On her visit to Patan, Anandi Patel also avoided meeting constituents, too afraid, perhaps, to face the wrath of the people. All fingers point at Anandi Patel as most believe that she was well aware of what was going on.

A scandal of this nature would of course be an embarrassment to any government. BJP bigwigs tried to save face,

offering a few stray comments in response to events, but were largely occupied with damage control exercises and discouraging any kind of public or institutional protests. In Patan they even monitored which teachers or professors joined the protest march and many people were therefore afraid to join in. The ruling party has made a concerted effort to underplay the matter through various means and this has had increasing effect with each passing day. Most people are now scared to be identified with the protests, particularly in Patan but elsewhere as well.

Meanwhile, the Congress party, in keeping with its past behaviour, appeared only to be seeking immediate political gain without any thought to building up a powerful social movement across the state. This overenthusiastic but short-sighted political approach will only provide the BJP with more scope to divert attention from the issue at hand.

Media trial

It is thanks to the media trial of the Patan case that the people of Gujarat were encouraged to come out in support of the victim. Almost every daily newspaper in Gujarat provided excellent reportage on the incident, evoking a fitting response from civil society. The

media coverage of the Patan case also gave many other victims the courage to speak out as several cases of sexual abuse in educational institutions across the state were reported soon after the Patan incident became public. Although afraid of possible repercussions and less willing now to make their protests public, ordinary people in Gujarat, women in Gujarat, are still outraged and want severe punishment to be meted out to the rapists.

The strength and courage shown by the victim, in her decision to speak out about her ordeal as well her brave decision to face heavy odds and continue with her education notwithstanding the public exposure, cannot be overstated. Her family and the citizens of Patan must also be saluted for their courageous actions in her support.

The epidemic of rape

One of the most distressing aspects of the 2002 carnage in Gujarat was the public gang rape of several Muslim women where gang rape was used as an instrument of genocidal violence. This instrument of violence is fast becoming an epidemic that is ravaging Gujarat society where rapists are protected by those in power. The Patan incident is but one example. Following the exposure of the Patan scandal, more and more instances of rape and sexual exploitation are being uncovered across the state. In many of Gujarat's primary schools, sexual abuse by male teachers is common. A number of incidents are suppressed for a variety of social factors, the risk of public humiliation or ostracism. Although many do come to light, a vast number go unreported. Even the more senior students, those studying for MPhil or PhD degrees, are not spared.

It would not be incorrect therefore to assume that incidents of sexual abuse are increasing at an alarming rate. These can no longer be seen as isolated incidents. They are an indication of the extent to which the epidemic of rape has overrun Gujarat society. It is imperative that we all speak out before the scourge consumes us.

There is a deliberate attempt at work to inure us to the shock that such crimes

should evoke, a *chalta hai* or laissez-faire approach to rape and sexual exploitation that accepts it as normal. More often than not, it is the victim who is further victimised as questions are raised about her character in the attempt to then justify her being raped or even killed. Myths about the rape are circulated and every means is used to justify it. And thus society sinks to the nadir of degeneracy.

There is an attempt to maul the voice of protest as useless. The process of inquiry, the legal process, takes long years and thus judicial recourse is always a distant prospect. The people's voice is but momentary and loses tenacity with the passage of time. And yet there is no other avenue that can address the people's concerns and bring justice to the victims.

The appalling gang rape of a student by six lecturers at an educational institution must act as a fearsome wake-up call to all of us. That we must all come together on a common platform and fight

The sangh parivar and its cadres mounted a determined campaign to malign protesters as anti-Modi, anti-BJP and so on. What is worse, they showered vile abuse upon the victim herself, even blaming her for the gang rapes she had been subjected to. Their vilification campaign crossed all limits of civility, of compassion, their actions comparable to the workings of the most perverted minds

to restore morality, ethics and social values in our people. Else we shall be left with a society that though technologically advanced is amoral and spineless.

Citizens' demands

During the public protests in Gujarat several demands were made:

- Investigation of the Patan incident should be handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).
- Exemplary punishment must be meted out to the culprit lecturers.
- The state government must ensure immediate social rehabilitation of the victim.
- Only female lecturers should be appointed at all girls' colleges in the state.

➤ The rule making hostel boarding compulsory for students must be discontinued.

➤ Female students must be given adequate protection at all educational institutes.

➤ The internal assessment system – a tool of student exploitation at the hands of lecturers – must be discontinued.

➤ The culprit lecturers must be black-listed and their degrees withdrawn.

➤ The state government should release a white paper on facts pertaining to all educational institutes for girls and women in the state.

➤ A watchdog committee comprising eminent citizens must be appointed to keep a close watch on all educational institutes in the state.

➤ Complaints committees to address complaints of sexual harassment and abuse should be set up according to the guidelines laid down by the Supreme Court.

➤ The Gujarat State Commission for Women must be activated by making the necessary appointments.

➤ The Gujarat State Human Rights Commission must be activated by making the necessary appointments.

Postscript: The spectre of Modi-phobia

When the sordid tale of gang rapes and sexual exploitation in Patan first came to light it shocked people all over Gujarat. Spontaneous protests spread like wildfire. As the people of Patan seethed with anger, a bandh unlike any before it was called in the town. But the BJP and sangh parivar's crisis control think tank soon sprang into action and was quick to deflect the story, even attempting to bury it altogether. On the eve of the bandh there were strict instructions from the BJP's state president, Parshottam

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Rupala, asking people to refrain from participating in the protest. In spite of these instructions, the people of Patan expressed a unique solidarity as they came together to demand justice. Local BJP leaders were unable to control their own people.

After the bandh however the BJP and its sister organisations set out to subdue the shame of Patan in various ways. When the story first became public it was expected that people across the entire state would add their voice to those in Patan, cutting across political, caste and communal identities. Mass protests were envisaged throughout the state. But the BJP's damage control machinery was very alert and with the help of the sangh parivar and its cadres mounted a determined campaign to malign protesters as anti-Modi, anti-BJP and so on. What is worse, they showered vile abuse upon the victim herself, even blaming her for the gang rapes she had been subjected to. They also tried to divide protesters and public opinion along caste lines. Their vilification campaign crossed all limits of civility, of compassion, their actions comparable to the workings of the most perverted minds. Following each initiative, every demand for justice in the Patan scandal, volunteers faced the usual prejudicial propaganda on codes of dress and conduct that every rape victim has also to face. This occurred consistently throughout the state.

Thus the unique protest that was supposed to echo in every corner of Gujarat came instead to a grinding halt, replaced by Modi-phobia yet again. In Patan people are now afraid to speak out openly lest they too are victimised.

Two months have now passed since the gang rapes at the PTC College, Patan first came to light. Yet the Government of Gujarat has done nothing to restore the confidence of Gujarat's citizenry. On the contrary, it is doing its best to undermine it in every possible way.

A magisterial inquiry is being conducted without any terms of reference and the court has served no charge sheet against the accused to date. This apart, investigations into the entire incident, originally under the Patan police, were handed over to the state Crime



Branch (Criminal Investigation Department, CID). Having learnt its lessons from the Sohrabuddin Sheikh encounter killing case, this time around every precaution has been taken to ensure that the government and the ruling party are not caught in an embarrassing position. In all, four police officers have been designated to ensure that evidence against the culprits is not leaked out.

The victim is still to receive the compensation amount of Rs one lakh she was promised by the state government.

Following the exposé, Jamna Taral replaced KT Purania as principal of the PTC College, Patan. Taral is the wife of the current district education officer in Patan whose car, incidentally, had been seized by the Election Commission for its use during the BJP's election campaign.

Wasting no time whatsoever, the moment she took charge as principal on February 23, 2008, Jamna Taral threatened the students – she said that all 98 girls were of questionable character and solely responsible for the incidents of sexual exploitation. She threatened to fail them in their internal assessment and ruin their futures if they dared ask their parents to intervene. Girls in the first year course were warned not to mix with those in the second year. Taral even threatened to file police cases against them. The new principal bred a greater sense of insecurity in the already traumatised students. Contrary to all norms of propriety, she even summoned them as late as 10 p.m. to record their statements.

The frightened students took their case to the director of the GCERT, MN Bhad, on February 23 and to the district collector of Patan, Vinod Rao, on February 24, asking that the transfer of Principal KT Purania be stopped. But since the administration remained inflexible, the girls' parents took their daughters home and demanded instead that their examination centre be changed.

On February 26, the parents' association also submitted a memorandum to the director of the GCERT, urging a cancellation of KT Purania's transfer. They

also sought clarifications about the government resolution (GR) on internal assessment.

The post of principal is a critical one in any college or educational institution. During Principal JN Chaudhary's tenure, sexual abuse was rampant at the PTC College, Patan. There have been complaints about sexual exploitation at the college from the year 2000 onwards. The students and their guardians wanted a thorough investigation into incidents that took place during JN Chaudhary's tenure, including the conduct of all lecturers at the college. The inquiry could have exposed the extent of irregularities, the favouritism and the modus operandi at work on the campus. In the wake of the Patan gang rape incident it has come to light that JN Chaudhary not only connived in the sexual exploitation but was also far from qualified to be principal. He is no more than a matriculate who enjoyed the support of high-ups influential in Gandhinagar.

On January 15, 2000 when the education secretary had visited the college, the students had submitted a memorandum demanding better educational facilities and also complaining about the behaviour of the then principal, JN Chaudhary, as well as the college clerk. The students had complained that JN Chaudhary was usually present in the college for only two days a week and that he visited the girls' hostel at night in the rector's absence. When Chaudhary heard of the complaints made against him, he had threatened the girls with dire consequences. On October 17, 2000 students again complained against Chaudhary, this time to the director of the GCERT, but still no action was taken against him; rather, the students earned the principal's wrath. As mentioned earlier in this report, on February 27, 2001 Prof Bharati Patel had sent a written complaint to the director, GCERT, about the sexual exploitation of girls at the college through misuse of the internal assessment system.

The girls at the PTC College, Patan have been fighting sexual abuse from the year 2000. For eight years their

complaints were all suppressed by the GCERT until finally the students took matters into their own hands on February 4 this year.

Today the ruling party is merely biding its time, waiting for the initial excitement to subside, and is using every tactic, of suppression as well as persuasion, to make the problem disappear. They have even attempted to cause rifts within the students and the parents' association in a bid to break down the opposition.

State of emergency

The parents' association were actively pressing home their demand for Jamna Taral's transfer and were keen to meet the chief minister in this regard when they were approached by education minister Ramanlal Vora who contacted them on the evening of February 25 and asked them to come to Gandhinagar.

The Patan issue has been a great embarrassment to the ruling BJP and all sorts of tactics were used to try and divide the small parents' association. Severe political pressure was exerted on association members in a bid to silence their protests. The manner in which the parents' association delegation was escorted out of Gandhinagar by the police is reminiscent of the days of the emergency

Following the minister's invitation, a team of 15 members of the parents' association led by their president Ghemar Chaudhary reached Gandhinagar on February 26 along with the father of the victim in the Patan case. The state assembly was in session at the time and as they made their way to the minister's bungalow in Gandhinagar the parents were optimistic that their mission would indeed be successful. Vora directed them to the minister of state for health and family welfare, Parbat Patel, who kept them waiting while he attended the state assembly session. Both ministers attempted to pressurise the association members, asking them to avoid causing the government any embarrassment during this inaugural assembly session, the first one to be held after the BJP's victory in the December polls.

Ministers Ramanlal Vora and Parbat Patel, minister of state for home, Amit

Shah, the MLA from Visnagar taluka, Rishikesh Patel and other party leaders asked members of the parents' association to withdraw their protests. Ramanlal Vora and Amit Shah even threatened Ghemar Chaudhary in private, telling him to withdraw the protests or face the consequences. No minister exchanged a single word with the father of the victim.

Any hopes of meeting the chief minister began to fade. Annoyed by the ministers' indifference, the parents' association then went to the GCERT office and submitted their memorandum demanding the transfer of Jamna Taral to the GCERT director, MN Bhad. The moment they stepped out of the GCERT office, they were surrounded by a police cordon and then escorted out of Gandhinagar to an as yet unknown destination. They were not allowed to meet the media. Two police jeeps, one in front

and another bringing up the rear, escorted them to Gojharia, 30 km from Gandhinagar. During this journey, the parents were asked to switch off their mobile phones. In Gojharia they were taken to the Arbuda hotel where they met Shankar Chaudhary, the MLA from Radhanpur and an influential BJP leader, as well as KC Patel, a BJP state secretary from Patan. The police escort left them there. Shankar Chaudhary also threatened the members of the parents' association. They were told to send the girls back to college. He too made no attempts to commiserate with the victim's father. Shankar Chaudhary also tried to play on caste sentiments, asking why the Patels and the Chaudharies had joined hands with the Dalits (the victim belongs to the Dalit community). Fortunately, the parents' association did not succumb to these tactics.

■ SPECIAL REPORT

The Patan issue has been a great embarrassment to the ruling party and all sorts of tactics were used to try and divide the small parents' association. Severe political pressure was exerted on Ghemar Chaudhary and fellow association members in a bid to silence their protests. The manner in which the parents' association delegation was escorted out of Gandhinagar by the police is reminiscent of the days of the emergency.

After the incident at Gandhinagar, the parents' association president Ghemar Chaudhary, a teacher, received a show-cause notice for unauthorised absence from the management of the school where he was employed; they also threatened to suspend him from the job. A fellow protester, Kirit Patel, a lecturer from the Law College in Patan and a senate member of the North Gujarat University, received similar threats from the authorities.

In what is being seen as yet another vile attempt to pressurise the rape victim and her supporters, there is a rumour now doing the rounds that obscene MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service) clips of the gang rapes by the six lecturers are currently being circulated on mobile phones across Gujarat.

Meanwhile, following a second visit to Patan in the first week of March, the National Commission for Women expressed dissatisfaction with the inquiry being conducted by the Gujarat government and demanded that the inquiry be handed over to the CBI. The commission also observed that the education department had taken no concrete action against the accused lecturers and demanded that the six men be dismissed from service and that their degrees be revoked.

While on a visit to Ahmedabad on March 9, Asma Jahangir, the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, United Nations Human Rights Council, is said to have expressed concern about the sexual exploitation at the PTC College, Patan during her meeting with the state chief secretary, Manjula Subramaniam. Jahangir was briefed on recent events by representatives of the democratic collective, Move-

ment for Secular Democracy, at a meeting in Ahmedabad organised by the legal rights group, Citizens for Justice and Peace.

Even as the BJP and the sangh parivar seem determined to divert the issue, concerned citizens, organisations, students, women, are coming out to de-



mand justice. On February 14, various voluntary organisations and citizens of Ahmedabad came together under the banner of the Citizens' Forum against Patan Gang Rape Incident to stage a huge rally and hold a protest meeting at Sardar Baug. In Ahmedabad, Baroda, Surat and elsewhere in Gujarat, March 8 was observed as Patan Day.

There can no longer be any doubt that under the circumstances described above the inquiry into the Patan incidents will not be conducted impartially while a fair trial of the case seems exceedingly unlikely. With the government and its machinery seemingly determined to bury the shame of Patan through threats, coercion, persuasion and direct interference, how long can the victim's parents and the other students hold out against an autocratic government at great risk to their safety? An air of suppressed fear and threat haunts the people. None but a few dare to speak out openly. And though the majority are seething with anger, they cannot seem to muster up the courage to face the wrath of the government. The initial outraged response was a spontaneous one. But the moment people knew that they would be forced into a confrontation with Anandi Patel, the minister said to be closest to Narendra Modi in his cabinet, most protesters ran scared.

The ruling party and the sangh parivar are doing their best to underplay the Patan sex scandal in a devious and perverted manner. On the one hand fear, insecurity, anguish and helplessness have already gripped civil society in Gujarat since the carnage of 2002. Moreover, the 'no remorse factor' has been skillfully percolated among the people. The desensitisation of Gujarat society is indeed greatly alarming. Under these circumstances it is high time concerned citizens in Gujarat came forward. If the sex scandal at the PTC College, Patan is allowed to be buried, victims will stop speaking for years to come. Fighting for justice in the Patan case will save society from complete moral and cultural degradation. ■

(Dwarika Nath Rath, an activist from Gujarat, belongs to the Movement for Secular Democracy, MSD, the broadest possible platform of concerned citizens and voluntary organisations comprising secular and democratic-minded people in the state.)