



The mother of the 12-year-old girl in her village home. *JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

# Indian Village Feels Aftershocks of Rape

Politicians Visit Hamlet of Two Girls Killed Last Week  
As Families Recall 'Best Friends,' Their Final Walk to the Chili Field

By **JESSE PESTA** and  
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*International, June 1, 2014*

KATARA SADATGANJ, India—VIPs swept into this isolated village over the weekend as outrage rippled through India and beyond over the country's latest case of violent sexual abuse.

Two girls were allegedly raped and then hanged from a mango tree here last week. After a photo of the dead girls circled the globe, some of India's most

prominent politicians came to this hamlet of mud-and-brick huts, while the murders have reinvigorated calls for India to address the persistent problem of violence against women.

The father of one of the victims, who were cousins, said the family left the girls bodies hanging from the tree because they saw it as one of the few ways to be sure the crime was recorded.

“We wanted the world to know what happened to our daughters,” the older girl’s father, a spearmint farmer, said Sunday afternoon.



**The father of the younger girl.** *JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

He and other relatives described the girls and how they spent their last day alive.

They were 14 and 12. They were best friends, the father of the older girl said. They both wanted to be doctors. Indian law prohibits identifying rape victims.

The incident “calls for a rethink of our entire society,” said Albeena Shakil, a New Delhi-based women’s activist. “We have the law, but our law-enforcement agencies are so poor that nothing changes.”



**Villagers wave at a helicopter carrying a prominent local politician, Mayawati. The tree where the girls were hung is in the cluster behind the helicopter. JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

The gruesome deaths have revived an issue that has consumed India since the shocking 2012 rape-and-murder of a woman in New Delhi.

In recent weeks, other attacks have drawn fresh attention to the problem of violence against women in India.

In another town in Uttar Pradesh called Azamgarh, a 17-year-old girl was allegedly gang-raped by four men last week, according to an official investigating the assault.

Rahul Gandhi, the scion of one of India's leading political families, visited the victims' parents on Saturday.

"Rahul Gandhi told us, 'You will get your rights,'" said the father of the elder girl.

The United Nations on Sunday condemned the attacks and called for India to address violence

against women and people of marginalized communities nationwide.

“I’m scared,” said Poonam Yadav, an 11-year-old neighbor of the victims here who saw the girls’ bodies hanging from the tree. She stood at the edge of a field of spearmint with her aunt on Sunday afternoon to watch a visiting politician’s helicopter take off.

Some people in the village, located about 180 miles southeast of Delhi, blame the local police for not acting quickly enough and failing to keep the peace. Maan Singh Chauhan, a senior regional police official, echoed those complaints. With more timely action, “those girls perhaps would have been saved,” he said.

Three men have been arrested in the alleged rape and murder of the two girls. The three, all brothers, don’t have a lawyer and couldn’t be reached for comment. Police said they were searching for two other men whose identities they don’t know.

The father, mother and older sister of the 12-year-old victim, sitting in the courtyard of their village home, described her last day.

“She got up at 4 in the morning and studied,” her mother said, “then she had a bath.”

She made tea over a fire in the courtyard’s open-air kitchen. After lunch she and her cousin sat together on a cot in the courtyard and studied math all afternoon.

In the evening she helped cook a simple meal. After dinner, she told her mother she had to go and relieve herself. Her mother told her to take her older cousin with her.

“Come back soon,” her mother said. Those were her last words to her daughter.

Because the family doesn’t have a bathroom, her daughter and niece walked to a nearby field of chili plants, where women often venture when dusk affords some privacy.

When she didn’t return in 15 minutes, her mother

went to the field, shouting her daughter's name. "I got no reply."

Around the same time, an uncle was returning from fieldwork. "I saw three men dragging [both girls]," he said in an interview.

He said he grabbed a fourth man, whom he recognized, and that man pulled a gun on him.



**The girls were buried on the Ganges river, a few miles from their homes. The mounds of sand mark their graves.** *JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

"I got scared and ran away," the uncle said.

The family said they searched the fields for the girls and hoped for the best.

Then, around 11 p.m., a group of family members went to the police. According to the uncle, one police officer asked them to leave and then the police later went to arrest the man the uncle recognized.

The next morning at around 5 a.m., an officer came to the families of the two girls and told them

that their daughters were dead and hanging from a mango tree nearby.

“The bodies were moving in the wind like they were dolls,” said a school guard named Mahesh Kashyap, “I was in tears.”

The families refused to take down the bodies until the afternoon, after the police promised that the deaths would be investigated.



**Some of the girls' clothes lay among the wild spearmint near the graves.**

*JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

On Thursday, the two girls were buried on the bank of the Ganges river, a few miles from their homes, in a small ceremony before dawn.

Two mounds of sand mark the graves, as well as a few of their garments, including school uniforms, which lie among wild spearmint plants nearby.

“The sky was full of stars when they were buried,” said a relative who was in attendance.

*—Preetika Rana contributed to this article.*