

Date with disaster

Date rape is a growing threat for urban girls and according to doctors and police officers, peaks during the academic year-end when there are many reasons to celebrate -- Valentine's Day, New Year, Christmas bashes and vacations when adolescents manage permission for sleepovers

BY ANNAM SURESH

When 18-year-old Anandita managed to persuade her parents to allow her to go with a friend to a Valentine's Day party, little did she know what lay in store. She was drugged and raped by the very friend who had promised to drop her home safely. A week later, unable to face her friends or confide in her family, she killed herself.

Swati clearly recalls the gang rape she suffered. She remembers her inability to flee, because she had lied to her parents in order to join this party and felt she could not seek their help. Swati had her parents' permission to attend a Valentine's Day party at a girlfriend's place as they would all be passing out of school in a couple of weeks and might never meet again. She and her friends, in fact, had gone to their friend Sonia's boyfriend Rahul's house instead as his parents were out of town.

The boys had stocked up on alcohol and once the girls were drunk, took turns at raping the girls and videotaping the activity. Swati could not just walk out as she needed the guys to drop her home -- her house was far away and at that hour no public transport or cab would be available. She was scared to call her parents because she had lied to them.

When she finally mustered the courage to tell her parents the truth three days later, the boys were arrested -- the videotapes helped nail them.

What is Date Rape?

Date rape is forced or coerced sex between unmarried partners, dates, friends, friends of friends or general acquaintances, the perpetration or threat of an act of violence by at least one member of an unmarried couple on the other member within the context of dating or courtship.

This violence includes any form of sexual assault, physical violence,

and verbal or emotional abuse. Of late, coercion has often been replaced or supplemented by drugs which induce partial sedation and low resistance.

Although girls are usually the victims, occasionally, especially in stag parties and all-male institutions, boys too have been subject to 'date rape' or forced sodomy.

Typically, in India, most victims are young girls between the ages of 14 and 23, though younger girls and older women too are not free of the risk. It all depends on their social environment and on opportunistic situations within their lifestyle.

Those who indulge in substance abuse or go with boys who do so are also highly vulnerable -- drug dependence can make the girls submit to anything for the next dose, and a high guy can do anything. Often, such surreptitious dates are also the first time when many youngsters try various addictive practices like narcotic drugs and alcohol.

Guys who perpetrate such violence are generally men with an aggressive streak -- whether overt or covert, who subscribe to the 'powerful male' image. Often, it could be a chap who has been snubbed or refused a date. Frequently, the person who is paying for the date, has brought along the car etc. also believes that he is entitled to liberties by virtue of these and the fact that the girl has agreed to join the party is often seen as silent consent for physical and sexual overtures. "If you are such a good girl, how come you agreed to a party like this?" is often the taunt.

Often, earlier episodes of physical intimacy with the victim, however brief, are considered an indication of a no-holds-barred licence when the opportunity presents itself.

Youngsters who pick up their 'sex education' lessons from pornographic magazines, blue

films or equally ignorant peers are most likely to conform to gender-stereotype myths, like girls want violent sex.

Men who have experienced violence at home rarely think it inappropriate as the ideal tool of persuasion on a date.

Why date rapes happen?

The most common reasons are available opportunity, especially if such opportunities are not easy to come by, peer pressure, curiosity, sexual ignorance and lure of money. It is not unusual for men anticipating an evening of carnal pleasure to come prepared with drugs that can be unobtrusively introduced into a girl's drinks. In fact, many of these drugs used to spike drinks are available as prescription sedatives.

In India, young girls dating with



parental consent is still not very common. Once the plans go awry, they are too scared to seek help.

Misconceptions regarding sex too contribute to this. Aarati, for instance, had heard from her friends, some of who had steady boyfriends, that men biologically have a very high need for sex and if they do not get it from their girlfriends, would seek it elsewhere and even break up with their girlfriends over this. She agreed to the date, since she would eventually be marrying the person and needed to keep him from 'straying' till then. When she found that her boyfriend was willing to 'share' her with his buddies, it was too late to turn back.

Rape, a concept not understood

Most young girls believe that the danger is only from strangers and not from people they have known. The fear of prematurely killing a relationship or being abandoned by her boyfriend/ fiancé that she has invested time over, too contributes to a girl's submission to the violence. If there is a promise of marriage, however vague, it somehow seems to minimize the risk and legitimise the recklessness.

As for the guys, not only do they

believe that a girl's 'no' is not to be taken seriously, but also that consent, obtained by whatever means, or even just the absence of active and sustained resistance, absolves them of rape.

Not very rarely, these rapes are photographed or video taped and are a source of income – either through blackmail or through sale in the pornography circuit.

Warning signs

If the relationship is characterized by extreme jealousy or possessiveness, emotional withholding, lack of warmth, angry outbursts, sexual coercion, infidelity, verbal abuse, threats, lies, broken promises, physical violence, power games, then outings to inaccessible and remote farmhouses, especially without the knowledge of family is a sure call to danger.

For parents certain signs should trigger a suspicion that their daughter is in an abusive or potentially abusive relationship, such as bruises, cuts, etc., if she begins to withdraw from close friends or family, is obsessed with pleasing her boyfriend, exhibits low self-esteem, is elusive and evasive.

The Dos and Don'ts

Never agree to go to a party where you do not know anyone simply because some of your friends say 'everyone will be there'.

Do not ignore your gut feeling – if you are uncomfortable, back out.

Do not date on the sly – men prefer girls to do this since the girl cannot call her family for help.

Drugs can easily be slipped into a drink. Do not ever leave your drink unattended. Always drink in moderation.

Go on dates in public places.

Opt for a day date so that you are not dependent on him for a return ride and can walk out any time the going gets unpleasant.

If your date's overtures make you uncomfortable, say 'no' clearly and unequivocally – it is a command that must be respected. Remember that date rape is a serious crime, and if you are a victim, contact the police and seek medical attention as soon as possible. Do not shower, douche or change clothes. You may destroy evidence in the process.

What can parents do?

Talk about dating violence to children. Also let boys know that despite all the myths, girls neither like nor respect a guy who is abusive and that date rape is punishable.

Role-play: Ask the young woman/man how they would get out of a given situation. When teens get involved in risk-taking behaviors such as drug use, truancy or other problematic behaviors with a group of friends, it might be a good idea to involve in frequent dialogue with them.

Consider allowing the children on dates after you have gotten to know whom your teenager is dating, and insist on a specific drop time. Take the home telephone numbers and mobile numbers of as many friends as possible. Also, take down the address of party venues. It would be a good idea to ask your daughter to call you once she reaches the place, and just as she is leaving. If your child does confide in you about a violent experience, listen—do not judge. Help her get out of the abusive circle. If required, seek professional help ■

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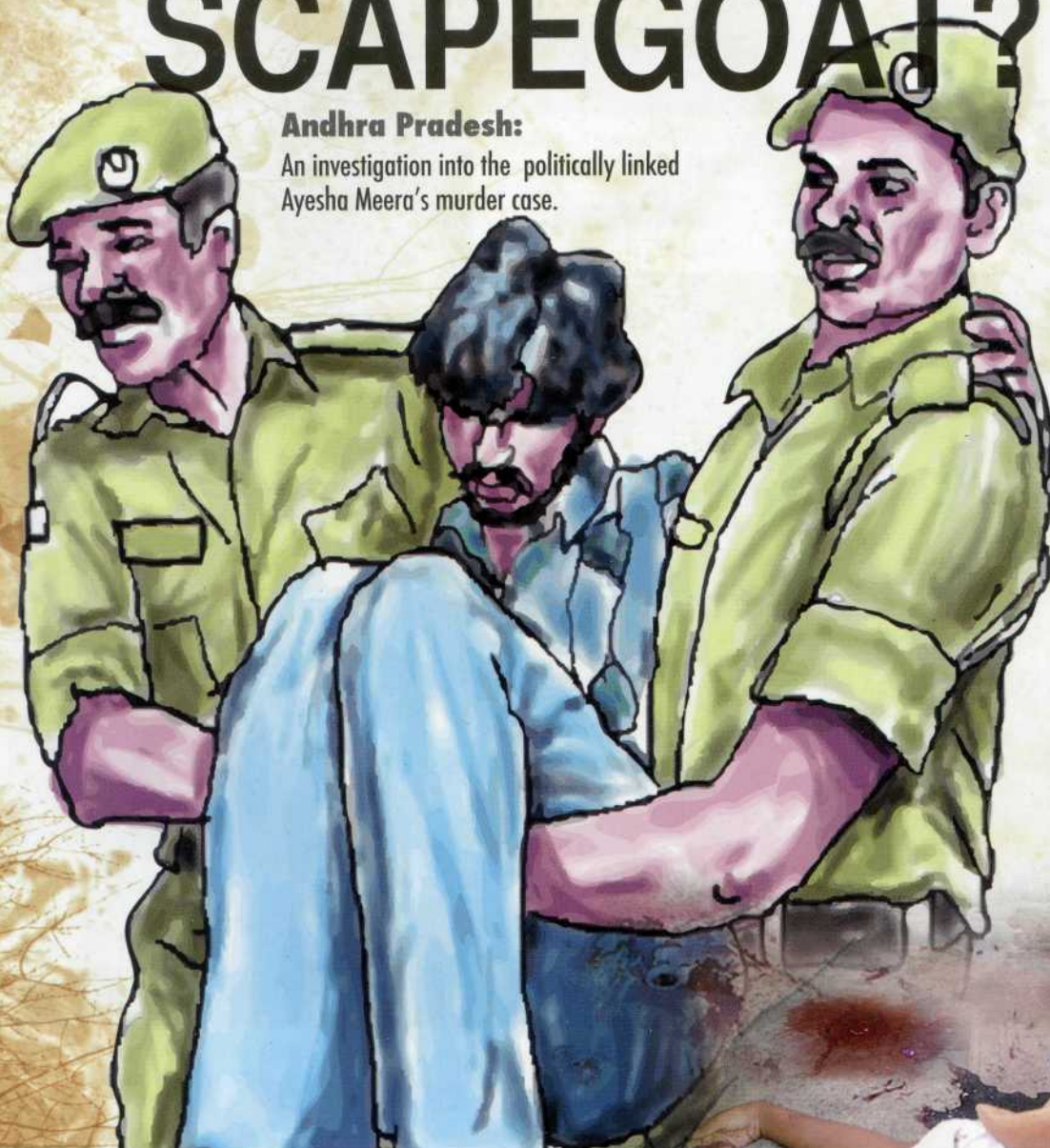
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