(1996) 2 Supreme Court Cases 384 : 1996 Supreme Court Cases (Cri) 316

(BEFORE DR A.S. ANAND AND S. SAGHIR AHMAD, JJ.)

STATE OF PUNJAB . . Appellant;

Versus

GURMIT SINGH AND OTHERS . . Respondents.

Criminal Appeal No. 616 of 1985[†], decided on January 16, 1996

A. Penal Code, 1860 — Ss. 376, 363, 366 and 368 — Evidence of a victim of sexual assault — Corroboration not necessary — Conviction can be founded on her testimony alone unless there are compelling reasons for seeking corroboration — Court may look for some assurance of her statement to satisfy its judicial conscience — Her evidence is more reliable than that of an injured witness — She is not an accomplice — On facts, even though no corroboration is required yet there is sufficient corroboration from the medical evidence and report of the chemical examiner

B. Penal Code, 1860 — S. 376 — Cases involving sexual molestation — Duty of court to deal with such cases with utmost sensitivity — Minor contradictions or insignificant discrepancies in the statement of the prosecutrix should not be a ground for throwing out an otherwise reliable prosecution case

The testimony of the victim of sexual assault is vital and unless there are compelling reasons which necessitate looking for corroboration of her statement, the courts should find no difficulty in acting on the testimony of a victim of sexual assault alone to convict an accused where her testimony inspires confidence and is found to be reliable. Seeking corroboration of her statement before relying upon the same, as a rule, in such cases amounts to adding insult to injury. Why should the evidence of a girl or a woman who complains of rape or sexual molestation, be viewed with doubt, disbelief or suspicion? The court while appreciating the evidence of a prosecutrix may look for some assurance of her statement to satisfy its judicial conscience, since she is a witness who is interested in the outcome of the charge levelled by her, but there is no requirement of law to insist upon corroboration of her statement to base conviction of an accused. The evidence of a victim of sexual assault stands almost on a par with the evidence of an injured witness and to an extent is even more reliable. Just as a witness who has sustained some injury in the occurrence, which is not found to be self-inflicted, is considered to be a good witness in the sense that he is least likely to shield the real culprit, the evidence of a victim of a sexual offence is entitled to great weight, absence of corroboration notwithstanding. Corroborative evidence is not an imperative component of judicial credence in every case of rape. Corroboration as a condition

for judicial reliance on the testimony of the prosecutrix is not a requirement of law but a guidance of prudence under given circumstances. It must not be overlooked that a woman or a girl subjected to sexual assault is not an accomplice to the crime but is a victim of another person's lust and it is improper and undesirable to test her evidence with a certain amount of suspicion, treating her as if she were an accomplice. Inferences have to be drawn from a given set of facts and circumstances with realistic diversity and not dead uniformity lest that type of rigidity in the shape of rule of law is introduced through a new form of testimonial tyranny making justice a casualty. Courts cannot cling to a fossil formula and insist upon corroboration even if, taken

as a whole, the case spoken of by the victim of sex crime strikes the judicial mind as probable.

(Para 8)

Of late, crime against women in general and rape in particular is on the increase. It is an irony that while we are celebrating woman's rights in all spheres, we show little or no concern for her honour. It is a sad reflection on the attitude of indifference of the society towards the violation of human dignity of the victims of sex crimes. A rapist not only violates the victim's privacy and personal integrity, but inevitably causes serious psychological as well as physical harm in the process. Rape is not merely a physical assault — it is often destructive of the whole personality of the victim. A murderer destroys the physical body of his victim, a rapist degrades the very soul of the helpless female. The courts, therefore, shoulder a great responsibility while trying an accused on charges of rape. They must deal with such cases with utmost sensitivity. The courts should examine the broader probabilities of a case and not get swayed by minor contradictions or insignificant discrepancies in the statement of the prosecutrix, which are not of a fatal nature, to throw out an otherwise reliable prosecution case. If evidence of the prosecutrix inspires confidence, it must be relied upon without seeking corroboration of her statement in material particulars. If for some reason the court finds it difficult to place implicit reliance on her testimony, it may look for evidence which may lend assurance to her testimony, short of corroboration required in the case of an accomplice. The testimony of the prosecutrix must be appreciated in the background of the entire case and the trial court must be alive to its responsibility and be sensitive while dealing with cases involving sexual molestations.

(Para 21)

State of Maharashtra v. *Chandraprakash Kewalchand Jain*, (1990) 1 SCC 550 : 1990 SCC (Cri) 210, *followed*

C. Penal Code, 1860 — Ss. 376, 363, 366 and 368 — Abduction and rape — Appreciation of evidence — Principles — Course of normal human conduct

of an Indian woman in such a situation to be kept in mind — Prosecutrix abducted by three young men in a car when she was coming out of examination centre and after committing rape leaving her at the same place next morning — Ignorance of the prosecutrix about the make, etc. of car in which she was abducted or failure to give colour of the car, though given in the FIR, does not affect reliability of her testimony — Prosecutrix abducted under threat of death — Hence she cannot be discredited for not raising an alarm when being abducted — Negligence of the police officer in not tracing out the driver or car cannot be a ground to reject her testimony — Conduct of the prosecutrix in not complaining to the teachers or other girl students not unnatural — Held, in the circumstances of the case testimony of the prosecutrix suffers from no infirmity and can be acted upon without looking for corroboration

The courts must, while evaluating evidence, remain alive to the fact that in a case of rape, no self-respecting woman would come forward in a court just to make a humiliating statement against her honour such as is involved in the commission of rape on her. In cases involving sexual molestation, supposed considerations which have no material effect on the veracity of the prosecution case or even discrepancies in the statement of the prosecutrix should not, unless the discrepancies are such which are of fatal nature, be allowed to throw out an otherwise reliable prosecution case. The inherent bashfulness of the females and the tendency to conceal outrage of sexual aggression are factors which the courts should not overlook.

(Para 8)

The prosecutrix was a village girl. She was a student of Xth class. It was wholly irrelevant and immaterial whether she was ignorant of the difference between a Fiat, an Ambassador or a Master car. Again, the statement of the prosecutrix at the trial

that she did not remember the colour of the car, though she had given the colour of the car in the FIR was of no material effect on the reliability of her testimony.

(Para 8)

The prosecutrix in her statement categorically asserted that as soon as she was pushed inside the car she was threatened by the accused to keep quiet and not to raise any alarm, otherwise she would be killed. Under these circumstances to discredit the prosecutrix for not raising an alarm while the car was passing through the bus adda is a travesty of justice. The court overlooked the situation in which a poor helpless minor girl had found herself in the company of three desperate young men who were threatening her and preventing her from raising any alarm. Again, if the investigating officer did not conduct the investigation properly or was negligent

in not being able to trace out the driver or the car, how can that become a ground to discredit the testimony of the prosecutrix? The prosecutrix had no control over the investigating agency and the negligence of an investigating officer could not affect the credibility of the statement of the prosecutrix. The trial court fell in error for discrediting the testimony of the prosecutrix on that account.

(Para 8)

A girl, in a tradition-bound non-permissive society in India, would be extremely reluctant even to admit that any incident which is likely to reflect upon her chastity had occurred, being conscious of the danger of being ostracized by the society or being looked down upon by the society. Her not informing the teachers or her friends at the examination centre under the circumstances cannot detract from her reliability. In the normal course of human conduct, this unmarried minor girl, would not like to give publicity to the traumatic experience she had undergone and would feel terribly embarrassed in relation to the incident to narrate it to her teachers and others overpowered by a feeling of shame and her natural inclination would be to avoid talking about it to anyone, lest the family name and honour is brought into controversy. Therefore her informing her mother only on return to the parental house and no one else at the examination centre prior thereto is in accord with the natural human conduct of a female.

(Para 8)

D. Penal Code, 1860 — Ss. 376, 363, 366 and 368 — Age of victim — Prosecutrix abducted and forcibly subjected to sexual intercourse by the accused persons without her consent and against her will — Question of age of the victim not relevant — However, on facts, evidence of father and mother of the victim that she was below 16 years of age on the date of incident is fully corroborated by medical evidence and school leaving certificate

(Para 13)

E. Criminal Procedure Code, 1973 — S. 154 — Delay in filing FIR in sexual offences — Reluctance of the prosecutrix or her family members must be taken into consideration — On facts, delay not only properly explained but also found natural — Penal Code, 1860, S. 376

The courts cannot overlook the fact that in sexual offences delay in the lodging of the FIR can be due to variety of reasons particularly the reluctance of the prosecutrix or her family members to go to the police and complain about the incident which concerns the reputation of the prosecutrix and the honour of her family. It is only after giving it a cool thought that a complaint of sexual offence is generally lodged.

(Para 8)

F. Criminal Procedure Code, 1973 — S. 327(2) & (3) — Trial in camera — Rape cases — Courts obliged to hold the trial in camera — Trial of rape cases in camera should be the rule and an open trial an exception — High Courts directed to impress upon the Presiding Officers to invariably hold the trial in

camera — Cases of sexual assault should be tried by lady Judges, if available — Court should, as far as possible, avoid to disclose names of the victims in its

orders to maintain anonymity of the victim — Press or anyone else not to print or publish any matter in relation to the proceedings except by permission under S. 327 (3), CrPC — Contempt of Courts Act, 1971, S. 7

Sub-sections (2) and (3) of Section 327 inserted by Act 43 of 1983 are in the nature of exception to the general rule of an open trial. In spite of the amendment, however, it is seen that the trial courts either are not conscious of this amendment or do not realise its importance for hardly does one come across a case where the inquiry and trial of a rape case has been conducted by the court in camera. The expression that the inquiry into and trial of rape "shall be conducted in camera" as occurring in sub-section (2) of Section 327 CrPC is not only significant but very important. It casts a duty on the court to conduct the trial of rape cases etc. invariably "in camera". The courts are obliged to act in furtherance of the intention expressed by the legislature and not to ignore its mandate and must invariably take recourse to the provisions of Sections 327(2) and (3) CrPC and hold the trial of rape cases in camera. It would enable the victim of crime to be a little comfortable and answer the questions with greater ease in not too familiar a surroundings. Trial in camera would not only be in keeping with the self-respect of the victim of crime and in tune with the legislative intent but is also likely to improve the quality of the evidence of a prosecutrix because she would not be so hesitant or bashful to depose frankly as she may be in an open court, under the gaze of the public. The improved quality of her evidence would assist the courts in arriving at the truth and sifting truth from falsehood. The High Courts would therefore be well-advised to draw the attention of the trial courts to the amended provisions of Section 327 CrPC and to impress upon the Presiding Officers to invariably hold the trial of rape cases in camera, rather than in the open court as envisaged by Section 327(2) CrPC. When trials are held in camera, it would not be lawful for any person to print or publish any matter in relation to the proceedings in the case, except with the previous permission of the court as envisaged by Section 327(3) CrPC. This would save any further embarrassment being caused to the victim of sex crime. Wherever possible, it may also be worth considering whether it would not be more desirable that the cases of sexual assaults on the females are tried by lady Judges, wherever available, so that the prosecutrix can make her statement with greater ease and assist the courts in properly discharging their duties, without allowing the truth to be sacrificed at the altar of rigid technicalities while appreciating evidence in such cases. The courts should, as far as possible, avoid disclosing the name of the prosecutrix in their orders to save further embarrassment to the victim of sex crime. The anonymity of the victim of the crime must be maintained as far as possible

throughout. The trial courts should take recourse to the provisions of Sections 327 (2) and (3) CrPC liberally. Trial of rape cases in camera should be the rule and an open trial in such cases an exception.

(Para 24)

G. Evidence Act, 1872 — Ss. 137, 146, 148, 151, 152 and 155(4) — Cross-examination of the victim of sexual assault — Duty of court to see that she is not harassed or humiliated — Penal Code, 1860, S. 376

The provisions of Evidence Act regarding relevancy of facts notwithstanding, some defence counsel adopt the strategy of continual questioning of the prosecutrix as to the details of the rape. The victim is required to repeat again and again the details of the rape incident not so much as to bring out the facts on record or to test her credibility but to test her story for inconsistencies with a view to attempt to twist the interpretation of events given by her so as to make them appear inconsistent with her allegations. The court, therefore, should not sit as a silent spectator while the victim of crime is being cross-examined by the defence. It must effectively control the recording of evidence in the court. While every latitude should be given to the

defence to test the veracity of the prosecutrix and the credibility of her version through cross-examination, the court must also ensure that cross-examination is not made a means of harassment or causing humiliation to the victim of crime. A victim of rape, it must be remembered, has already undergone a traumatic experience and if she is made to repeat again and again, in unfamiliar surroundings what she had been subjected to, she may be too ashamed and even nervous or confused to speak and her silence or a confused stray sentence may be wrongly interpreted as "discrepancies and contradictions" in her evidence.

(Para 22)

H. Penal Code, 1860 — Section 376 — Casting stigma on the character of a victim of rape deprecated — Trial judge not justified in characterising a rape victim as a girl of loose character — Court must use self-restraint while recording such finding even if the girl is found to be habituated to sexual intercourse — Evidence Act, 1872, S. 155(4)

I. Penal Code, 1860 — Ss. 375 Secondly, 376, 376-B, 376-C, 376-D — Past promiscuous behaviour of the prosecutrix held is no ground to condone rape — Even such a prosecutrix has a right to refuse to submit herself to sexual inter-course

The trial court not only erroneously disbelieved the prosecutrix, but quite uncharitably and unjustifiably even characterised her as "a girl of loose morals" or "such type of a girl". We express our strong disapproval of the approach of the trial court and its casting a stigma on the character of the prosecutrix. The observations

lack sobriety expected of a Judge. Suchlike stigmas have the potential of not only discouraging an even otherwise reluctant victim of sexual assault to bring forth complaint for trial of criminals, thereby making the society suffer by letting the criminal escape even a trial. The courts are expected to use self-restraint while recording such findings which have larger repercussions so far as the future of the victim of the sex crime is concerned and even wider implications on the society as a whole — where the victim of crime is discouraged — the criminal encouraged and in turn crime gets rewarded! Even in cases, unlike the present case, where there is some acceptable material on the record to show that the victim was habituated to sexual intercourse, no such inference like the victim being a girl of "loose moral character" is permissible to be drawn from that circumstance alone. Even if the prosecutrix, in a given case, has been promiscuous in her sexual behaviour earlier, she has a right to refuse to submit herself to sexual intercourse to anyone and everyone because she is not a vulnerable object or prey for being sexually assaulted by anyone and everyone. No stigma, like the one as cast in the present case should be cast against such a witness by the courts, for after all it is the accused and not the victim of sex crime who is on trial in the court.

(Paras 10, 14 and 16)

J. Penal Code, 1860 — Ss. 376, 363, 366 and 368 — Abduction and rape — Sentence — Mitigating factors — The three respondent accused acquitted by the trial court more than a decade ago and since then not involved in any other offence — They aged between 21-24 years at the time of occurrence and by now all of them and the prosecutrix got married and settled down in life — Held, sentence of 5 years' RI and a fine of Rs 5000 each is appropriate for offence under S. 376 — But, in the circumstances of the case, it is not desirable to award any compensation particularly as no scheme as suggested in Delhi Domestic Working Women's Forum case has been drawn up

(Paras 17 to 19)

Delhi Domestic Working Women's Forum v. *Union of India*, (1995) 1 SCC 14 : 1995 SCC (Cri) 7, *referred to*

S-M/M/15649/CR

Advocates who appeared in this case:

Ms Amita Gupta, R.S. Suri and R.L. Rao, Advocates, for the Appellant;

Ujagar Singh, Senior Advocate (Davender Verma and Ms Naresh Bakshi, Advocates, with him) for Respondents 1-2.

C.S. Ashri, Advocate, for Respondent 3.

Chronological list of cases cited ***in para(s)***

1. (1995) 1 SCC 14 : 1995 SCC (Cri) 7, *Delhi Domestic Working Women's Forum* v. *Union of India* 18

2. (1990) 1 SCC 550 : 1990 SCC (Cri) 210, *State of Maharashtra* v. *Chandraprakash Kewalchand Jain* 8

The Judgment of the Court was delivered by

DR ANAND, J.— This appeal under Section 14 of the Terrorist Affected Areas (Special Courts) Act, 1984 is directed against the judgment and order of Additional Judge, Special Court, Ludhiana dated 1-6-1985 by which the respondents were acquitted of the charge of abduction and rape. For what follows, the judgment impugned in this appeal presents a rather disquietening and a disturbing feature. It demonstrates lack of sensitivity on the part of the court by casting unjustified stigmas on a prosecutrix aged below 16 years in a rape case, by overlooking human psychology and behavioural probabilities. An intrinsically wrong approach while appreciating the testimonial potency of the evidence of the prosecutrix has resulted in miscarriage of justice. First a brief reference to the prosecution case.

2. The prosecutrix (name withheld by us), a young girl below 16 years of age, was studying in the 10th class at the relevant time in Government High School, Pakhowal. The matriculation examinations were going on at the material time. The examination centre of the prosecutrix was located in the Boys' High School, Pakhowal. On 30-3-1984 at about 12.30 p.m. after taking her test in Geography, the prosecutrix was going to the house of her maternal uncle, Darshan Singh, and when she had covered a distance of about 100 karmas from the school, a blue Ambassador car being driven by a Sikh youth aged 20/25 years came from behind. In that car Gurmit Singh, Jagjit Singh @ Bawa and Ranjit Singh accused were sitting. The car stopped near her. Ranjit Singh accused came out of the car and caught hold of the prosecutrix from her arm and pushed her inside the car. Accused Jagjit Singh @ Bawa put his hand on the mouth of the prosecutrix, while Gurmit Singh accused threatened the prosecutrix, that in case she raised an alarm she would be done to death. All the three accused (respondents herein) drove her to the tubewell of Ranjit Singh accused. She was taken to the 'kotha' of the tubewell. The driver of the car after leaving the prosecutrix and the three accused persons there went away

with the car. In the said kotha Gurmit Singh compelled the prosecutrix to take liquor, misrepresenting to her that it was juice. Her refusal did not have any effect and she reluctantly consumed liquor. Gurmit Singh then got removed her salwar and also opened her shirt. She was made to lie on a cot in the kotha while his companions guarded the kotha from outside. Gurmit Singh committed rape upon her. She raised roula

as she was suffering pain but Gurmit Singh threatened to kill her if she persisted in raising alarm. Due to that threat, she kept quiet. After Gurmit Singh had committed rape upon her, the other two accused, who were earlier guarding the kotha from outside, came in one by one and committed rape upon her. Jagjit Singh alias Bawa committed rape on her after Gurmit Singh and thereafter Ranjit Singh committed rape on her. Each one of the accused committed sexual intercourse with the prosecutrix forcibly and against her will. They all subjected her to sexual intercourse once again during the night against her will. Next morning at about 6.00 a.m., the same car arrived at the tubewell kotha of Ranjit Singh and the three accused made her sit in that car and left her near the Boys' High School, Pakhowal nearabout the place from where she had been abducted. The prosecutrix had to take her examination in the subject of Hygiene on that date. She, after taking her examination in Hygiene, reached her Village Nangal-Kalan, at about noon time and narrated the entire story to her mother, Smt Gurdev Kaur PW 7. Her father Tirlok Singh PW 6 was not present in the house at that time. He returned from his work late in the evening. The mother of the prosecutrix, Smt Gurdev Kaur, PW 7, narrated the episode to her husband Tirlok Singh PW 6 on his arrival. Her father straightaway contacted Sarpanch Joginder Singh of the village. A panchayat was convened. Matter was brought to the notice of the Sarpanch of Village Pakhowal also. Both the Sarpanches tried to effect a compromise on 1-4 -1984 but since the panchayat could not give any justice or relief to the prosecutrix, she along with her father proceeded to the Police Station, Raikot to lodge a report about the occurrence with the police. When they reached the bus adda of Village Pakhowal, the police met them and she made her statement, Ex. PD, before ASI Raghubir Chand PW who made an endorsement, Ex. PD/1 and sent the statement Ex. PD of the prosecutrix to the Police Station Raikot for registration of the case on the basis of which formal FIR Ex. PD/2 was registered by SI Malkiat Singh. ASI Raghubir Chand then took the prosecutrix and her mother to the primary health centre Pakhowal for medical examination of the prosecutrix. She was medically examined by lady doctor, Dr

Sukhwinder Kaur, PW 1 on 2-4-1984, who found that the hymen of the prosecutrix was lacerated with fine radiate tears, swollen and painful. Her pubic hair were also found matted. According to PW 1 intercourse with the prosecutrix could be "one of the reasons for laceration which I found in her hymen". She went on to say that the possibility could not be ruled out that the prosecutrix "was not habitual to intercourse earlier".

3. During the course of investigation, the police took into possession a sealed parcel handed over by the lady doctor containing the salwar of the prosecutrix along with 5 slides of vaginal smears and one sealed phial containing pubic hair of the prosecutrix, vide memo Ex. PK. On the pointing out of the prosecutrix, the investigating officer prepared the rough site plan Ex. PF, of the place from where she had been abducted. The prosecutrix also led the investigating officer to the tubewell kotha of Ranjit Singh where she had been wrongfully confined and raped. The investigating officer prepared

a rough site plan of the kotha Ex. PM. A search was made for the accused on 2-4-1984 but they were not found. They were also not traceable on 3-4-1984, in spite of a raid being conducted at their houses by the ASI. On 5-4-1984 Jagjit Singh alias Bawa and Ranjit Singh were produced before the investigating officer by Gurbachan Singh PW 8 and were placed under arrest. Both Ranjit Singh and Jagjit Singh on the same day were produced before Dr B.L. Bansal PW 3 for medical examination. The doctor opined that both the accused were fit to perform sexual intercourse. Gurmit Singh respondent was arrested on 9-4-1984 by SI Malkiat Singh. He was also got medically examined on 9-4-1984 by Dr B.L. Bansal PW 3 who opined that Gurmit Singh was also fit to perform sexual intercourse. The sealed parcels containing the slides of vaginal smears, the pubic hair and the salwar of the prosecutrix, were sent to the chemical examiner. The report of the chemical examiner revealed that semen was found on the slides of vaginal smear though no spermatozoa was found either on the pubic hair or the salwar of the prosecutrix. On completion of the investigation, respondents were challaned and were charged for offences under Sections 363, 366, 368 and 376 IPC.

4. With a view to connect the respondents with the crime, the prosecution examined Dr Sukhwinder Kaur, PW 1; prosecutrix, PW 2; Dr B.L. Bansal, PW 3; Tirlok Singh, father of the prosecutrix, PW 6; Gurdev Kaur, mother of the prosecutrix, PW 7; Gurbachan Singh, PW 8;

Malkiat Singh, PW 9 and SI Raghubir Chand, PW 10, besides, some formal witnesses like the draftsman etc. The prosecution tendered in evidence affidavits of some of the constables, whose evidence was of a formal nature as also the report of the chemical examiner, Ex. PM. In their statements recorded under Section 313 CrPC the respondents denied the prosecution allegations against them. Jagjit Singh respondent stated that it was a false case foisted on him on account of his enmity with the Sarpanch of Village Pakhowal. He stated that he had married a Canadian girl in the village gurdwara, which was not liked by the Sarpanch and therefore, the Sarpanch was hostile to him and had got him falsely implicated in this case. Gurmit Singh respondent took the stand that he had been falsely implicated in the case on account of enmity between his father and Tirlok Singh, PW 6, father of the prosecutrix. He stated that there was long-standing litigation going on between his father and the father of the prosecutrix and their family members were not even on speaking terms with each other. He went on to add that on 1-4-1984 he was given a beating by Tirlok Singh, PW 6, on grounds of suspicion that he might have instigated some persons to abduct his daughter and in retaliation he and his elder brother on the next day had given a beating to Tirlok Singh, PW 6 and also abused him and on that account Tirlok Singh PW, in consultation with the police had got him falsely implicated in the case. Ranjit Singh respondent also alleged false implication but gave no reasons for having been falsely implicated. Jagjit Singh alias Bawa produced DW 1 Kuldip Singh and DW 2 MHC, Amarjit Singh in defence and tendered in evidence Ex. DC, a photostat copy of his passport

and Ex. DD copy of a certificate of his marriage with the Canadian girl. He also tendered into evidence photographs marked 'C' and 'D', evidencing his marriage with the Canadian girl. The other two accused however did not lead any defence evidence.

5. The trial court first dealt with the prosecution case relating to the abduction of the prosecutrix by the respondents and observed:

> "The first point for appreciation before me would arise whether this part of the prosecution story stands fortified by any cogent or reliable evidence or not. There is a bald allegation only of (prosecutrix — name omitted) that she was forcibly abducted in a car. In the FIR she stated that she was abducted in an Ambassador car of blue colour. After going through the evidence, I am of the view that this thing has been introduced by the prosecutrix or by her

father or by the thanedar just to give the gravity of offence. (prosecutrix — name omitted) was tested about the particulars of the car and she is so ignorant about the make etc. of the car that entire story that she was abducted in the car becomes doubtful. She stated in her cross-examination at page 8 that the make of the car was Master. She was pertinently asked whether the make of the car was Ambassador or Fiat. The witness replied that she cannot tell the make of the car. But when she was asked as to the difference between Fiat, Ambassador or Master car, she was unable to explain the difference amongst these vehicles. So, it appears that the allegations that she was abducted in a Fiat car by all the three accused and the driver is an imaginary story which has been given either by the thanedar or by the father of the prosecutrix.

* * *

If the three known accused are in the clutches of the police, it is not difficult for the IO to come to know about the car, the name of its driver etc., but strange enough, SI Raghubir Chand has shown pitiable negligence when he could not find out the car driver in spite of the fact that he directed the investigation on these lines. He had to admit that he made search for taking the car into possession allegedly used in the occurrence. He could not find out the name of the driver nor could he find out which car was used. In these circumstances, it looks to be improbable that any car was also used in the alleged abduction." (Omission of name of the prosecutrix — ours)

The trial court further commented:

"On 30-3-1984 she was forcibly abducted by four desperate persons who were out and out to molest her honour. It has been admitted by the prosecutrix that she was taken through the bus adda of Pakhowal via metalled road. It has come in the evidence that it is a busy centre. In spite of that fact she had not raised any alarm, so as to attract persons that she was being forcibly taken. The height of her own unnatural conduct is that she was left by the accused at the same point on the next morning. The accused would be the last persons to extend sympathy to

the prosecutrix. Had it been so, the natural conduct of the prosecutrix would have been first to rush to the house of her maternal uncle to apprise him that she had been forcibly abducted on the previous day. The witness after being left at the place of abduction lightly takes her examination. She does not complain to the lady teachers who were

deployed to keep a watch on the girl students because these students were to appear in the centre of Boys' School. She does not complain to anybody nor her friend that she was raped during the previous night. She prefers her examination rather than go to the house of her parents or relations. Thereafter, she goes to her Village Nangal-Kalan and informs for the first time her mother that she was raped on the previous night. This part of the prosecution story does not look to be probable."

6. The trial court, thus, disbelieved the version of the prosecutrix basically for the reasons: (*i*) "she is so ignorant about the make etc. of the car that entire story that she was abducted in the car becomes doubtful" particularly because she could not explain the difference between a Fiat car, Ambassador car or a Master car; (*ii*) the investigating officer had "shown pitiable negligence" during the investigation by not tracing out the car and the driver; (*iii*) that the prosecutrix did not raise any alarm while being abducted even though she had passed through the bus adda of Village Pakhowal; (*iv*) that the story of abduction "has been introduced by the prosecutrix or by her father or by the thanedar just to give the gravity of offence" and (*v*) that no corroboration of the statement of the prosecutrix was available on the record and that the story that the accused had left her near the school next morning was not believable because the accused could have no 'sympathy' for her.

7. The trial court also disbelieved the version of the prosecutrix regarding rape. It found that the testimony of the prosecutrix did not inspire confidence for the reasons (*i*) that there had been delay in lodging the FIR and as such the chances of false implication of the accused could not be ruled out. According to the trial court, Tirlok Singh PW 6 became certain on 1-4-1984 that there was no outcome of the meeting between the panchayats of Nangal-Kalan and Pakhowal, therefore, there was no justification for him not to have lodged the report on 1-4-1984 itself and since Tirlok Singh had "entered into consultations with his wife as to whether to lodge the report or not, it rendered the matter doubtful"; (*ii*) that the medical evidence did not help the prosecution case. The trial court observed that in her cross-examination PW 1 lady doctor had admitted that whereas intercourse with the prosecutrix could be one of the reasons for the laceration of the hymen "there could be other reasons also for that laceration". The trial court noticed that the lady doctor had inserted a vaginal speculum for taking swabs from the posterior vaginal fornix of the prosecutrix for preparing slides and since the width of the speculum was about two fingers, the possibility that the prosecutrix was habituated to sexual intercourse could not be ruled out". The trial court observed that the

prosecutrix was "flighting her imagination in order to rope in the accused persons" and that implicit reliance could not be

placed on the testimony "of such a girl"; (*iii*) there was no independent corroboration of her testimony and (*iv*) that the accused had been implicated on account of enmity as alleged by the accused in their statements recorded under Section 313 CrPC.

8. The grounds on which the trial court disbelieved the version of the prosecutrix are not at all sound. The findings recorded by the trial court rebel against realism and lose their sanctity and credibility. The court lost sight of the fact that the prosecutrix is a village girl. She was a student of Xth class. It was wholly irrelevant and immaterial whether she was ignorant of the difference between a Fiat, an Ambassador or a Master car. Again, the statement of the prosecutrix at the trial that she did not remember the colour of the car, though she had given the colour of the car in the FIR was of no material effect on the reliability of her testimony. No fault could also be found with the prosecution version on the ground that the prosecutrix had not raised an alarm while being abducted. The prosecutrix in her statement categorically asserted that as soon as she was pushed inside the car she was threatened by the accused to keep quiet and not to raise any alarm, otherwise she would be killed. Under these circumstances to discredit the prosecutrix for not raising an alarm while the car was passing through the bus adda is a travesty of justice. The court overlooked the situation in which a poor helpless minor girl had found herself in the company of three desperate young men who were threatening her and preventing her from raising any alarm. Again, if the investigating officer did not conduct the investigation properly or was negligent in not being able to trace out the driver or the car, how can that become a ground to discredit the testimony of the prosecutrix? The prosecutrix had no control over the investigating agency and the negligence of an investigating officer could not affect the credibility of the statement of the prosecutrix. The trial court fell in error for discrediting the testimony of the prosecutrix on that account. In our opinion, there was no delay in the lodging of the FIR either and if at all there was some delay, the same has not only been properly explained by the prosecution but in the facts and circumstances of the case was also natural. The courts cannot overlook the fact that in sexual offences delay in the lodging of the FIR can be due to variety of reasons particularly the reluctance of the prosecutrix or her family members to go to the police and complain about the

incident which concerns the reputation of the prosecutrix and the honour of her family. It is only after giving it a cool thought that a complaint of sexual offence is generally lodged. The prosecution has explained that as soon as Tirlok Singh PW 6, father of the prosecutrix came to know from his wife, PW 7 about the incident he went to the village Sarpanch and complained to him. The Sarpanch of the village also got in touch with the Sarpanch of Village Pakhowal, where in the tubewell kotha of Ranjit Singh rape was committed, and an effort was made by the panchayats of the two villages to sit together and settle the matter. It was only when the Panchayats failed to provide any relief or render any justice to the prosecutrix, that she and her family decided to report the matter to the police and before doing that

naturally the father and mother of the prosecutrix discussed whether or not to lodge a report with the police in view of the repercussions it might have on the reputation and future prospects of the marriage etc. of their daughter. Tirlok Singh PW 6 truthfully admitted that he entered into consultation with his wife as to whether to lodge a report or not and the trial court appears to have misunderstood the reasons and justification for the consultation between Tirlok Singh and his wife when it found that the said circumstance had rendered the version of the prosecutrix doubtful. Her statement about the manner in which she was abducted and again left near the school in the early hours of next morning has a ring of truth. It appears that the trial court searched for contradictions and variations in the statement of the prosecutrix microscopically, so as to disbelieve her version. The observations of the trial court that the story of the prosecutrix that she was left near the examination centre next morning at about 6 a.m. was "not believable" as "the accused would be the last persons to extend sympathy to the prosecutrix" are not at all intelligible. The accused were not showing "any sympathy" to the prosecutrix while driving her at 6.00 a.m. next morning to the place from where she had been abducted but on the other hand were removing her from the kotha of Ranjit Singh and leaving her near the examination centre so as to avoid being detected. The criticism by the trial court of the evidence of the prosecutrix as to why she did not complain to the lady teachers or to other girl students when she appeared for the examination at the centre and waited till she went home and narrated the occurrence to her mother is unjustified. The conduct of the prosecutrix in this regard appears to us to be most natural. The trial court overlooked that a girl, in a tradition-bound non-permissive society in India, would be extremely reluctant even to admit

that any incident which is likely to reflect upon her chastity had occurred, being conscious of the danger of being ostracized by the society or being looked down by the society. Her not informing the teachers or her friends at the examination centre under the circumstances cannot detract from her reliability. In the normal course of human conduct, this unmarried minor girl, would not like to give publicity to the traumatic experience she had undergone and would feel terribly embarrassed in relation to the incident to narrate it to her teachers and others overpowered by a feeling of shame and her natural inclination would be to avoid talking about it to anyone, lest the family name and honour is brought into controversy. Therefore her informing her mother only on return to the parental house and no one else at the examination centre prior thereto is in accord with the natural human conduct of a female. The courts must, while evaluating evidence, remain alive to the fact that in a case of rape, no self-respecting woman would come forward in a court just to make a humiliating statement against her honour such as is involved in the commission of rape on her. In cases involving sexual molestation, supposed considerations which have no material effect on the veracity of the prosecution case or even discrepancies in the statement of the prosecutrix should not, unless the discrepancies are such which are of fatal nature, be allowed to throw out an otherwise reliable prosecution case.

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The inherent bashfulness of the females and the tendency to conceal outrage of sexual aggression are factors which the courts should not overlook. The testimony of the victim in such cases is vital and unless there are compelling reasons which necessitate looking for *corroboration* of her statement, the courts should find no difficulty to act on the testimony of a victim of sexual assault alone to convict an accused where her testimony inspires confidence and is found to be reliable. Seeking corroboration of her statement before relying upon the same, as a rule, in such cases amounts to adding insult to injury. Why should the evidence of a girl or a woman who complains of rape or sexual molestation, be viewed with doubt, disbelief or suspicion? The court while appreciating the evidence of a prosecutrix may look for some *assurance* of her statement to satisfy its judicial conscience, since she is a witness who is interested in the outcome of the charge levelled by her, but there is no requirement of law to insist upon corroboration of her statement to base conviction of an accused. The evidence of a victim of sexual assault stands almost on a par with the evidence of an injured witness and to an extent is even more reliable. Just as a

witness who has sustained some injury in the occurrence, which is not found to be self-inflicted, is considered to be a good witness in the sense that he is least likely to shield the real culprit, the evidence of a victim of a sexual offence is entitled to great weight, absence of corroboration notwithstanding. Corroborative evidence is not an imperative component of judicial credence in every case of rape. Corroboration as a condition for judicial reliance on the testimony of the prosecutrix is not a requirement of law but a guidance of prudence under given circumstances. It must not be overlooked that a woman or a girl subjected to sexual assault is not an accomplice to the crime but is a victim of another person's lust and it is improper and undesirable to test her evidence with a certain amount of suspicion, treating her as if she were an accomplice. Inferences have to be drawn from a given set of facts and circumstances with realistic diversity and not dead uniformity lest that type of rigidity in the shape of rule of law is introduced through a new form of testimonial tyranny making justice a casualty. Courts cannot cling to a fossil formula and insist upon corroboration even if, taken as a whole, the case spoken of by the victim of sex crime strikes the judicial mind as probable. In *State of Maharashtra* v. *Chandraprakash Kewalchand Jain*[1] Ahmadi, J. (as the Lord Chief Justice then was) speaking for the Bench summarised the position in the following words: (SCC p. 559, para 16)

> "A prosecutrix of a sex offence cannot be put on a par with an accomplice. She is in fact a victim of the crime. The Evidence Act nowhere says that her evidence cannot be accepted unless it is corroborated in material particulars. She is undoubtedly a competent witness under Section 118 and her evidence must receive the same weight as is attached to an injured in cases of physical violence. The same degree of care and caution must attach in the evaluation of her

evidence as in the case of an injured complainant or witness and no more. What is necessary is that the court must be alive to and conscious of the fact that it is dealing with the evidence of a person who is interested in the outcome of the charge levelled by her. If the court keeps this in mind and feels satisfied that it can act on the evidence of the prosecutrix, there is no rule of law or practice incorporated in the Evidence Act similar to Illustration (*b*) to Section 114 which requires it to look for corroboration. If for some reason the court is hesitant to place implicit reliance on the testimony of the prosecutrix it may look for evidence which may lend assurance to her

testimony short of corroboration required in the case of an accomplice. The nature of evidence required to lend assurance to the testimony of the prosecutrix must necessarily depend on the facts and circumstances of each case. But if a prosecutrix is an adult and of full understanding the court is entitled to base a conviction on her evidence unless the same is shown to be infirm and not trustworthy. If the totality of the circumstances appearing on the record of the case disclose that the prosecutrix does not have a strong motive to falsely involve the person charged, the court should ordinarily have no hesitation in accepting her evidence."

9. We are in respectful agreement with the above exposition of law. In the instant case our careful analysis of the statement of the prosecutrix has created an impression on our minds that she is a reliable and truthful witness. Her testimony suffers from no infirmity or blemish whatsoever. We have no hesitation in acting upon her testimony alone without looking for any 'corroboration'. However, in this case there is ample corroboration available on the record to lend further credence to the testimony of the prosecutrix.

10. The medical evidence has lent full corroboration to the testimony of the prosecutrix. According to PW 1 lady doctor Sukhwinder Kaur she had examined the prosecutrix on 2-4-1984 at about 7.45 p.m. at the Primary Health Centre, Pakhowal, and had found that "her hymen was lacerated with fine radiate tears, swollen and painful". The pubic hair were also matted. She opined that intercourse with the prosecutrix could be "one of the reasons for the laceration of the hymen" of the prosecutrix. She also opined that the "possibility cannot be ruled out that (prosecutrix) was not habitual to intercourse earlier to her examination by her on 2-4-1984". During her cross-examination, the lady doctor admitted that she had not inserted her fingers inside the vagina of the prosecutrix during the medico-legal examination but that she had put a vaginal speculum for taking the swabs from the posterior vaginal fornix for preparing the slides. She disclosed that the size of the speculum was about two fingers and agreed with the suggestion made to her during her cross-examination that "if the hymen of a girl admits two fingers easily, the possibility that such a girl was habitual to sexual intercourse cannot be ruled out". However, no direct and specific question was put by the defence to the lady doctor whether the prosecutrix in the present case could be said to be habituated to sexual intercourse and

there was no challenge to her statement that the prosecutrix "may not have been subjected to sexual intercourse earlier". No enquiry was made from the lady doctor about the tear of the hymen being old. Yet, the trial court interpreted the statement of PW 1 Dr Sukhwinder Kaur to hold that the prosecutrix was habituated to sexual intercourse since the speculum could enter her vagina easily and as such she was "a girl of loose character". There was no warrant for such a finding and the finding if we may say so with respect, is a wholly irresponsible finding. In the face of the evidence of PW 1, the trial court wrongly concluded that the medical evidence had not supported the version of the prosecutrix.

11. The trial court totally ignored the report of the chemical examiner Ex. PM, according to which semen had been found on the slides which had been prepared by the lady doctor from the vaginal secretions from the posterior of the vaginal fornix of the prosecutrix. The presence of semen on the slides lent authentic corroboration to the testimony of the prosecutrix. This vital evidence was forsaken by the trial court and as a result wholly erroneous conclusions were arrived at. Thus, even though no corroboration is necessary to rely upon the testimony of the prosecutrix, yet sufficient corroboration from the medical evidence and the report of the chemical examiner is available on the record. Besides, her statement has been fully supported by the evidence of her father, Tirlok Singh, PW 6 and her mother Gurdev Kaur, PW 7, to whom she had narrated the occurrence soon after her arrival at her house. Moreover, the unchallenged fact that it was the prosecutrix who had led the investigating officer to the kotha of the tubewell of Ranjit Singh, where she had been raped, lent a built-in assurance that the charge levied by her was 'genuine' rather than 'fabricated' because it is no one's case that she knew Ranjit Singh earlier or had ever seen or visited the kotha at his tubewell. The trial court completely overlooked this aspect. The trial court did not disbelieve that the prosecutrix had been subjected to sexual intercourse but without any sound basis, observed that the prosecutrix might have spent the 'night' in the company of some 'persons' and concocted the story on being asked by her mother as to where she had spent the night after her maternal uncle, Darshan Singh, came to Nangal-Kalan to enquire about the prosecutrix. There is no basis for the finding that the prosecutrix had spent the night in the company of "*some persons*" and had indulged in sexual intercourse with *them* of her own free will. The observations were made on surmises and conjectures — the prosecutrix was condemned unheard.

12. The trial court was of the opinion that it was a 'false' case and that the accused had been implicated on account of enmity. In that connection it observed that since Tirlok Singh PW 6 had given a beating

to Gurmit Singh on 1-4-1984 suspecting his hand in the abduction of his daughter and Gurmit Singh accused and his elder brother had abused Tirlok Singh and given a beating to Tirlok Singh PW 6 on 2-4-1984, "it was very easy on the part of Tirlok Singh to persuade his daughter to name Gurmit Singh so as to take revenge". The trial court also found that the relations between the family of

Gurmit Singh and of the prosecutrix were strained on account of civil litigation pending between the parties for 7/8 years prior to the date of occurrence and that was also the 'reason' to falsely implicate Gurmit Singh. Indeed, Gurmit Singh accused in his statement under Section 313 CrPC did raise such a plea but that plea has remained unsubstantiated. Tirlok Singh PW 6 categorically denied that he had any litigation with the father of Gurmit Singh at all and went on to say that no litigation had ever taken place between him and Mukand Singh, father of Gurmit Singh, over a piece of land or otherwise. To the similar effect is the statement of Gurdev Kaur PW 7 who also categorically stated that there had been no litigation between her husband and Mukand Singh, father of Gurmit Singh. The trial court ignored this evidence and found support for the plea of the accused from the statement of the prosecutrix in which during the first sentence of her cross-examination she admitted that litigation was going on between Mukand Singh, father of Gurmit Singh, and her father for the last 8/9 years over a piece of land. In what context the statement was made is not clear. Moreover, the positive evidence of PW 6 and PW 7 that there was no litigation pending between PW 6 and the father of Gurmit Singh completely belied the plea of the accused. If there was any civil litigation pending between the parties as alleged by Gurmit Singh, he could have produced some documentary proof in support thereof but none was produced. Even Mukand Singh, father of Gurmit Singh, did not appear in the witness-box to support the plea taken by Gurmit Singh. The allegation regarding any beating given to Gurmit Singh by PW 6 and to PW 6 by Gurmit Singh and his brother was denied by PW 6 and no material was brought forth in support of that plea either and yet the trial court for undisclosed reasons assumed that the story regarding the beating was correct. Some stray sentences in the statement of the prosecutrix appear to have been unnecessarily blown out of all proportion to hold that 'admittedly' PW 6 had been given a beating by Gurmit Singh accused and that there was civil litigation pending between the father of the prosecutrix and the father of Gurmit Singh to show that the relations between the parties were inimical. There is no

acceptable material on the record to hold that there was any such civil litigation pending between the parties. Even if it be assumed for the sake of argument that there was some such litigation, it could hardly be a ground for a father to put forth his daughter to make a wild allegation of rape against the son of the opposite party, with a view to take revenge. It defies human probabilities. No father could stoop so low as to bring forth a false charge of rape on his unmarried minor daughter with a view to take revenge from the father of an accused on account of pending civil litigation. Again, if the accused could be falsely involved on account of that enmity, it was equally possible that the accused could have sexually assaulted the prosecutrix to take revenge from her father, for after all, enmity is a double-edged weapon, which may be used for false implication as well as to take revenge. In any case, there is no proof of the existence of such enmity between PW 6 and the father of Gurmit Singh which could have prompted PW 6 to put up his daughter to falsely implicate

Gurmit Singh on a charge of rape. The trial court was in error to hold that Gurmit Singh had been implicated on account of enmity between the two families and for the beating given by Gurmit Singh and his brother to PW 6, in retaliation of the beating given by PW 6 to Gurmit Singh on 1-4-1984. Similarly, so far as Jagjit Singh respondent is concerned, the trial court opined that he could have been got implicated at the instance of the Sarpanch of Village Pakhowal who was hostile to Jagjit Singh. The ground of hostility as given by Jagjit Singh against the Sarpanch of Village Pakhowal stems out of the fact that the Sarpanch was annoyed with him for marrying a Canadian girl in the village gurdwara. There is no evidence whatsoever on the record to show that the Sarpanch of Village Pakhowal had any relationship or connection with the prosecutrix or her father or was in any way in a position to exert so much of influence on the prosecutrix or her family, that to settle his score Tirlok Singh PW 6 would put forward his daughter to make a false allegation of rape and thereby jeopardise her own honour and future prospects of her marriage etc. The plea of Jagjit Singh alias Bawa like that of Gurmit Singh did not merit acceptance and the trial court erroneously accepted the same without any basis. The plea of the accused was a plea of despair not worthy of any credence. Ranjit Singh, apart from stating that he had been falsely implicated in the case did not offer any reasons for his false implication. It was at his tubewell kotha that rape had been committed on the prosecutrix. She had pointed out that kotha to the police during

investigation. No ostensible reason has been suggested as to why the prosecutrix would falsely involve Ranjit Singh in the commission of such a heinous crime and nominate his kotha as the place where she had been subjected to sexual molestation by the respondents. The trial court ignored that it is almost inconceivable that an unmarried girl and her parents would go to the extent of staking their reputation and future in order to falsely set up a case of rape to settle petty scores as alleged by Jagjit Singh and Gurmit Singh — respondents.

13. From the statement of the prosecutrix, it clearly emerges that she was abducted and forcibly subjected to sexual intercourse by the three respondents without her consent and against her will. In this fact situation the question of age of the prosecutrix would pale into insignificance. However, in the present case, there is evidence on the record to establish that on the date of the occurrence, the prosecutrix was below 16 years of age. The prosecutrix herself and her parents deposed at the trial that her age was less than 16 years on the date of the occurrence. Their evidence is supported by the birth certificate Ex. PJ. Both Tirlok Singh PW 6 and Gurdev Kaur PW 7, the father and mother of the prosecutrix respectively, explained that initially they had named their daughter, the prosecutrix, as Mahinder Kaur but her name was changed to … (name omitted), as according to The Holy Guru Granth Sahib her name was required to start with the word 'chhachha' and therefore in the school-leaving certificate her name was correctly given. There was nothing to disbelieve the explanation given by Tirlok Singh and Gurdev Kaur in that behalf. The trial court ignored the explanation given by

the parents observing that "it could not be swallowed being a belated one". The trial court was in error. The first occasion for inquiring from Tirlok Singh PW 6 about the change of the name of the prosecutrix was only at the trial when he was asked about Ex. PJ and there had been no earlier occasion for him to have made any such statement. It was, therefore, not a belated explanation. That apart, even according to the lady doctor PW 1, the clinical examination of the prosecutrix established that she was less than 16 years of age on the date of the occurrence. The birth certificate Ex. PJ was not only supported by the oral testimony of Tirlok Singh PW 6 and Gurdev Kaur PW 7 but also by that of the school-leaving certificate marked 'B'. With a view to do complete justice, the trial court could have summoned the official concerned from the school to prove various entries in the school-leaving certificate.

From the material on the record, we have come to an unhesitating conclusion that the prosecutrix was less than 16 years of age when she was made a victim of the lust of the respondents in the manner deposed to by her against her will and without her consent. The trial court did not return any positive finding as to whether or not the prosecutrix was below 16 years of age on 30-3-1984 and instead went on to observe that "even assuming for the sake of argument that the prosecutrix was less than 16 years of age on 30-3-1984, it could still not help the case as she was not a reliable witness and was attempting to shield her own conduct by indulging in falsehood to implicate the respondents". The entire approach of the trial court in appreciating the prosecution evidence and drawing inferences therefrom was erroneous.

14. The trial court not only erroneously disbelieved the prosecutrix, but quite uncharitably and unjustifiably even characterised her as "a girl of loose morals" or "such type of a girl".

15. What has shocked our judicial conscience all the more is the inference drawn by the court, based on no evidence and not even on a denied suggestion, to the effect:

> "The more probability is that (prosecutrix) was a girl of loose character. She wanted to dupe her parents that she resided for one night at the house of her maternal uncle, but for reasons best known to her, she did not do so and she preferred to give company to some persons."

16. We must express our strong disapproval of the approach of the trial court and its casting a stigma on the character of the prosecutrix. The observations lack sobriety expected of a Judge. Suchlike stigmas have the potential of not only discouraging an even otherwise reluctant victim of sexual assault to bring forth complaint for trial of criminals, thereby making the society suffer by letting the criminal escape even a trial. The courts are expected to use self-restraint while recording such findings which have larger repercussions so far as the future of the victim of the sex crime is concerned and even wider implications on the society as a whole — where the victim of crime is discouraged — the criminal encouraged and in turn crime gets rewarded! Even in cases, unlike the present case, where there is

some acceptable material on the record to show that the victim was habituated to sexual intercourse, no such inference like the victim being a girl of "loose moral character" is permissible to be drawn from that circumstance alone. Even if the prosecutrix, in a given case, has

been promiscuous in her sexual behaviour earlier, she has a right to refuse to submit herself to sexual intercourse to anyone and everyone because she is not a vulnerable object or prey for being sexually assaulted by anyone and everyone. No stigma, like the one as cast in the present case should be cast against such a witness by the courts, for after all it is the accused and not the victim of sex crime who is on trial in the court.

17. As a result of the aforesaid discussion, we find that the prosecutrix has made a truthful statement and the prosecution has established the case against the respondents beyond every reasonable doubt. The trial court fell in error in acquitting them of the charges levelled against them. The appreciation of evidence by the trial court is not only unreasonable but perverse. The conclusions arrived at by the trial court are untenable and in the established facts and circumstances of the case, the view expressed by it is not a possible view. We, accordingly, set aside the judgment of the trial court and convict all the three respondents for offences under Sections 363/366/368 and 376 IPC. So far as the sentence is concerned, the court has to strike a just balance. In this case the occurrence took place on 30-3-1984 (more than 11 years ago). The respondents were aged between 21-24 years of age at the time when the offence was committed. We are informed that the respondents have not been involved in any other offence after they were acquitted by the trial court on 1-6-1985, more than a decade ago. All the respondents as well as the prosecutrix must have by now got married and settled down in life. These are some of the factors which we need to take into consideration while imposing an appropriate sentence on the respondents. We accordingly sentence the respondents for the offence under Section 376 IPC to undergo five years' RI each and to pay a fine of Rs 5000 each and in default of payment of fine to 1 year's RI each. For the offence under Section 363 IPC we sentence them to undergo three years' RI each but impose no separate sentence for the offence under Sections 366/368 IPC. The substantive sentences of imprisonment shall, however, run concurrently.

18. This Court, in *Delhi Domestic Working Women's Forum* v. *Union of India*[2], had suggested, on the formulation of a scheme, that at the time of conviction of a person found guilty of having committed the offence of rape, the court shall award compensation.

19. In this case, we have, while convicting the respondents, imposed, for reasons already set out above, the sentence of 5 years' RI with fine of Rs 5000 and in default of payment of fine further RI for one year on each of the respondents for the offence under Section 376 IPC. Therefore, we do not, in the instant case, for those very reasons, consider it desirable to award any

compensation, in addition to the fine already imposed, particularly as no scheme also appears to have been drawn up as yet.

20. Before parting with the case, there is one other aspect which we would like to advert to.

21. Of late, crime against women in general and rape in particular is on the increase. It is an irony that while we are celebrating woman's rights in all spheres, we show little or no concern for her honour. It is a sad reflection on the attitude of indifference of the society towards the violation of human dignity of the victims of sex crimes. We must remember that a rapist not only violates the victim's privacy and personal integrity, but inevitably causes serious psychological as well as physical harm in the process. Rape is not merely a physical assault — it is often destructive of the whole personality of the victim. A murderer destroys the physical body of his victim, a rapist degrades the very soul of the helpless female. The courts, therefore, shoulder a great responsibility while trying an accused on charges of rape. They must deal with such cases with utmost sensitivity. The courts should examine the broader probabilities of a case and not get swayed by minor contradictions or insignificant discrepancies in the statement of the prosecutrix, which are not of a fatal nature, to throw out an otherwise reliable prosecution case. If evidence of the prosecutrix inspires confidence, it must be relied upon without seeking corroboration of her statement in material particulars. If for some reason the court finds it difficult to place implicit reliance on her testimony, it may look for evidence which may lend *assurance* to her testimony, short of corroboration required in the case of an accomplice. The testimony of the prosecutrix must be appreciated in the background of the entire case and the trial court must be alive to its responsibility and be sensitive while dealing with cases involving sexual molestations.

22. There has been lately, lot of criticism of the treatment of the victims of sexual assault in the court during their cross-examination. The provisions of Evidence Act regarding relevancy of facts notwithstanding, some defence counsel adopt the strategy of continual questioning of the prosecutrix as to the details of the rape. The victim is required to repeat again and again the details of the rape incident not so much as to bring out the facts on record or to test her credibility but to test her story for inconsistencies with a view to attempt to twist the interpretation of events given by her so as to make them appear

inconsistent with her allegations. The court, therefore, should not sit as a silent spectator while the victim of crime is being cross-examined by the defence. It must effectively control the recording of evidence in the court. While every latitude should be given to the accused to test the veracity of the prosecutrix and the credibility of her version through cross-examination, the court must also ensure that cross-examination is not made a means of harassment or causing humiliation to the victim of crime. A victim of rape, it must be remembered, has already undergone a traumatic experience and if she is made to repeat again and again, in unfamiliar surroundings what she had been subjected to, she may be too ashamed and even nervous or

confused to speak and her silence or a confused stray sentence may be wrongly interpreted as "discrepancies and contradictions" in her evidence.

23. The alarming frequency of crime against women led Parliament to enact Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 1983 (Act 43 of 1983) to make the law of rape more realistic. By the Amendment Act, Sections 375 and 376 were amended and certain more penal provisions were incorporated for punishing such custodians who molest a woman under their custody or care. Section 114-A was also added in the Evidence Act for drawing a conclusive presumption as to the absence of consent in certain prosecutions for rape, involving such custodians. Section 327 of the Code of Criminal Procedure which deals with the right of an accused to an open trial was also amended by addition of sub-sections 2 and 3 after renumbering the old section as sub-section (1). Sub-sections 2 and 3 of Section 327 CrPC provide as follows:

"327. *Court to be open*.—

* * *

(2) Notwithstanding anything contained in sub-section (1), the inquiry into and trial of rape or an offence under Section 376, Section 376-A, Section 376-B, Section 376-C or Section 376-D of the Penal Code, 1860 shall be conducted *in camera*:

Provided that the presiding Judge may, if he thinks fit, or on an application made by either of the parties, allow any particular person to have access to, or be or remain in, the room or building used by the court.

(3) Where any proceedings are held under sub-section (2), it shall not be lawful for any person to print or publish any matter in relation to any such proceedings, except with the previous permission of the

court."

24. These two provisions are in the nature of exception to the general rule of an open trial. In spite of the amendment, however, it is seen that the trial courts either are not conscious of the amendment or do not realise its importance for hardly does one come across a case where the inquiry and trial of a rape case has been conducted by the court in camera. The expression that the inquiry into and trial of rape "shall be conducted in camera" as occurring in sub-section (2) of Section 327 CrPC is not only significant but very important. It casts a *duty* on the court to conduct the trial of rape cases etc. invariably "in camera". The courts are obliged to act in furtherance of the intention expressed by the legislature and not to ignore its mandate and must invariably take recourse to the provisions of Section 327(2) and (3) CrPC and hold the trial of rape cases in camera. It would enable the victim of crime to be a little comfortable and answer the questions with greater ease in not too familiar a surroundings. Trial in camera would not only be in keeping with the self-respect of the victim of crime and in tune with the legislative intent but is also likely to improve the quality of the evidence of a prosecutrix because she would not be so hesitant or bashful to depose frankly as she may be in an *open court*, under the gaze of public. The improved quality of her evidence would assist the courts in

arriving at the truth and sifting truth from falsehood. The High Courts would therefore be well-advised to draw the attention of the trial courts to the amended provisions of Section 327 CrPC and to impress upon the Presiding Officers to invariably hold the trial of rape cases in camera, rather than in the open court as envisaged by Section 327(2) CrPC. When trials are held in camera, it would not be lawful for any person to print or publish any matter in relation to the proceedings in the case, except with the previous permission of the court as envisaged by Section 327(3) CrPC. This would save any further embarrassment being caused to the victim of sex crime. Wherever possible, it may also be worth considering whether it would not be more desirable that the cases of sexual assaults on the females are tried by lady Judges, wherever available, so that the prosecutrix can make her statement with greater ease and assist the courts to properly discharge their duties, without allowing the truth to be sacrificed at the altar of rigid technicalities while appreciating evidence in such cases. The courts should, as far as possible, avoid disclosing the name of the prosecutrix in their orders to save further embarrassment to the victim of sex

crime. The anonymity of the victim of the crime must be maintained as far as possible throughout. In the present case, the trial court has repeatedly used the name of the victim in its order under appeal, when it could have just referred to her as the prosecutrix. We need say no more on this aspect and hope that the trial courts would take recourse to the provisions of Sections 327(2) and (3) CrPC liberally. Trial of rape cases *in camera* should be the rule and an *open trial* in such cases an exception.

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† From the Judgment and Order dated 1-6-1985 of the Additional Judge, Special Court, Ludhiana in Sessions Case No. 69/51 of 1984 and Trial No. 56 of 1985

[1] (1990) 1 SCC 550 : 1990 SCC (Cri) 210

[2] (1995) 1 SCC 14 : 1995 SCC (Cri) 7