

Press Coverage of Pritam Singh's Rape Case: A Case Study
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Introduction

The involvement of Pritam Singh in sexually transgressive acts, particularly that of rape, incest and paedophilia had fuelled public resentment which consequently led to his conviction. Accused of raping his two underaged daughters on numerous occasions over a period of time, Pritam Singh exemplifies the classical violation of trust and responsibility of a father towards his daughters. The focus is on Pritam Singh and his heinous crimes as the defence counsel negotiates his way through the minefield of public censure and legal prosecution.

Against this background, I will examine the series of events that led to his short-lived acquittal and eventual conviction as reported in the local daily, *the Star* and the Internet site *quicklaw.com*. Perhaps, more importantly, I will investigate how the events, the rapist and the victims are represented by the press, the defence counsel, the prosecution and the judges.

An in-depth examination of the news reports reveals an interesting paradox: the news reports reproduce the discourses of child sexual abuse and legitimizes certain myths of rape. The former functions to produce public resentment and revulsion towards the perpetrator and the crime whilst the latter endorses prevailing assumptions of rape.

These discourses and myths are covertly embedded in the linguistic structures that are used by the newspapers and the web-site. Such implicit strategies or linguistic devices are deemed necessary for the effectiveness of the ideological working of language. As van Dijk (1997) aptly points out, informed readers are less easily swayed by overt and blatant persecution because they are aware that such linguistic devices are equipped with "strategies of resisting persuasive messages" (p. 41).

Identification of the Rapist and the Rape Victims by the Press

The news reports are replete with references to the rapist's occupation as a bus driver or lorry driver. This helps to invoke in the reader's mind the script of a rough, rugged, and poorly educated man whose reliability and moral reasoning are found wanting and who would easily succumb to his lust and sexual desire, hence both pandering to and perpetuating the rape myth of a fiendish attacker. Incidentally, at this moment in time, bus drivers are not perceived as trustworthy people by the larger public because of their culpability in road accidents and tragic loss of lives, and not forgetting their involvement in rapes and abductions (based on past reports in the newspapers). The following table fleshes out some of the utterances with reference to the rapist's occupation:

Table 1: Identifying the rapist by his occupation

Utterances	Sources
1. <u>Bus driver</u> denies rape charges (headlined)	Star 16.7.98
2. A 43-year-old <u>bus driver</u> claimed trial ...	Star 16.7.98
3. A <u>bus driver</u> threatened his 14-year-old daughter ...	Star 4.2.99
4. A <u>bus driver</u> was jailed 15 years ...	Star 4.7.00
5. A <u>bus driver</u> escaped a 15-year jail term and at least 5 strikes of the rotan ...	Star 15.2.01
6. A <u>bus driver</u> was ordered by a Sessions Court yesterday to enter his defence ...	Star 5.7.01
7. <u>Bus driver</u> acquitted of raping daughter (headlined)	Star 4.3.03
8. <u>Bus driver</u> gets 20 years for raping daughter (headlined)	quicklaw.com 26.2.04

The press' constant reference to the tender age of both victims and the disparate chasm in terms of age between the rape survivors and the rapist serve as a reminder to the readers of the seriousness of the nature of the transgression and crime i.e. paedophilia. As Caldas-Courthard (1996) posits, "the age information is ideologically interesting ... because age here is attached to transgression" (p. 259).

Furthermore, as Clark (1992: 213) argues the age information of the child rape survivors is important as it helps readers to imagine their smallness in size, fragility, innocence and vulnerability, hence drawing the readers' sympathy towards their suffering and at the same time, magnifying the attacker's cruelty and heartlessness. Clearly, this will help to contribute to the manufacturing of public revulsion and moral judgement.

Table 2: Highlighting the age of the rapist, the rape victims and the wide age gap

Utterances	Sources
1. A <u>43-year-old</u> bus driver claimed trial ... to raping his two daughters, now age <u>14</u> and <u>19</u> .	Star 16.7.98
2. A bus driver threatened his <u>14-year-old</u> daughter ...	Star 4.2.99
3. His eldest daughter, a <u>19-year-old</u> bank clerk ...	Star 4.2.99
4. ... he was found guilty of raping his <u>17-year-old</u> daughter in 1997.	Star 14.7.00
5. ... the <u>44-year-old</u> father ...	Star 14.7.00
6. ... raping his <u>15-year-old</u> daughter between 1993 and April 1998.	Star 14.7.00
7. ... ordered the <u>45-year-old</u> man to be acquitted and discharged.	Star 15.2.01
8. ... raping his eldest daughter, now <u>21</u> ...	Star 15.2.01
9. ... raping his younger daughter, now <u>17</u> ...	Star 15.2.01
10. ... raping his <u>17-year-old</u> daughter at their house ...	Star 5.7.01
11. The accused, <u>45</u> ...	Star 5.7.01

12. ... raping his eldest daughter, now <u>21</u> ...	Star 5.7.01
13. Pritam Singh, <u>53</u> ...	Star 4.3.03
14. ... the girl, who is now <u>17</u> ...	Star 4.3.03
15. ... the prosecution's appeal against the <u>49-year-old</u> man's acquittal ...	Star 26.2.04
16. ... raping one of his daughters, who is now <u>19</u> .	Star 26.2.04
17. A <u>49-year-old</u> bus driver ...	quicklaw.com 26.2.04
18. ... his <u>11-year-old</u> daughter ...	quicklaw.com 26.2.04

Central to the case is the issue of violation of trust and responsibility of a father towards his daughters as echoed in the proliferation of kinship terms in the news reports. The identification of the relationship between the rapist and the rape survivors as that between father and daughters is indicative of a form of naming which, according to Clark (1992), serves as “a powerful ideological tool” (p. 209) and conveyor of blame.

Embedded in these names is a script of sexual unavailability involving a fiendish rapist (i.e. the father) attacking ‘genuine’ and ‘unavailable’ females (i.e. his underaged daughters) (Clark, 1992: 211). Such linguistic devices help to form in the readers mind the perception of the rape as incest and this produces empathy for the survivor who must have suffered great pain and feelings of guilt and shame which, as scholarly studies have shown, most incest survivors have had to struggle with and endure over a long period of time. As a consequence, public revulsion for the rapist will soon turn to outrage as he is portrayed as someone who is not repentant of his crimes.

Table 3: Identifying the relationship between the rapist and the rape victims in kinship terms

Utterances	Sources
1. He denied raping his <u>younger daughter</u> between 1993 and April this year.	Star 16.7.98
2. The man was charged in another court with raping his <u>elder daughter</u> between 1989 and June last year.	Star 16.7.98
3. The girls' <u>father</u> was charged with raping his 14-year-old <u>daughter</u> at his house in Nibong Tebal ...	Star 4.2.99
4. He also faces two other charges of raping his 19-year-old <u>daughter</u> ...	Star 4.2.99
5. Man gets 15 years for raping <u>daughter</u> (headlined)	Star 14.7.00
6. ... the 44-year-old <u>father</u> had the gall to rape his own <u>daughter</u> .	Star 14.7.00
7. A Butterworth Sessions Court had on July 13 found the man guilty of raping his <u>eldest daughter</u> ...	Star 15.2.01
8. The accused was found guilty by the Butterworth Sessions Court on July 13 last year of raping his <u>eldest daughter</u> ...	Star 5.7.01
9. Bus driver acquitted of raping <u>daughter</u> (headlined)	Star 4.3.03

10. Maximum for rapist <u>dad</u> (headlined)	Star 26.2.04
11. Bus driver gets 20 years for raping <u>daughter</u> (headlined)	quicklaw.com 26.2.04

The press' sympathetic portrayal of the rape survivors is reflected in the proliferation of temporal references and frequencies of the rape crime, hence underscoring the monstrosity of the crime committed over a period of time. This serves to highlight the rapist's violation of his authority and abuse of power as a father in taking advantage of the vulnerability and dependency of his daughters. As Ward and Martin (as cited in Clark 1992) point out,

violence from someone known will probably be endured over a period of time, access to the victim is usually unlimited, and the after-effects are harder to recover from because a trust has been violated and the victim is less likely to confide in others and, if she does, is less likely to be believed. (p. 224)

Ultimately, such revelation will certainly ignite outrage from the readers. The following table reproduces some of the utterances containing such temporal references:

Table 4: Time references to and frequencies of the rape crime

Utterances	Sources
1. The man is alleged to have committed the offences at his house in Nibong Tebal <u>over the past few years</u> .	Star 16.7.98
2. ... raping his younger daughter <u>between 1993 and April this year</u> .	Star 16.7.98
3. ... raping his elder daughter <u>between 1989 and June last year</u> .	Star 16.7.98
4. ... raping the same girl (the elder daughter) <u>on an unknown date in July last year</u> .	Star 16.7.98
5. ... raping his 14-year-old daughter at his house in Nibong Tebal <u>between 1993 and April last year</u> .	Star 4.2.99
6. ... raping his 19-year-old daughter <u>between 1989 and June last year and on an unknown date in July last year</u> .	Star 4.2.99
7. "When I asked my sister, she told me that our father had been raping her <u>since she was in Standard Three and the last time was sometime in May last year</u> ..."	Star 4.2.99
8. "She also told me that <u>most of the time</u> , he would rape her when our mother was out ..."	Star 4.2.99
9. ... raping his 15-year-old daughter <u>between 1993 and April 1998</u> .	Star 14.7.00
10. ... raping the girl at the same place <u>between 1989 and May 1997</u> .	Star 15.2.01
11. ... raping his younger daughter, now 17, at the same house <u>between 1993 and April 1998</u> .	Star 15.2.01
12. ... raping the girl at their house ... <u>between 1993 and</u>	Star 5.7.01

<u>April 1998.</u>	
13. ... raping his then nine-year-old daughter <u>between 1995 and 1998.</u>	Star 4.3.03
14. Pritam Singh, 53, was alleged to have raped the girl ... on <u>different occasions between 1995 and 1998.</u>	Star 4.3.03
15. "... A father would give his life to protect his child against rape, and here you have <u>consistently</u> been raping your daughter ..."	Star 26.2.04
16. "... he <u>systematically and consistently</u> raped his own daughter..."	Star 26.2.04

The assignment of agentive role and affected role to the rapist and rape survivors respectively - both directly and indirectly - in the form of material action processes and the deployment of verbs that connote violence and acts of intimidation such as "rape", "threatened", "kill" and "spoil" are testament to the press' sympathetic reading of the rape crime in which the press acknowledges the guilt and blame of the rapist in no uncertain terms. This ultimately serves to draw public sympathy for the rape survivor's and at the same time, ignite public outrage at the cruelty and heartlessness of the rapist. The following table fleshes out some of the utterances containing such material processes:

Table 5: Representing the father as perpetrator and the daughters as victims with the deployment of violent verbs in material processes

Utterances	Sources
1. <u>The man</u> was charged with ... raping <i>his daughter</i> ...	Star 16.7.98
2. <u>A bus driver</u> threatened <i>his 14-year-old daughter</i> that <u>he would kill</u> her mother and <i>younger siblings</i> if she disclosed that <u>he raped</u> <i>her</i> ...	Star 4.2.99
3. ... <u>their father</u> also threatened to expose the matter to her (the younger daughter) future husband.	Star 4.2.99
4. "When I asked my sister, she told me that <u>our father</u> had been raping <i>her</i> since she was in Standard Three..."	Star 4.2.99
5. ... <u>he would rape</u> <i>her</i> when our mother was out ...	Star 4.2.99
6. <u>The man</u> had raped <i>his daughter</i> at a house in Jalan Kelidi ...	Star 14.7.00
7. ... <u>the same man</u> , charged with raping <i>his younger daughter</i> ...	Star 15.2.01
8. <u>The accused</u> was found guilty ... of raping <i>his eldest daughter</i> ...	Star 5.7.01
9. <u>Pritam Singh</u> , 53, was alleged to have raped <i>the girl</i> ...	Star 4.3.03
10. "... A father would give his life to protect his child against rape, and yet <u>you</u> have consistently been raping <i>your daughter</i> ..."	Star 26.2.04
11. "... <u>he</u> systematically and consistently raped <i>his own daughter</i> ..."	Star 26.2.04
12. ... (the High Court judge) rebuked <u>the father</u> for his conduct which he said had spoilt <i>the young girl's life</i> ...	quicklaw.com 26.2.04

- Key:
1. Underlined words indicate that the rapist occupies the agentive role.
 2. Italicised words indicate that the rape survivors occupy the affected role.
 3. Words in bold are verbs that connote violence or acts of intimidation.

Interestingly, the rape survivors are not dehumanised or objectified in the press reports as is the case in other rape reports (for eg Norita Samsudin). On the contrary, they are granted voice and agency as they are quoted by the newspapers concerned and as Caldas-Coulthard (1996) observes, “the use of the quote ... is a strategy of authorial detachment and approximation of reader and character ...” (p. 258). Such vivid first-hand account of the crime by the survivors contributes to drawing public sympathy for them.

Table 6: Quoting the rape victims

Utterances	Sources
1. “When I asked my sister why she had not complained to anyone regarding the alleged rape, she said she was threatened by our father and because he had also done the same thing to me,” she (the eldest daughter) said in her evidence-in-chief ...	Star 4.2.99
2. “He said if I refused to return, my sister would be his victim. He also mentioned that if I failed to get back, he would do the same to her as what he had done to me,” she (the eldest daughter) said.	Star 4.2.99
3. “When I asked my sister, she told me that our father had been raping her since she was in Standard Three and that the last time was sometime in May last year. She also told me that most of the time, he would rape her when our mother was out of the house,” she (the eldest daughter) said.	Star 4.2.99

Representation of the Rapist and the Rape Victim by the Session Court Judge, the High Court Judge and the Defence Counsel: The Case of the Elder Daughter

In the case involving the elder daughter, the Sessions Court judge delivers a straight-forward judgment convicting the rapist of the heinous crime of rape, making references to the sexual transgression and violation of trust and responsibility of a father towards his daughter, hence serving justice to the rape victim.

Table 7: Grounds for convicting the rapist by the Sessions Court judge

Utterances	Sources
1. A lorry driver was jailed 15 years and ordered to be whipped 5 times after he was found guilty of raping his 17-year-old daughter in 1997.	Star 14.7.00
2. Sessions Court judge ... who described the crime as heinous, said the 44-year-old father had the gall to rape his own daughter. He said the defence had failed to cast doubt on the prosecution’s case.	Star 14.7.00

In mitigating the sentence, the defence counsel attempts to draw sympathy for the rapist by highlighting his ill health and otherwise clean criminal record, hence portraying the rapist as self-suffering and a victim of circumstance.

Table 8: Defence counsel highlighting the rapist’s ill health

Utterances	Sources
1. In mitigation, (defence) counsel ... said his client was a <u>first offender</u> and that he was suffering from <u>heart and kidney ailments</u> .	Star 14.7.00

In his subsequent appeal to the High Court, the defence counsel peddles a script of a confused rape survivor lacking in credibility, hence casting doubts over her testimony and her one-year delay in reporting the crime. Such argument speaks volumes of either the defence counsel’s ignorance of or refusal to acknowledge the dynamics between rapist and rape victim, more so when the element of fear and intimidation are present in the case of a minor incest survivor who occupies a powerless position.

Table 9: Defence counsel representing the rape victim as confused and lacking credibility

Utterances	Sources
1. (The defence counsel said that) ... there was no corroborative evidence ... and the defence had managed to raise <u>reasonable doubt</u> .	Star 15.2.01
2. (The defence counsel) ... said there were <u>inconsistencies</u> between the girl’s testimony and that of the eyewitness, her younger sister.	Star 15.2.01
3. (The defence counsel) ... also said the girl had not given any reason why she only lodged the police report a year after the alleged incident.	Star 15.2.01

Despite the mounting evidence against the rapist, the gravity of the crime and the monstrosity of the transgression, the High Court judge buys the script of a confused victim lacking in credibility as promoted by the defence counsel, hence overturning the earlier ruling of the Sessions Court judge and denying the rape victim justice.

Table 10: Grounds for acquitting the rapist by the High Court judge

Utterances	Sources
1. A bus driver escaped a 15-year jail term and at least 5 strokes of the rotan when a High Court yesterday allowed his appeal ...	Star 15.2.01
2. “From the evidence in this case, I find that <u>several doubts</u> have been raised as to his guilt and conviction,” said the High	Star 15.2.01

<p>Court judge.</p> <p>3. “The Sessions Court judge had erred in evaluating the evidence and in making his finding,” said the High Court judge.</p>	<p>Star 15.2.01</p>
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Representation of the Rapist and the Rape Victim by the Session Court Judge, the High Court Judge, the Prosecution and the Defence Counsel: The Case of the Younger Daughter

In the legal tussle involving the younger daughter, on the other hand, the Sessions Court judge delivers a favourable judgment to the rapist, a judgment that is premised on the victim’s lack of credibility as the judge deems the victim’s testimony “not credit worthy” despite the gravity of the offence.

Table 11: Grounds for acquitting the rapist by the Sessions Court judge

Utterances	Sources
<p>1. Sessions judge ... in acquitting and discharging Pritam Singh ... said the prosecution <u>had failed to prove</u> a case against the accused.</p>	<p>Star 4.3.03</p>
<p>2. (Sessions Court judge) ... said the complainant’s testimony was <u>not credit worthy</u> and there was no independent corroborative evidence to support the girl’s testimony.</p>	<p>Star 4.3.03</p>

However, the rapist’s euphoria is short-lived as the High Court judge subsequently overrules the Sessions Court’s acquittal of the rapist and instead slaps him with a sentence of “20 years’ jail and 15 strokes of the rotan” for the crime. The High Court judge’s argument as presented in the following table demonstrates a high degree of enlightenment, neutrality, objectivity and understanding of the dynamics between rapist and rape victim, especially one that involves a minor and a family member.

Table 12: Grounds for convicting the rapist by the High Court judge

Utterances	Sources
<p>1. Rape is a most <u>heinous crime</u>, more so when a father commits it, said a High Court judge in sentencing a bus driver to 20 years’ jail and 15 strokes of the rotan for the offence.</p>	<p>Star 26.2.04</p>
<p>2. “A father gives life to a child and he should protect the child with his own life. A father would give his life to protect his child against rape, and yet here you <u>have been consistently been raping</u> your daughter,” (said the High Court judge).</p>	<p>Star 26.2.04</p>
<p>3. “Your <u>lust</u> has no boundaries, no limits. You <u>have spoilt</u> this young girl’s life,” (said the High Court judge).</p>	<p>Star 26.2.04</p>

4. “Your counsel has spoken of your various ailments. You must indeed be a strong man to <u>consistently rape</u> your daughter despite these ailments,” (said the High Court judge).	Star 26.2.04
5. “I find the Sessions judge wrong because the girl’s <u>evidence was very clear</u> that he <u>systematically and consistently raped</u> his own daughter,” (said the High court judge).	Star 26.2.04
6. “She had given exact descriptions of what he had done to her, which no child at such a tender age would have been able to recall and relate with such graphic details if it was not the <u>truth</u> ,” (said the High Court judge).	Star 26.2.04
7. “I see <u>no reason to disbelieve her evidence</u> . I find you guilty as charged,” (said the High Court judge).	Star 26.2.04

Although justice finally prevails for the younger daughter, no amount of punishment will ever be able to erase the emotional and physical scar that she has to endure for the rest of her life. In this regard, the prosecution presses for the maximum sentence as a deterrent to future transgressors and offenders of such heinous crime.

Table 13: Prosecution pressing for maximum sentence

Utterances	Sources
1. In pressing for a deterrent sentence, DPP ... urged the court to give due consideration to the fact that incest involved <u>public interest</u> of the highest degree.	Star 26.2.04
2. “The state demands no less than the <u>maximum sentence</u> . No doubt, we sympathise with him but the extent of the offence that he had committed was <u>disgusting</u> ,” (said the prosecution).	Star 26.2.04

In mitigating the sentence, the defence counsel invokes a script of an ailing man suffering from a host of diseases with the intention of mitigating the rapist’s culpability and drawing sympathy to his suffering, a plea that is rightfully rejected by the High Court judge.

Table 14: Defence counsel attempting to mitigate the sentence

Utterances	Sources
1. In mitigation, (defence) ... counsel ... said the man, who now lives with his son, suffered from <u>high blood pressure, diabetes and kidney problems</u> .	Star 26.2.04

Responding to such argument, the High Court judge exposes the glaring disjunction between the rapist’s supposed ill health and his ability in raping his daughters “systematically” and “consistently”, hence stripping the rapist of his pretence of ill health and unmasking the lustful animal in him.

Table 15: High Court judge exposing the rapist’s dubious claim of ill health

Utterances	Sources
1. “Your counsel has spoken of your various ailments. You must indeed be a strong man to consistently rape your daughter despite these ailments,” (said the High Court judge).	Star 26.2.04

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the elder daughter is denied justice, the case of the younger daughter concludes with the conviction of the rapist father. The outcome of the former is contingent on the defence counsel’s successful peddling of a script of a non-genuine victim whose credibility is questionable. However, such unfortunate outcome does not alter the fact that “eighty per cent of sex crimes against children are by attackers well known to them and fifty percent are by their father” (Ward as cited in Clark, 1992: 224). Such incestuous crime bears testimony to the blatant violation of the sacred trust and responsibility of a father towards his daughters. Although the perpetrator may have escaped conviction through clever manoeuvring by his defence counsel in the case involving his elder daughter, his transgressive behaviour ultimately leads to social resentment, public censure and punishment.

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