

Vigilante justice draws praise after gang rape in Indian city

HYDERABAD, INDIA

BY JEFFREY GETTLEMAN

All day, every day, at a certain point along a highway leading out of Hyderabad, the technology hub of India, people stop their cars and get out to peer over the guardrail.

It was here, under a highway bridge, that four men set fire to the body of a young veterinarian after they gang raped and suffocated her a few weeks ago in a case that horrified the country.

Nearby is another likely crime scene of note: In the green fields that gently roll away from the highway stands a ring of yellow police tape where the police gunned down the four accused men. The police say there was a shootout, and that they killed the men in self-defense. But that is now under investigation, and most people around here seem to believe it was a straight-up case of extrajudicial killing.

None of this happened in an isolated part of India or in some tough, broken place. It happened on the busy outskirts of one of India's most up-and-coming cities.

Apple. Google. Facebook. Uber. All have big offices in Hyderabad. So does Amazon, which this year opened its largest office building in the world here, a futuristic campus with 15,000 employees.

The city, already a metropolis of around 10 million, is growing by leaps and bounds. It is famous for its spicy food, fancy shops, rich residents and good relations between Muslims and Hindus.

Many Muslims in Hyderabad have joined the protests sweeping the coun-

try over a new citizenship law that many Indians feel discriminates against Muslims in this Hindu-majority nation.

In the rape case, most Hyderabadis seem to believe that the police officers shot the suspects in cold blood and then placed guns in their hands. Still, many said it was the right thing to do. One crowd even showered police officers in rose petals.

"It was the need of the hour," said Akkineni Nagarjuna, a Hyderabad movie star. "Somebody had to put the fear of God in them."

The shootings have uncapped a wave of vigilante violence against other rape suspects. One was nearly lynched on his way to court in Indore.

Many Indians are so fed up with the courts — and it's not just that trials can drag on for years, but so often notorious criminals evade justice — that they crave swift and decisive punishment, however it comes.

"This is what I like about Hyderabad," said Akash Chaturvedi, the sales manager at an exotic car dealership in the city. "People here are direct. They take action. They hit their targets."

"I meet 20 to 25 people a day: politicians, bureaucrats, big businessmen, celebrities," he added, as he paused in front of a blue Lamborghini. "Not a single one is unhappy with the action that has taken place."

Cities everywhere contain jarring contradictions: misery and success, crime and erudition, grit and glitz, all stacked on top of each other. This is especially true in Hyderabad, a fast-changing place in southern India that is striving to be included on the list of the country's supercities, along with Delhi and Mumbai.

Centuries ago, Hyderabad was the



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Looking down at the site where the body of a young woman was burned after she was gang raped in Hyderabad, India. The four suspects were killed by the police.

seat of a vast Muslim kingdom that made a fortune from nearby diamond mines, producing some of history's biggest gems.

Today, strong infrastructure and business-friendly policies adopted by Hyderabad officials have attracted so many tech companies that an outlying part of the area is now called Cyberabad. That is where the bloodshed unfolded.

Adding to the suspicions of police foul play is that V.C. Sajjanar, Cyberabad's police commissioner, was the supervising officer in at least two other cases of suspects killed by the police. In each incident, the officers said they acted in self-defense.

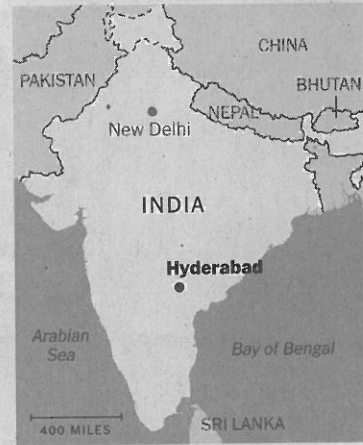
In this case, the police were under pressure. After the news broke that the

veterinarian had been raped and killed, protests erupted across India.

The outcry was not as seismic as what followed after a young woman was gang raped and fatally brutalized on a moving bus in New Delhi in 2012, but the incidents present disturbing parallels. In both, the young women were on professional tracks, and the weak link was having to rely on nighttime transport that left them vulnerable.

In the Delhi attack, a woman who was about to become a physiotherapist came out of a movie theater around 9:30 p.m. She needed a ride and accepted one from an off-duty bus with few passengers.

In Hyderabad, the 26-year-old veterinarian, whose name Indian officials



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have asked not to be disclosed, parked her motor scooter at a toll plaza outside a central district around 6 p.m. on Nov. 27. She grabbed a shared taxi to a mall about 10 miles away, a common practice to spare drivers a grueling scooter ride.

But she was being watched.

The police said that four men who worked on a freight truck — Mohammed Arif, Shiva Kumar, Jollu Naveen Kumar and Chintakunta Chenna Keshavulu — deflated her scooter's back tire right after she left. Then they fortified themselves with a couple of bottles of cheap Imperial Blue whiskey, and waited.

Some of the most widely publicized criminal cases in India have turned on rape and murder. Sexual violence experts say this is because many rapists feel that if they destroy the evidence, they will have a good chance of getting away with the crime.

According to the police, the veterinarian came back from the mall at 9:30

p.m., and when the group of men offered to help her with her flat tire, she sensed danger.

On her last phone call, to her sister, right before going with them, she said she was scared.

The men pulled her into a vacant lot. They raped her. She bled badly and fainted.

When she came to, Mr. Arif, the ring-leader, according to the police, decided to kill her, smothering her with his hands. The four dragged her body into their truck and drove off to the stretch of fields and highway where they set her on fire.

The police were able to use closed-circuit video footage to identify the truck, which led them to the suspects, and all four confessed, the police said.

They were in custody on Dec. 6 when the officers took them out of jail and back to the crime scene, at 3 a.m. The police said that they needed the men to re-enact the crime, and that two of the suspects grabbed officers' guns, provoking a shootout.

Several legal activists in Delhi have filed lawsuits against the police, saying the shooting amounted to a summary execution. And the families of two of the suspects said that they were minors.

But you would struggle to find any others in Hyderabad willing to take the dead men's side.

"Justice is good," said Minhaj Obaid, who works in a call center for Dell computers, as he stood on the highway bridge.

"And instant justice," he said, smiling, "is even better."

Hari Kumari contributed reporting from New Delhi, and S.M. Bilal from Hyderabad