

Grief and rage in India: making violence against women history?

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There was uproar in India at the brutal gang rape of a 23 year old student on her way home from the cinema. Can we harness the international attention to this case to demand that the world's leaders commit themselves to a policy of zero tolerance of violence against women ?



Protestors in central New Delhi.
Photo: Demotix / Jiti Chadha

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When the international community came together in 2000 to agree the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) that it would prioritize over the next 15 years, it did not include the issue of violence against women. Perhaps the problem did not appear sufficiently important or perhaps it was hoped that progress on the gender-related goals and targets that *were* adopted – education, labour market opportunities and political representation – would take care of the problem.

The horrific gang rape of a 23 year old para-medical student in Delhi on 16th December 2012 suggests that such hope is misplaced. Yes, the gender gap in education in India is closing. Yes, many more women are now in the labour force than ever before. And yes, political quotas and reservations have increased the percentage of women in elected office. But blocking the transformative potential of this evidence of progress is an age-old patriarchal system which regards women as inferior to men and its toxic interaction with the new global culture of consumerism and its relentless sexualisation of women's bodies.

The young woman who was raped had been one of the few from her village who had made it into college, she had promising professional career ahead of her and she was the citizen of a country with a long track record of democracy and increasing numbers of women elected into office. None of this was sufficient to protect her from a sexual assault the sheer ugly brutality of which has brought thousands of

horrified and grieving protestors onto the streets across the country.

Named 'Nirbhaya' ('without fear') by some of the press who, in an unusual show of sensitivity have not revealed her real name, the woman was returning home from the cinema with a male friend at 9 o'clock in the evening. They boarded a bus in the belief that it would take them closer to home. Instead her companion was beaten badly and she was subjected to an extended period of rape and violence that left her brutalized and unconscious. Their naked bodies were thrown out of the moving bus to be found by passersby. Nirbhaya recovered sufficiently to give a statement to the police but died on the 29th December. She was named 'fearless' because of the fight she put up against her attackers (she left teeth marks on at least one of their bodies), because of her determination that her attackers be brought to justice and because of her struggle to live, despite horrific injuries to her internal organs.



A vigil in Delhi. Photo: Demotix / Jiti Chadha

There are a number of reasons why I think that what is happening in India right now is important, not only for its citizens but for the rest of South Asia. We share a great deal of the same misogynistic culture and we all have our own shameful roll call of women who have paid the price for it. In Bangladesh, we remember 14 year old Yasmin, a young domestic trying to return to her parents in the village, picked up, gang-raped and murdered by three policemen; Seema travelling home with her boyfriend, was picked up by the police on grounds of suspicious behaviour, put into 'safe custody' in the police station where she was gang-raped by four policemen and died a few days later; Sima, a young college student who suffered daily sexual harassment at the hands of the hoodlums in her neighbourhood, found no support from the police in her area and killed herself to spare her parents further harassment. And on the December 21st of this year, a week after the Delhi case, a fourteen year old tribal girl was raped and killed by 3 Bengali settlers in the Rangamati hills of Bangladesh.

In Pakistan, there is Muktharan Mai, gang raped on the orders of council of elders in her village; Kainat Somroo, gang raped by local village thugs at the age of 13; Naseema Lubano, raped by the local landlord and his henchman. And in India, there is Mathura, a 16 year old tribal girl gang raped by the police in the police station even as her relatives who had come to file a complaint waited outside, not knowing what was happening; Bhanwari Devi, a lower caste woman gang raped by men from the upper castes for her temerity in challenging the practice of child marriage; Rameeza Bee, who was returning home at night with her husband, a rickshaw puller, was picked up by the police and raped while her husband was killed; Maya Tyagi, on her way back from a wedding with her husband, was stopped on the road by plainclothes policemen, stripped and paraded naked through the city bazaar and then raped in the police station. The list goes on, but it only names those women whose cases came to public attention. It is the tip of a very ugly iceberg whose hidden depths we know very little about.



A youth leader speaks at a Delhi protest.

Photo: Demotix / Jiti Chadha

So the first reason why what is happening in India right now is important for all of us in South Asia is that, in a region where women's movements have been fighting almost on their own on the issue of violence against women for so many decades, the sheer scale of the public response to the gang rape of Nirbhaya has been astonishing, moving and inspiring. If it can lead to lasting change in India, then perhaps it will lead to change in the rest of the region. But at the very least, it has seared the issue into the public consciousness and put it onto the public agenda. Certainly there have been vigils and demonstrations in solidarity with Nirbhaya in Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The second reason is the very visible presence of men. One of the most discouraging aspects of women's struggles for justice, not just in South Asia, but across the world, has been how few and far between have been the men prepared to stand up and be counted. Not this time. Men, mostly but not only young men, are speaking out in the press and taking their place alongside women on the streets. Such male support is critical. Without it, the question of sexual violence will remain ghettoized as a women's issue and efforts to eradicate it remain ineffective.

There are many theories floating around as to why, in a country with so many well publicized incidents of violence against women, it was this case that seems to have galvanized such large-scale public response. One theory points to the class dynamics of the case. A great deal of the sexual violence in India is perpetrated by men who hold positions of power against women in positions of structural subordination: by higher caste men against women from the 'untouchable' castes or tribal groups; by the police against women from poor households; by the army against women deemed to belong to the 'enemy' within - women in India's insurgency-hit areas such as Kashmir, Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand and the north east region. The ferocious brutality of the attack on Nirbhaya has revealed something frightening about the consequences of widening inequalities in a rapidly growing, modernizing and globalizing economy. This was violence perpetrated by men from the underclass of Delhi, men who will never share in the benefits of 'shining' India, against a woman who symbolized the country that India hopes to become.

The six men in question came from one of the squalid slum neighbourhoods of Delhi and there is little question that, had this or something like this not happened, they would spend their lives in the same or similar slums. The youngest of them has been living on the streets since the age of 13. They fit the face of the image of the rapist 'monster' in the public imagination in a way that rapists in the police force, the army and the upper castes do not. According to this theory, the scale of the response we are seeing is a manifestation of class outrage. The rage that her rapists enacted on the body of Nirbhaya is being met by an answering rage in those who now call for the death penalty or chemical castration of the rapists.

But this does not suffice to explain the demographics of the protestors, the way that the protest appears to have broken through class and gender barriers. I think there are different elements to such an explanation. One element is captured by the sentiment expressed in different words by many of the protestors: 'That girl could have been any one of us'. What happened to Nirbhaya could have happened to any of the thousands of young women currently attending university. They do not necessarily come from privileged backgrounds. Many, like Nirbhaya, come from humble backgrounds and have had to struggle to find a place in what the new India has to offer. Many, like Nirbhaya, are the first generation of women in their family to make it into college. In Nirbhaya's case, her father had to sell what little land he had in order to make this possible. In that sense, she was 'everywoman' for this generation of university students. Her very anonymity, what one writer has called her status as 'the unknown citizen', has allowed each person to see their own story in her life and death.

A second element is captured by the fact that India, except for its cosmopolitan elite, remains a highly gender-segregated society. Universities are one of the few places where men and women can interact as friends, as ordinary human beings doing ordinary things on a daily basis, something not easy to do in the highly charged nature of gender relations in most spheres of public life. Nirbhaya went that evening to see a film with a young man who, contrary to some newspaper reports, was a friend, not a lover, not a fiancé. While many of the young women demonstrating on the streets today could have been Nirbhaya, many of the men on the demonstrations know someone like her – as daughters, sisters, friends. What these men have learnt additionally from this case is that their presence cannot protect their friends, sisters, and daughters from what happened to Nirbhaya.

However, while students were the first out on the streets, and joined by women activists, many other women from different social backgrounds began to swell their numbers. Most women in India – in South Asia – feel vulnerable to sexual violence. Commenting on the large scale turn out by *aam aurat*, the ordinary women of India who do not take time off from their daily lives to march and protest, the Times of India said 'At the root of this unwonted outpouring is empathy. Women teachers, students, shopkeepers and homemakers alike find themselves in Nirbhaya's shoes every day. Their privileges are few and they chase their dreams in buses and autos, suffering a thousand indignities...'. These women have had to put up with being groped, leered at and often assaulted as they seek to go about their daily business. The brutal assault on Nirbhaya is just the extreme on this daily continuum of sexual harassment.

In addition, there are certain groups of women who are more vulnerable to such harassment by virtue of their identity or the work they do: for instance, the Delhi protests were joined by migrant women from the hill regions who come to work as domestics in the city, a group particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment, as well as by women activists from the north-east where the military stands accused of molesting and raping women.

Finally, there is a third aspect to the current response which I think holds out particular hope for all of us in South Asia. While many voices have been raised in India against the indifference, often collusion on the part of politicians (quite a few of them have rape charges pending against them), against the corruption and brutality of the police who are seen as part of the problem rather than the solution, against the justice system that has systematically failed the victims of rape (635 cases of rape registered in Delhi in 2012, only one conviction) and, of course, against the 'monsters', 'beasts' and 'demons' that perpetrate these atrocities, a recurring theme in the current response is the need for serious introspection.

The problem does not simply lie 'out there', 'the problem is us'. There is much talk of the collective mindset that has developed in a culture in which violence against women is not only widespread, not only condoned, but is frequently blamed on women themselves. When Nirbhaya boarded the bus with her companion, they were asked by one of their would-be rapists why they were out so late in the night. This was clearly not an expression of concern for her safety on the part of a kindly stranger. In retrospect, it can be seen more in the way of comment that she had only herself to blame for what came next.

We continue to hear the voices of misogyny speaking even as the country turns a troubled gaze inwards and acknowledges the need for vast behavioural change at the grassroots level. One of the most notorious statements has come from Abhijit Mukherjee, the son of the President of India and an elected MP who claimed that the women protesting on the streets had 'no contact with ground reality' and indeed were probably not students: 'These pretty women, dented and painted, who come for protests are not students. I have seen them speak on television, usually women of this age are not students'. He suggested that these women, who apparently frequently went to discotheques, were holding candles and protesting as a form of fashion statement.

His comments were slammed by many fellow MPs, disowned by his sister and later apologized for by Mukherjee himself, but not before the Shiv Sena, an extremist Hindu party, supported his statement, saying that he had merely said what most Indian men were thinking anyway, only his timing had been wrong. Then there is the leader of a caste panchayat in Haryana who declared that most rapes were fabricated, anyway; the elected Member of the BJP party in Rajasthan who called for a ban on skirts as a part of school uniforms as it attracted 'sharp and dirty glances and lewd comments'; and the opinion expressed by Khushwant Singh, one of India's leading writers, that rape had to be understood as the inability by men to control their libido so that they took their lust out on unwilling women.

Nor it is only men who subscribe to these misogynistic views. Women too, many of them in elected office, have also expressed them. According to Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal, 'rapes are happening because men and women are interacting too freely'. Of a woman who accepted a ride home from a pub in Calcutta and was then raped at gun point by five men, Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar, leader of the party in power in West Bengal, said, 'That was not a rape, that was a deal gone wrong'. Sheila Dixit, now Chief Minister of Delhi, once said of a female journalist who was murdered in Delhi that she should not have been so 'adventurous' as to be out on her own in the night.

While well-known Bollywood figures have joined the national protests, questions are being raised about the role of the film industry in promoting the sexualisation of culture. While kissing on screen is still rare, recent articles point out that there is a long tradition of heroes stalking, harassing and pressing their unwanted attentions on heroines but ending up getting the girl anyway. Rape scenes too have been part of the staple diet of Indian cinema, but becoming increasingly explicit over the years. And where once it was the lone 'vamp' in the film that flaunted her sexuality while the heroine exuded virtue, the vamp figure has all but vanished in today's films since it is now the scantily clad heroine who gyrates provocatively to the approval of leering crowds of men. In a society that remains highly segregated by gender, where sexual mores remain highly repressed, what messages do these images communicate to men about women and what they want?

Expressions and evidence of a misogynistic culture are so routine on the part of both men and women, so deeply woven into the societal fabric, that it would not be possible to exhaust even those that have surfaced since Nirbhaya's rape and death, but one more example is worth citing. The Hindustan Times reported on a survey carried out among men and women using public transport in the last week of 2012. 78% of women had been sexually harassed in the past year: of these, over 90% reported lewd comments and whistling; 69% reported groping and 69% reported forcible assault. 56% of the men believed that women had to learn to tolerate some level of sexual harassment. Similar percentages of women and men said men engaged in sexual harassment to feel powerful (40% and 44% respectively) but while 35% of women believed they did it to show off in front of their friends, only 18% of men agreed with this statement and while 18% of women believed men 'did it for fun', 30% of men agreed with this. Finally, 59% of men but just 14% of women agreed that 'most women invite harassment because of the way they dress and behave'.

I have dwelt at some length on the issue of culture and mind set because I think it is an important reason why violence against women has proved so difficult for feminists to get onto the public agenda. It is not clear why this particular gang rape was the one that has provoked so much grief and anger, but the question is whether this grief and anger can now be harnessed to bring about sustained change in the way that violence against women is dealt with by society. In India, there is a serious

debate going on about the kinds of measures that are likely to bring about such change, but the problem of violence against women, within the home and outside it, is not unique to India nor indeed to South Asia. It occurs in all countries, though some countries deal with it more effectively than others.

We are now looking ahead to the post-MDG era and discussions are taking place in various forums as to what the priority goals should be for the next phase. There are many new and burning issues jostling for attention: climate change and growing global inequalities, for example. But why can we not now at last turn our attention to an old problem that will not go away? Making zero tolerance on violence against women a central platform in post-MDG agenda would have, at the very least, a powerful symbolic impact. Given the long-standing culture of silence that surrounds violence against women, the fear and shame that so often silences its victims, the belief that it is men's prerogative to beat their wives, that women invite rape by their clothes and demeanour, a clear and uncompromising statement that such beliefs and behaviour will no longer be tolerated will help to show the problem for what it is: the denial of dignity and bodily integrity to half of humanity. For that statement to carry weight, it has to be made by those with the mandate and power to make change happen. If the world's leaders who came together in 2015 to discuss the post-MDG agenda committed themselves collectively, loudly and clearly to a policy of zero tolerance and put in place the enforcement mechanisms that demonstrated the seriousness of their commitment, women's rights activists across the world might finally be able to shame their governments into action. And if that happens, that as yet unnamed young woman whose terrible fate shook her country out of its apathy towards its female citizens may do the same thing for women in the rest of the world.

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