

Five issues raised by BBC 'India's Daughter' documentary

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Earlier this week, India's courts banned a BBC documentary about the 2012 gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh, a 23-year old medical student in Delhi. **Shakuntala Banaji** separates debates thrown up by the film, from those around gender violence in India to the discussion of violence against women in a wider context, and from the issue of orientalist perspectives in the western media to the question of whether the film should be shown while judicial procedures are still pending.



There are five separate issues that need to be disaggregated in relation to the furious debate now raging over India's ban on Leslee Udwin's BBC documentary 'India's Daughter', although they can and should be brought together and re-articulated at various points. Perhaps in an attempt to prevent demonstrations about rape from starting across the country, the [avowed reason](#) for banning this film is that it gives voice to one of the unrepentant rapists. Dozens of articles and thousands of comments flying around international print and electronic media suggest that the issue of free speech and censorship has almost overshadowed the issues of gender-based violence and protest against it. In many online comments, rape as a practice, Indian male attitudes, and Western disrespect of India are decontextualised. In this brief post, I cannot hope to do justice to all of the issues raised, or their cultural and academic histories. I merely hope to foreground how important perspectives that examine gender and violence at the intersection of class, geography, race and sexuality are, and to point towards ways forward. This is important for any of us who wish to work towards a world in which misogyny and rape, lynching and capital punishment, and racist stereotyping are rare and unusual phenomena.

1) The very pressing issue of vicious sexual, ethnic and gender violence and torture, including rapes of all kinds against children, women and men; and the ideologies and rhetorics (Hindutva/Caste/Wahabism/Salafism/Indian Patriotism/'Indian tradition', etc.) used to justify or disavow responsibility for them in India.

India's daughter raises issues about widespread and insidious processes and practices of gender discrimination, from sex-selective abortions, to sexual harassment, which are part of custom and practice and form the backdrop to more violent sexual crimes against women. The film is worth watching just for the first five minutes in which Jyoti's parents, a humble working couple, appear on screen, speak their memories even when words fail them, in Hindi, laying out minute by painful minute the life's work that she embodied for them as people and as parents. It is eminently clear that they loved her as an equal; that they negotiated with her ambitions humanely, generously; that the manner of her death has not changed their beliefs about their decision to treat her as an equal or about their feelings of love and respect for her. Here are two eminently sensible, calm, persuasive Indians, a woman and a man, who live in a conservative institutional social setting, telling parts of a very traumatic story. The everyday and familiar comments that interweave their narrative of love and loss – the throwaway comments from relatives about why they celebrated Jyoti's birth with sweets 'as if she were a boy'; the disapproval of their male relatives when they sold their small plot of ancestral land to fund their daughter's university degree, are all eminently familiar to me, as a researcher in issues of gender, sexuality and media in India, as they will be to so many others who have grown up across the country, or worked there. And I have no doubt that some audiences, watching closely, or through tears, will note the connections between this everyday misogyny and the horror which ended Jyoti's life. Audiences are not all the same. Some will watch with puerile hurt nationalist pride, stupefied disapproval of India (see [daily mail comments](#)) or blood-thirsty anti male rage; many will not.

2) The equally pressing issue of vicious sexual, gender, ethnic, racial, religious discrimination, violence and torture, including rape of all kinds, in different geographical and cultural contexts from Nigeria and Syria to Australia and the UK.

During [my research](#) on gender, sexual harassment and homophobia at the intersection of media and everyday life,

I've heard arguments about which types of girls get raped or molested from men and boys, young and old across the global south (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka) and across the UK, as well as from numerous women; and sometimes from girls 'slut shaming' each other or making homophobic comments which suggest that all non-heterosexuals endanger themselves. India has no premium on retrograde views about rape, gender and sexuality; in this case, India happens to be the geographical locus of the story. Rape happens to be its central conceit as the statistics at the very end of the film emphasise. And no media text can be expected to tackle every contextual issue. Nevertheless, the film would have been far more resonant and powerful, had the Indian context been linked creatively, even briefly, to wider histories of rape around the globe and in the subcontinent – in private, in marriage, in the streets, in police stations, in factories, in public, as a weapon of the colonisers, as a weapon of caste elites, as a weapon against religious minorities, amongst all-male cadres of Hindu chauvinist organisations, by members of the army, and during pogroms.

3) The frames, constraints and exigencies of media production in a quasi-neoliberal ratings-oriented media economy; namely, editorial decisions related to particular audiences and the decontextualisation of complex histories/content for the sake of brevity/narrative; the spectacularisation of bodies, crowds and events; weakened journalistic ethics and reflexivity.

Documentaries are not made in vacuums. In the absence of unlimited, or even limited creative budgets, they require a cutting edge 'pitch', financial backing, logistical support and ratings to justify the time and efforts of their directors. Without doubt *India's Daughter* is at points guilty of international journalistic malaise – sensational jump cut and segues, soft-focus on crowds, rhetorically loaded music which could just as well be from Bollywood as from the BBC. For instance, the commentary of the bus driver rapist is stretched across images of the slum houses in which the rapists lived suggests overtly that steroids, alcohol, a penchant for aggressive encounters, and male camaraderie were forged over years, and played out tragically for Jyoti; and perhaps, suggests to some that slums, with their cramped spaces, peeling walls, dirty gutters and lack of privacy are the places where psychosis is bred. But films, news broadcasts and documentaries made by Indians purportedly about 'terrorism' have led the way in this regard; the BBC has no monopoly on orientalism or on illogical ideological segues. We need higher regard for journalistic ethics across the board in such troubling and heinous circumstances, and deeper reflection on the ways in which even subtle inflections of sound and aesthetics can alter sociological perceptions.

4) The postcolonial/colonial history of orientalism which is as evident in academia as in journalism. An impulse which can lead to a disavowal of problems such as misogyny and homophobia amongst White communities, and to representations of 'the other' as essentially different and uncivilised, and with female 'others' as powerless victims rather than victims, participants, perpetrators and resisters.

This documentary, like all documentaries, is in some ways a work of fiction and its editing and sensational music speaks to this. It does try to include the repulsive views of 'educated' men such as the defence lawyers. But still, problematically, its narrative ends up *othering certain types of Indian men*, while distancing Indian political elites, the middle and upper classes, and everyone else from worldviews in which: women who go out at night are courting rape; women who do not cover themselves are 'bad'; women who have male friends are 'fair game'; women who roll bidis, wash floors or work in mines are 'worth' less airtime, life for life. The overlaying to one of Jyoti's rapists' misogynist commentary from his jail cell with brief shots of film posters of women's bodies on walls, and working-class men's leering faces, apparently examining these posters, establishes a narrative of subaltern Indian male sexual perversion which has both classist and orientalist overtones. And yes, the film is also responsible, unlike the warm and grieving parents captured at the beginning and end, of suggesting – not arguing outright, but simply connoting, hinting, implying – that Jyoti, the victim, was a hardworking, English-speaking graduate assaulted by unreformed working class Indian men.

5) Violence, capital punishment and criminal justice; the proportionality of response to rape, protections for both perpetrators and those who have suffered violence, avoidance of lynching and other mob-related behaviours.

Should the film have been banned? No. I do not think so. If anything, that single act will ensure that it is watched widely, and not necessarily by those who will learn from or gain from watching it. Was it necessary to screen the film right now? Right in the middle of the judicial appeal process of the rapists in the documentary? After all, lives have been lost, but other lives are also at stake; chillingly underlined in wider media by Jyoti's mother's call for swifter capital punishment. There are merits in the points made by this [the writer](#) who argues that the significance of judicial ethics and legal context do not appear to weigh as heavily in the mind of the BBC and Udwin in relation to India as these issues might in relation to Western cases. For instance imagine an equally painful and sensational film linking British colonial racist violence to contemporary race discrimination and hate crime in the UK. Imagine this released on the eve of the appeal or trial of the murderers of young London student, [Stephen Lawrence](#). Newspapers were criticised for revealing the names of the suspects at the time. Questions of law, ethics, prejudice and justice raised.

But should the story of Jyoti and of her killers be told? Yes, I believe it should, loud and clear, again and again, by Leslee Udwin, herself a rape survivor, by Indian journalists, by others with similar stories, male or female, from the global north or the global south; some of these retelling will hopefully be more nuanced; some will contest Udwin's; some will raise issues about the humanity and ethics of capital punishment; some will not. As some [feminist campaigners](#) in India have argued, and showbiz commentator [Shoba De](#) has emphasised, it would not be a bad thing if films like this were shown and discussed on college curricula. It's an imperfect film about a desperately sad and violent event in a longstanding national context of hostility and violence towards women, children, gay people, poor people, of every religion, and it should be seen as part of a conversation rather than the beginning or end of one.

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Cover image: Screenshot from [India's Daughter](#) documentary.

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