

“India has become very cruel towards its women” – Kishwar Desai

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2013-6-7

Novelist and former journalist Kishwar Desai explains how her new book, “The Sea of Innocence”, engages with the contemporary reality of gender-based violence in India.

More than five months have passed since the brutal gang rape of a student in Delhi, and the trial drags on in a ‘fast’ track court in India’s capital. It doesn’t seem right, does it? It took just two awful hours to extinguish the dreams and hopes of an extremely aspirational young woman, and we are still awaiting justice for her very public rape and murder.

In the meantime, one of the accused rapists has [allegedly been murdered](#) in jail, another has been declared a juvenile, and no one can predict the final verdict. The more cynical have assumed that the judgement will be announced when the government needs to distract the public from its current record of scams, or whenever it is politically convenient—because nothing is straightforward when rape cases are dealt with in India.

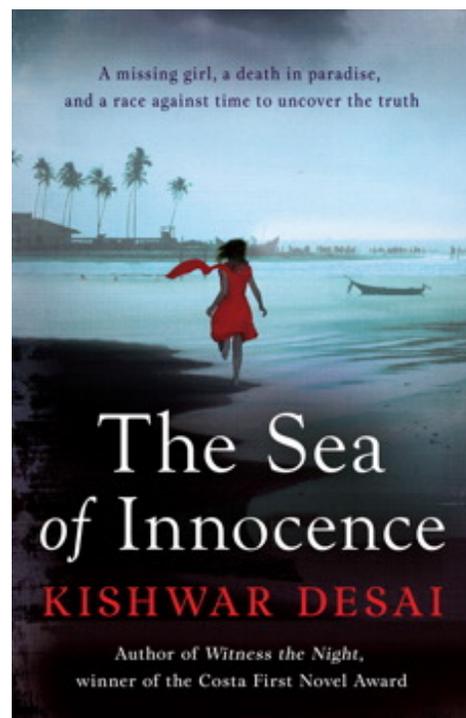
This is what I discovered when I started research around two years ago on my novel “[The Sea of Innocence](#)”, which deals with rape and sexual violence. These issues, linked closely to the declining status of Indian women, had troubled me for a long time: why was the Indian state silent while its women were being attacked, within families and out on the streets? Where was the justice and the sympathy? And why didn’t Indian women speak out more strongly against what was being done to them?

I had started asking these questions earlier, while working on my first novel, “Witness the Night” (2009), in which I had explored – in a great rage, I must confess – the atrocious tradition of female foeticide and infanticide widely practiced in India. There were prohibitory laws, but no one ensured that these were followed. During the course of my research, I met a woman who had been given an overdose of opium as a child in order to kill her; she had survived, learning of her intended fate only as a traumatised teenager. “Witness the Night” was fiction, but it became her story of bewilderment and grief, of being brought up in a family and a country that thought her to be worthless, and better dead.

When the book was launched (before the [2011 census](#), which proved yet again that [gendercide](#) had been taking place) I toured India and the UK talking to people about India’s gender imbalance and the harm it was inflicting on relations between men and women.

Most people refused to take my concerns seriously; wasn’t I being just a little sensational? Sadly, [increasing gender-based and sexual violence](#), including the death of the young gang-rape victim in Delhi, proves again that women are vulnerable, particularly in northern India. We are also becoming increasingly aware that this could be a consequence of men growing up without women, and treating them like pieces of meat when they do encounter them.

After all, when a family turns into a mob against its own baby girls – and sanctions their killing before or after birth – why would anyone object if the girls who are allowed to grow up are burnt for dowry, have acid flung on them, are



raped, or abandoned as old women in places like Varanasi? India has become very cruel towards its women, and while writing “The Sea of Innocence” and “[Origins of Love](#)” (another gender-centric book in the series, dealing with India’s surrogacy industry), I realised, yet again that only the very few (and very fortunate) Indian women with some kind of economic status were respected. The rest were disposable.

Like the novels that preceded it, “The Sea of Innocence” is a research-based book. It is set in Goa because I want to demolish the myth that rapes don’t happen in cosmopolitan places: they do. Even though Goa is in some ways a modern state – with a wonderful mix of international visitors – it also has a record of startling and horrific gender-based crimes, some of which have never been solved. This includes, of course, the [Scarlett Keeling case](#), which is probably the best known. But I also examined other cases across the country, and found common threads emerging. Firstly, there was a disturbing increase in the number of gang rapes taking place—perhaps another ghastly consequence of gendercide. Secondly, the age of the victim appeared to be getting younger and younger. Thirdly, rapists increasing sought to get rid of their victim either by burning or murdering her, or in some other way.

Of course, horrible gang rapes have occurred in the more feudal parts of India, where upper-caste men have been able to harass or rape women from the lower castes with impunity. Some of these patriarchal attitudes are now manifest in urban areas as well, and those in positions of power, especially the police, feel inclined to take on the mantle of ‘upper castes’ and impose their will upon the vulnerable and helpless. There are far too many cases in which the police have been complicit—both as the perpetrator of sexual violence and also as the entity that hushes it up. We saw the latter clearly when the horrible rape of a five-year-old in Delhi came to light last month: the police had tried to [conceal the rape](#) by bribing the poor parents with Rs. 2,000.

“The Sea of Innocence” is written like a crime thriller, but it raises many of these issues through the investigation conducted Simran Singh, the novel’s protagonist who is a social worker and detective. She is also a free spirit; very liberal and not averse to being attracted to unsuitable men. But her heart is in the right place as she abandons her holiday to hunt for a missing British girl in Goa.

For me, this was an important book to write because I have tried through fiction to explore a difficult contemporary reality in India today. I hope this novel reaches a wide cross section of readers—and both disturbs and mobilises them against gender-based violence.

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