

Raped! The Indian polity in shambles (guest blog)

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*A 23 year old student, varyingly named by the media as the treasure (Amanat), the light (Jyoti) or the fearless (Nirbhaya) – died, after being **gang-raped and tortured** with an iron rod by 6 drunk men on a moving bus in the Indian capital New Delhi on 16th December 2012.*

*The capital, and some other cities, erupted in unprecedented protests which began online, then went offline and continued through the New Year – demanding not just the gallows for the rapists, but a reform of the Indian penal code which provides little for sexual crimes, let alone sexual crimes of this kind – most of which are not caught or reported, let alone dealt with, legally. Former Polis Silverstone Scholar **Ranjana Das**, now teaching at the University of Leicester, reports on the deeper, disturbing politics of gender, image and power in India that have been exposed by this case.*



For the first time perhaps, a sexual crime has been expedited and put on the ‘fast track’, and a commission led by a female retired High Court Judge has been set up to look into the question of reforms. A horrifyingly high number of unresolved rape cases are stacked high, all waiting for trial. A higher number remains unreported.

And not just rape – there’s honour killings, dowry deaths, female foeticides in illicit abortion clinics, or often even, at home and the usual groping and molesting on public transport. Sadly, for anyone picking up the local or national newspapers, none of this is news. Neither am I the only Indian woman to have been groped when walking down Park Street, in Christmas time Calcutta, last week, and not even given it a second thought, because it’s a part and parcel of ‘these things happen’ as I know it. And yet, unlike my grandparents who had fled overnight into the now India as refugees, I have grown up as a daughter of comparative privilege.

War On Women?

We all know that it is not just about a war on women, it never is. The female body in India is worshipped and groped, sought blessings from and raped, deified and expected to pay homage to the genitalia of a certain male god.

As much scholarship in post-colonial studies has repeatedly underlined in its work on the interstices of gender, race and class, the female body in India exists at the intersect of caste, class, religion, sexuality and politics.

When MF Hussain painted a Hindu goddess in the nude, questions were asked about why he had not painted a Muslim woman, implying that the Muslim female body can be stripped and laid bare, which it was, of course, time and again, during the ‘riots’ in Gujarat in India, in 2002.

Rungs of Privilege

When Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* showing a lesbian relationship was censored in India, the Hindu Right asked why the protagonists were given names from Hindu mythology (Radha and Sita) and not Muslim names. As elsewhere around the globe, the lower a body is, on the rungs of privilege – indicated often, if not mostly, by one’s caste positions, the greater its accessibility in the eyes of the rapist.

And so, a sweeper woman cleaning the streets of an early morning metropolis is suddenly an accessible body for passing truckers. The Park Street rape last year was claimed by those in power to be that of a sex worker. Setting aside the outrage following the insinuation, more important is to note that this drew mixed responses from many amidst the ‘respectable’ middle class who claimed (sometimes in hushed embarrassment) that the rape of a sex worker isn’t quite a rape.

It’s a cliché to also point out that the problematic symbols began circulating ages ago – for this is the country of epic

figures like Sita – the chaste wife of the Hindu God whose trial by fire is recounted with much emotion, and Draupadi – the uncelebrated heroine of an Indian epic, who had five husbands, or the Mother Goddess Durga (and her 108 incarnations) at whose feet countless men lay face down seeking blessings, before plunging themselves into an unwilling and protesting female body some hours later. If every rape was to be protested as this month has seen – there would be about a 100,000 protests per year. It is unlikely and unsustainable.

Shame And Corruption

So, where does the rot lie? Indeed, it lies woven into our long standing encounters with the roles ascribed to 'decency' and shame, corruption, legal systems in need of reform, our persistent encounters with right-wing persecution of minorities and a long litany of other such.

But it also lies in the everyday, where each of us are victims or perpetrators or usually, both, through the jokes we crack and laugh at, the roles we reinforce in our rituals, the images we circulate in our mediasphere.

And equally, the rot lies in our extremes, which are a part of our everyday. 'Amanat/Nirbhaya' (not her real name) is on her way to becoming a martyr following her death after the brutal rape and the torture with the iron rod which ruptured her uterus and intestines. In headlines and in public speak she is becoming a Goddess and a warrior.

No Need For Goddesses

But that is not what is required. We do not need glorific Goddesses, female bodies need not become deities to worship. Remember, how, not very many decades ago, when widowed women were burnt alive on the funeral pyres of dead husbands, we saluted their souls and they became martyrs and near goddesses?

Our scary extremes need a halt – the red vermilion on the body of the Mother Goddess is the same colour as the red blood that covered the bus in which Amanat was gang raped and the iron rod pushed into her till her organs burst – as artists in India have noted.

What happens about the Penal Code Reform remains to be seen – call me a cynic, but I have my doubts, and whether these protests will last till the 2014 elections, nobody knows.

Stop Bickering

In the meantime, it is time for a range of other things, to begin attacking the rot. It is time for the largely malfunctioning multi-party system to stop bickering over trivialities such as the manner in which Amanat was cremated. It is time for the media to stop its dangerous tendencies to manufacture goddesses out of victims.

It is time for sex, sexual touching, in/appropriateness of conduct and protection to be discussed in the living room. It is time to look very closely (and swiftly) into our preventive measures (we have few) against sexual crimes. It is time for helplines to work, for offenders to be caught, for punishment, I dare say, to be severe.

And equally, it is time, to reflect on the symbols, rituals, acts, gestures and metaphors circulating in the everyday, for that is where the rot begins to gnaw its way right in.

This personal view [by Dr Ranjana Das](#)

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