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Women

# India: Mass Struggle vs. Rape Culture

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**On August 14, 2024 at 11:55 pm, the streets of Bengal, usually deserted by this hour, were packed with Indian women claiming their half of the sky. At the approach of the country's 77th "Independence Day" celebration they made the night their own by demanding an end to the rape culture that undercuts any notion of independence.**

## The Struggle Erupts

Almost every nook and corner was occupied by women — working women from different sectors facing sexual harassment in their workplace; students across schools, colleges and universities who have to fight for every inch of space to assert themselves on their campuses; women who are otherwise shackled by the everyday drudgery of housework; doctors, nurses, teachers and domestic workers all taking to the streets in protest.

Five nights earlier a resident doctor had been raped and murdered in a seminar room during her night shift. Her parents were informed that she had "committed suicide" and were made to wait for three hours before being allowed inside the room.

Rumors were spread questioning her psychological health. In fact, the principal of RG Kar Medical College made a reckless remark, asking "what was the girl doing so late" in the seminar room. Yet the autopsy report revealed that she had been raped and sexually assaulted before being strangled.

The principal's comment sparked a mass outrage. A call for a Take Back the Night event on the eve of "Independence Day" in India spread like wildfire, igniting a huge mass movement that the country had not seen in a decade. In West Bengal alone there were around 250 protest sites across cities, district towns and villages as women, trans and queer people defied societal curfews to occupy streets clamoring for justice.

The night of August 14 turned out to be historic. This was not the first time that the Take Back the Night Campaign was being organized to protest sexual harassment in the country. This was also not the first time that women in India were coming out in such massive numbers in solidarity and rage to claim justice against rape, against sexual harassment.

This was also not the first time that such a brutal crime had been committed in India. In the India of today, where the powers that be nurture rape culture regime after regime, what happened at RG Kar is not an exception. In the India of today, headed by a fascist rightwing regime whose leaders have been openly misogynist, who have used rape as a political weapon to curb dissent and silence women, the murder at RG Kar and the gross miscarriage of justice attempted by officials has become rather the norm.

Yet what was so historic about the protest was the spontaneous outburst of women. In different parts of West Bengal women had organized protests to claim the night, to demand justice for the victim, to demand safe public transport for women, to demand public toilets, to demand a functional Internal Complaints Committee in every workplace, to claim basic labor rights for women in organized and unorganized sectors.

For many of these women this was their first protest. For many this was also their first night under the sky. For many

this was their first time raising slogans.

For many this was also their first experience in political organizing. There were women gig workers in their work uniforms sharing experiences of harassment faced at work. There were women nurses from private and public hospitals speaking about not having the infrastructural support to safely perform their duties at night. There were theater performers speaking about the harassment they faced in their work.

There were women, queer and trans people who had travelled two-to-three hours in order to reach protest sites. When they found public transportation lacking, women formed groups to organize their own transport and travelled together.

There were women from nearby slums sharing experiences of harassment, violence at home or at work. Mothers came with their daughters. Sisters came together. At the rallies old friends connected. It was a carnival of resistance.

Strangers opened up their homes all night to let protesters use their washrooms. Market cooperatives in the area kept their places open for women. Students from nearby public University campuses negotiated with their authorities to keep the campus gates and women's hostels unlocked. There were women who had ventured out of their house, unaccompanied by men at night, determined to lay claim to a public space of their own, to organize protests in their neighborhoods.

## “Azaadi”

Shouting “Azaadi” (“Freedom”), women claimed freedom from rape, from domestic violence, from workplace harassment, from moral policing, from the drudgery of housework, from discriminatory wages at work, from the patronizing remarks of fathers and brothers, from this brahmanical patriarchal capitalist system. There were women waving the red flag high in the air, while queer and trans people came with rainbow flags.

Women carried pictures of women revolutionaries, reminding people of the legacy of female resistance. A huge red flag with a portrait of the martyred Indian revolutionary Pritilata Waddadar flew high, watching over people who saw themselves as her comrades. [\[1\]](#)

There were handmade posters written by unpracticed hands, slogans raised by those who were conditioned to never raise their voices. There were songs, performances, sharing of experiences as women spent the night under the sky chatting, shouting, listening, leaning on each other.

Yet as the night unfolded, news began pouring in about an attack on the strike doctors were carrying out at RG Kar. A group of goons had entered the premises of the ongoing sit-in demonstration, dismantled the site, beat up protesting doctors, and attempted to destroy the crime scene. It was clear that their intent was to tamper with evidence and threaten the protestors. Meanwhile on-duty police officers were ordered to look away.

What had begun as a protest event was transformed into a full-fledged movement that witnessed the participation of people who had so far been indifferent to blood on the streets. It was a movement that understood the dignity of women's safety was connected to the right to a system of public health that provides care for ordinary people. Instead the system had been crumbling as corruption took over, even endangering the lives of patients.

# Culture of Impunity, Privatization and the Neoliberal State

The impunity and blatant display of power, deliberately showcased to send a message through the vandalizing of the protest site at RG Kar, broke the dams of a rage that had been simmering in the country over the past decade. Those of us who had been students during the 2012 Delhi rape case — where a young middle-class woman who was brutally gang raped and tortured later died — had witnessed thousands of women students and middle-class women occupying the streets to claim justice.

The protests then had initiated heated discussions on gender violence. Later a judicial committee reported that inadequate infrastructure and failures on the part of the government and police were the root cause behind crimes against women. This outcry led to a change in rape laws in India. Yet a decade later, as we take to the streets again, we are still challenged by a culture of impunity.

Almost every political party — from the parliamentary left to the centrists to the right — has time and again shielded rapists and nurtured rape culture to cement their hold in electoral politics. The rise of Hindutva fascism has followed with an explosion in gruesome gender violence. Rape has often been used as a political weapon to suppress protests and assert authority over minorities.

This culture of impunity, nurtured through coddling rapists, tampering with evidence and blatantly using state machinery to shield them, had set precedents that every ruling party could follow. That the ruling party in West Bengal used all its machinery to stand guard over the perpetrators in the RG Kar crime, therefore, was hardly surprising. Yet this time it fuelled the rage of people who seemed to have had enough.

Perhaps the RG Kar rape and murder triggered such widespread outrage because the victim was a doctor, a woman in an “honorable” white-collar job, assaulted while she was on duty in a public hospital. It meant women were nowhere safe. It also exposed how unequal our work spaces are, how they are designed to make working women, trans and queer people vulnerable. Working women from organized and unorganized sectors flocked to the rallies.

There were rallies organized by anganwadi (rural childcare) workers, midday meal workers, ICDS (child health) workers, domestic workers, IT workers, gig workers. The clamor for justice and dignity also made its way to workplaces. They demanded employer accountability to ensure the safety of women, trans, and queer workers, establishing just who would address gender violence.

While such outrage had been missing in previous cases of gender violence — where rape has been used as part of state repression to suppress movements in the hinterlands, where gender violence has been used to perpetuate caste atrocity, or to intensify occupation — the protests around the RG Kar incident opened up possibilities for conversations around the implications of all these silences.

The “reclaim the night” movement initiated a conversation on gender justice, exposing the failure of institutional mechanisms to ensure safety and dignity of women in their workplaces and in public spaces. This fight against impunity also strengthened the voices of healthcare workers raising their concerns over the corruption infesting public hospitals.

Narratives from different public hospitals began to pour out, exposing a larger system that was designed to make healthcare more inaccessible for the marginalized. These narratives laid bare a frail system with overworked workers gasping for breath, a system deliberately made to be dysfunctional through syndicates pushing the healthcare system towards privatization.

The deplorable condition of the public healthcare system in India was already exposed during the pandemic. These sparked conversations around structural adjustment policies imposed as debt conditions at the behest of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund during the 1980s. This paved the way for privatization, thereby relieving the government of its duty as the primary guarantor and enabler of health services.

The rape and murder of the resident doctor in a public hospital exposed the state's indifference to public healthcare workers. They are expected to work more intensely as the system rapidly collapses around them. Indeed, the murder has sparked a larger movement, headed by junior doctors in the 22 medical colleges throughout Bengal, to demand a better and safer public healthcare system.

Protesting doctors called for an indefinite strike and began a sit-in-demonstration at the Health Ministry. While the government attempted to douse the fire by promising to ensure safety in public hospitals through deploying security forces within hospital premises, protestors rejected the idea. They responded that their safety would only be ensured through democratizing the workspace and through building infrastructure to end corruption and help repair the deteriorating system.

The demands of the movement resonated particularly with middle-class and working-class people who are the primary beneficiaries of the public healthcare system. They have borne firsthand the costs of the privatized health sector.

Opposition political parties tried their best to hijack the movement for their electoral benefits, but were rejected by the larger protesting masses who had by now seen almost every parliamentary political party working to maintain the status quo. In the face of huge public outrage, the government was forced to transfer the Commissioner of Police who had looked the other way and facilitated the tampering of evidence in the RG Kar case.

The protesting doctors lifted their strike, only to be forced to begin a hunger strike in the face of a government that refused to budge on their other demands. However, following a meeting with the Chief Minister who promised to consider their demands the strike was called off.

## A Verdict and the Battle Onwards...

The trial court verdict has sentenced a civic volunteer working for the Kolkata Police to a life sentence for the rape and brutal murder of the 31-year-old resident doctor at the RG Kar Medical College and Hospital. The verdict has further fuelled protests as the entire trial seemed to hide the complicity of the state in protecting the murderer and absolving hospital authorities of their responsibility to safeguard the dignity and safety of their employees.

As Bengal gears up to put another fight challenging the loopholes in the verdict, the state clamors for capital punishment of the perpetrator. Yet it has been the ruling party that first shielded the accused and is known to be hand-in-glove with syndicates running various corruption rackets.

Interestingly, though, the demand for capital punishment had not emerged from the junior doctors' movement nor from the reclaim-the-night movements. The struggle for gender justice in India had historically campaigned against capital punishment, exposing it to be a tool of state repression that bestowed the state with a monopoly on violence. The state seeks to purge an individual while abdicating its responsibility for initiating any systemic change.

The verdict came out just a few days after the death of a pregnant adivasi (Indigenous tribal) woman in another

public hospital in a district town in Bengal.

She died after being administered a toxic saline that had been banned in other states. Yet pressured by a pharmaceutical company, Bengal's public hospitals, with little concern for the lives of marginalized women, still use it. Once again, her death has exposed the fault lines of the public healthcare system as the state-and-capital nexus spares little thought for the lives of women or marginalized people.

# The Role of a Mass Feminist Movement

It is significant that the feminist movement in India around workplace sexual harassment began with the gang rape of a grassroot community worker who was running an state awareness program in her village against child marriage.

That movement in the early 1990s fought to make the state accountable as an employer. It was able to legally assert that sexism and sexual harassment at the workplace makes for a hostile work environment. It is the duty of the employer to ensure the safety and dignity of their workers.

Thirty years later, our work spaces still remain designed to make women, trans, queer people vulnerable as workers whose labor is supposed to come cheap. Furthermore, the percentage of female workforce participation is declining in the organized sector as the informalization of women's labor grows.

Yet in the informal sector employers are neither held responsible for providing safe working conditions nor have any duty to abide by any regulations protecting workers' rights. In fact, we can say that the battle for workplace dignity is not only about asserting women's identity as workers, but also about the valuation of the work itself.

At a time when the neoliberal policies enable the state to wash its hands of public services, when labor codes are rewritten to criminalize unionization and extend working hours to fill the coffers of the owners, when factory closures and privatizing of public service units are enabling the informalization of labor, when the rightwing fascist state is normalizing violence with each passing day, the battle for bread and roses seems likely to be a long haul. That battle would require further organizing of working people in fields and factories, in homes and hospitals, in schools and streets, to claim every inch of safe space, every night, every day.

[Against the Current](#) 28 February 2025

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[1] Pritilata Waddedar (1911–1932), a member of the Indian Republican Army, led 15 others in an armed attack on a European club. Shot in the leg, she took cyanide poisoning to avoid being captured by the colonial police. Anticipating possible death, she carried a letter in her pocket, "Inquilab Zindebad" (Long Live Revolution), which has inspired other women ever since. Pritilata is Bengal's first woman martyr and is considered a revolutionary icon.