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India

Of rape, censorship and national honour

- IV Online magazine - 2015 - IV482 - March 2015 -

Publication date: Wednesday 25 March 2015

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If the Indian government wanted to become the laughing stock of the world, it couldn't have done so more instantly and effectively than by banning the BBC documentary "India's Daughter" on Delhi's December 2012 gang-rape. Not only was the film watched by millions the world over; it became a *cause celebre* for feminists, defenders of free expression and even progressive Hollywood actors.

The film powerfully depicts, mainly through her parents' narration, the life and aspirations of the 23-year-old paramedical student who was barbarically raped, grievously assaulted and left to die. It's also a quietly celebratory story of the tidal wave of anti-rape protests that followed. Not least, it's an account of how the rapists, their lawyers, and many others, justify brutal violence against women.

India's Daughter isn't a voyeuristic film, nor does it glamorise rape even indirectly, the way many Bollywood films do. It impels the viewer to reflect on the pathologies that afflict Indian society, which viciously discriminates against women and finds a hundred rationalisations for doing so.

That's why the hysterical reaction to the film from the government and the Bharatiya Janata Party is so deplorable, indeed revolting. So is the charge that film-maker Leslee Udwin violated the conditions set for interviewing Mukesh Singh, the convicted rapist, and other prisoners.

BJP MP Meenakshi Lekhi claimed the film would affect tourist arrivals. Urban development minister M Venkaiah Naidu smelt an anti-India "conspiracy" in it. And home minister Rajnath Singh muscularly declared that his government wouldn't allow anyone to single out India for an anti-national attack related to rapes.

However, Udwin didn't violate any conditions. She showed the full raw footage to the prison authorities, and also the 15 minutes-long edited material used. They raised no objections. Besides, the film doesn't single out India as uniquely rape-prone. Rape, like wife-beating, is prevalent in all countries. This is a testimony to the power of patriarchy everywhere. Rape is grossly under-reported in India because of the stigma that's perversely attached to its victims, rather than to its perpetrators.

Yet, India has recently witnessed a large number of rapes, in particular extremely violent gang-rapes. These have caught the world's attention, not least because of attempts by India's police and political leaders to minimise their incidence and to proffer advice on how women should dress and conduct themselves, or how they should avoid strangers.

But rape has nothing to do with how a woman looks or how "provocatively" she dresses. That's why 82-year-olds or disabled women are raped, as are six-year-olds. Most rapists aren't strangers, but men known to the victims. Rape isn't about sexual attraction; it's about male power, violently exercised to subjugate women. The official responses to the film solely focus on the image it supposedly conveys, and ignore the object—the reality of India, with mass killings of female foetuses, which have left more than 40 million women "missing" over a century. In India, sex-based discrimination begins in infancy with deprivation of food, and carries over into adulthood in countless ways.

Such extreme forms of patriarchy and male-supremacism set the context in which women are pervasively viewed in society as inferior. The dominant view oscillates between seeing women as worthy of worship (an epic hypocrisy this, based on a glorified but mythical notion of motherhood!), and regarding them as sources of temptation and objects of

carnal desire, who deserve to be mercilessly exploited: that's their karma.

Common to both is the notion that women are inherently weak and inferior. They must either be sexually used and enslaved, or be protected and defended by men. But they must never have equal status, independent agency or human dignity.

Thus, ML Sharma, a convict's lawyer, told Udwin: "A female is just like a flower... But on the other hand, a man is like a thorn... The flower always needs protection..." He also said: "In our society we never allow our girls to come out... after 6:30 or 7:30 or 8:30 in the evening with any unknown person... We have the best culture. In our culture, there is no place for a woman."

Another lawyer, A P Singh, declared: "If my daughter or sister engaged in pre-marital activities and disgraced herself... I would most certainly take her to my farmhouse, and in front of my entire family, I would put petrol on her and set her alight." Rapist Mukesh Singh said: "It takes two to clap"; since the victim was not a "decent" girl and was out in the streets late at night, she "asked for it"; had she not resisted, she wouldn't have been killed.

These views are shocking, but by no means confined to these men. They are aired day in and day out by khap panchayats, police officials, Sangh Parivar luminaries, judges and ministers, including most recently, Haryana Chief Minister and long-standing RSS functionary ML Khattar.

These same people now see India's Daughter as an attempt to malign India, and a "conspiracy" to tarnish the rising nation's image and prevent it from developing and equalling the West in wealth, stature and prestige. This speaks to a sick kind of nationalism.

The same nationalist argument was used by the Intelligence Bureau and the home ministry to justify the offloading of Greenpeace activist Priya Pillai from a plane to London where she was going to testify before an all-party committee of MPs on the violations of environmental regulations and poor tribals' rights in Central India by Essar, a corporation headquartered in the UK.

Pillai, they told a court, would indulge in "anti-India" propaganda aimed at hindering India's "development" and prosperity by prejudicing Western investors. They stooped to trying to drive a wedge between Pillai, and other activists such as Aruna Roy, Medha Patkar, PV Rajagopal, Admiral Ramdas, Nandini Sundar and myself.

They claimed we never testified before a foreign/international committee, but "relied on all the institutions of India's vibrant democracy...", using methods like dharnas, fasts and marches, litigation, and the print and electronic media. This is an invidious distinction, which some of us refuted (scroll.in/article/707224). We pointed out that many good activists like Dalit anti-caste campaigners have used UN and even European Union and US forums, as is legitimate. However, the official argument shamelessly justifies and invites the exploitation of India's vulnerable Adivasis and mineral resources by foreign corporations. So much for "nationalism"! It also victimises those who try to enforce India's own environmental laws and fundamental rights. Mercifully, the Delhi High Court has just quashed the ministry's order.

The Indian state since colonial times has used its "sovereign" power not to defend and extend the rights of the people in whom real sovereignty lies, but to limit, circumvent and violate these rights, whether by banning publications and activities, by refusing visas to progressive scholars and activists, or by shielding corporate criminals and communal thugs.

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This is true with a vengeance of the Bhopal disaster, in which the government imposed an unethically paltry settlement on the victims and betrayed them. It also applies to the deportation of Japanese activists who wanted to share the experience of the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe with the protesters at the Koodankulam atomic project. It holds true of scores of people's movements and NGOs now being harassed under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act.

The Indian government's international conduct often shows an admixture of hubris, insecurity and paranoia. It dishonestly but selectively presents much of what it fears, or what it's uncomfortable with, as a "trap" or "conspiracy" designed to prevent India from exercising its sovereign options and advancing its legitimate interests.

Take the nuclear issue. India in the 1960s opposed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on the ground that it created "Atomic Apartheid", or a division between nuclear and non-nuclear-weapons-states. Beneath the lofty moral stand was the crass intention to keep open the option of acquiring nuclear weapons, revealed in India's 1974 test.

In the mid-1990s, India similarly demonised the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which Nehru had pioneered in 1954. New Delhi denounced it as a "trap" to eliminate its sovereign security options after arguing for decades, including in a case before the International Court of Justice, that nuclear weapons never give security and nuclear deterrence is "morally repugnant".

Two years after rejecting the CTBT, India brazenly embraced deterrence with five nuclear blasts and joined the "Apartheid" system, on the side of its masters!

This reflects, and in turn reinforces, a toxic, bellicose, blind nationalism. This is disseminated through textbooks, school prayers, soap operas, newspaper articles, TV debates, and "Mera Bharat Mahan" slogans painted on trucks and autorickshaws.

Such toxic nationalism holds that it's India's unique destiny to be the world's greatest nation "never mind persistent mass poverty, malnourishment of half its children, and hideous inequalities. This is exactly the kind of hubris that inspired Hitler's and Mussolini's fascism and brought disaster upon their peoples. We must fight it resolutely.

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