

The Rootedness of Inequality

Written by Kathleen Cavanaugh

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KATHLEEN CAVANAUGH, APR 4 2013

Her name was Jyoti Singh Pandey. In December 2012 on a moving bus in Delhi, India, Jyoti Singh Pandey, a 23 year old physiotherapy intern from Delhi, was violently raped. On December 29th she died as a result of the injuries that were sustained during her attack. The attack would capture the attention of the international media, albeit briefly, and later became the catalyst for actions by women nationally and globally to 'rise,' drawing attention to violence against women worldwide. There was a powerful narrative that grew up in and around Jyoti's death; a performance of sorts in which the power elite of India took stage, carefully crafting a narrative of accountability; the language of human rights was carted out with promises that justice for the victim would be insured. Yet what is perhaps most remarkable about this event is really how unremarkable the event actually was. Violence against woman in India and violence against women globally is remarkable for how unremarkable, how banal, how accepted and acceptable it actually is. It is, in fact, the rootedness of the socio-economic and political inequality of women that so informs the banality of the act.

A gendered reading of the subaltern captures the reality (and rooted inequality) of women in India (particularly amongst the rural poor) who are subject to extreme subalternization—existing on the margins of socio-political and economic decision making. A 2011 survey conducted by gender specialists for the Thomson Reuters Foundation found that India ranked 4th amongst the top five most dangerous countries to be born a woman. Women in India face threats in every stage of life. Female infanticide and foeticide are said to have claimed over 50 million Indian women in the last century; these deaths and those that result from medical and nutritional neglect account for India's 'missing women'. Those who survive are likely to face endemic discrimination and cultural bias which tolerates substandard medical and nutritional care and condones violence against women.

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps unsurprising that in the same year that the survey was released, the National Crimes Record Bureau in India noted that there were 24,206 rapes reported; 29% of the victims were under the age of 18 and 54.7% of the victims were aged between 18 and 30. What is also striking is that in over 94% of the cases, the offenders were known to their victim (neighbours and parents or other close relatives accounting for a significant number). The level of other violent crimes against women—kidnapping, dowry deaths, cruelty by husbands/partners, molestation, sexual harassment, and trafficking reinforce the arguments made by economists Siwan Anderson and Debraj Ray that "women face the risk of excess mortality at every stage of their lives" (Anderson and Ray 2012). Drawing from Amartya Sen's concept of "missing women" (1990), Anderson and Ray's research finds that approximately 12% of India's 'missing women' disappear at birth, 25% die in childhood, 18% at the reproductive ages, and 45% at older ages. Insuring the protection of women in India society, therefore, is a much larger project than providing punitive measures for violent offenders, it means attacking the inequalities that narrate a woman's existence, not just in India but globally.

In fact perhaps our departing point in examining Jyoti's death is the wrong one. Situating such a reading solely within an Indian (or developing world) context, as so many commentators have done, misses a much larger point. With an Indian context, the subaltern is a colonial production, but freed from its colonial framework, the subaltern woman is better understood, not in a developing world context, but as a global figure—existing on the fringes of male centred sites of power. Violence against women and the societal attitudes that often provide the conditions which condone such acts cannot be parked within the developing world. If there is any doubt that the so called 'first' world has addressed the issues which frame violence against women in society, one only needs to read around the more recent

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events in Steubenville, Ohio where a 16 year old girl was violently raped by two local football players. The event was captured (and exchanged) across social media. The reaction by parts of the community and the national media (which suggest sympathy for the alleged offenders) as well as on line forums (which placed the blame on the victim) certainly give reasons to pry open the debate and place it properly in a global dialogue.

In 1990 Amartya Sen wrote an article for the New York Review of Books arguing that there are more than 100m women “missing” worldwide – these are women who have been denied “similar care in health, medicine, and nutrition” as men and who “are simply not there because women are neglected compared with men.” Changing the value society places on women involves not just changes in how states police that space (through programmes, policies and laws) but also uprooting and significantly changing societal attitudes towards women—challenging the patriarchy and misogyny that Anderson and Ray’s study shows to be so deeply entrenched in India, but shared globally. The human rights project provides a platform for highlighting and universalizing the language of equality but such initiatives must ensure that the goal is not just formal equality (that is, the equal treatment of the law) but rather substantive equality; that is insuring that there is an actual impact of the law. Substantive equality works towards eliminating the inequality that often underpins disadvantaged groups and, as Parmanand Singh notes, it “takes into account inequalities of social, economic and educational background of the people and seeks the elimination of existing inequality by positive measures” (Singh 1976). It seeks to bring in the powerless, the excluded who lay at the fringes of society and provide them equitable access to socio-economic and decision making institutions. These arguments, of course, are hardly new. That said, the assaults in both the US and India, have, at least for the moment, ignited a debate in the public square that makes visible (and challenges) how women are positioned in society. Such a ‘rising’ and call for change must continue as it is only when substantive equality for women is realised that justice for Jyoti will indeed have been achieved.

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