

The Indian Woman's Reality

Written by Kirthi Jayakumar

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KIRTHI JAYAKUMAR, JAN 9 2013

On December 16, 2012, a 23-year-old woman was brutally raped and assaulted to the point that her intestines were destroyed. She died prior to the New Year. While she battled for her life, India thronged to the streets in protest, demanding security sector reform, the drafting of new laws and their implementation, and death for the offenders. Some, including a prominent political leader in the South, demand castration as punishment for the offenders. Understandably so: anger is definitely raging high, and is not unfounded. But what the masses and policy-makers have failed to understand are the deeper cultural and institutional problems, allowing such crimes to happen.

The India I know and have grown up was peppered with instances of sexual and gender-based violence. In 1973, a nurse was sexually assaulted so brutally that she lies in a coma, in a hospital, even today. In 1990, a security guard raped and murdered a girl in the flat he 'guarded', and was hanged 14 years later. In 1992, a woman was brutally raped because she tried to prevent the marriage of a child. In the communal riots in Gujarat in 2002, rods were inserted into women and their breasts were bitten off. Families have aborted fetuses just because they were girls – only the male child was preferred, as a girl was seen as a burden – both, in terms of tradition (it is believed by many that only a male child can carry the family name forward) and in terms of the economic burden (when girls are married off, in some customs families are forced to pay heavily in the name of dowry). When sex-selective abortions were banned to stop foeticide, they resorted to infanticide. Street children would rummage through rubbish-bins and find these corpses and mistake them for dolls. Many Indian women live at the mercy of the men in their house, where domestic violence thrive unnoticed. In 2007, a house in suburban Delhi was discovered storing many skeletons. They were the remains of several children who were lured, sexually abused and then killed. India has remained a thriving hotbed of gender-violence, propped by the perception of women as sex-objects – an extension of which has been the recent incident in Delhi.

All this, in a place that gave the world the Scion of Peace: Gandhi, whose words (circa 1921), could never be more appropriate: *Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity; the female sex.*

India is in love with patriarchy. Whether in its mythological stories or in its daily living, patriarchy is enforced and reinforced by both men and women. A good example of how patriarchy is inscribed in India through mythologies is India's oldest epic, the Ramayan. India's oldest and most popular epic, the Ramayan, tells the tale of Prince Ram, whose wife, Sita, was abducted by the King of Lanka, Ravan. Ram is revered and worshipped today in India by Hindus. The epic shows that he questioned the chastity of his wife after he rescued her. *If she didn't willingly sleep with her abductor, she must have at least been raped.* With that, he drove her out of the kingdom. Ravan, the deca-headed 'monster' who is still perceived as the mondo-villain, did not even touch Sita. Unsurprisingly, this mentality persists even today.

The cultural salience surrounding a woman's honour in India is largely the reason for dominance. Male dominance stems from the notions surrounding the protection of female honour, which is inherent in traditional Indian culture. Women are deemed representatives of the code of honour of their families, their blood and lineage. This in turn leads to the augmented sanctity attached to the virginity, chastity, honour and "virtue" of a woman. Women themselves are brought up with the preconditioning that preserving their "honour" is non-negotiable for their and their family's acceptance in society. A woman represents the honour of the three-tiered hierarchy that commands her life: her

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husband, her family, and the community she represents. A sense of zealous self-righteousness prevails among some Indian men. They dominate, violently, in the name of making a woman “understand the importance of her honour”. If a woman continues to display her vulnerability, she is welcome, she is acceptable. The moment she asserts herself, throws an open challenge to the ‘accepted stereotypes’, she sends a subliminal slap to the ego of the male.

India’s laws relating to rape are terribly inadequate. We still use the 1860 Penal Code that was drafted by the British for Colonial India. Rape is punishable only with imprisonment for seven years. If rape and murder occur together, life imprisonment or death can be awarded. It is definitely agreeable that the law needs to change. There needs to be legislative reform towards not only offering substantive penalties, but also proper procedure. The lack of sensitization of the security sector has led to inappropriate questioning, blaming the victim, forcing the victim to relive her reality all over again. This needs to change, and the best way to do this is not only re-legislate, but also to sensitize and train the security sector.

For sensitization, the first precondition is education, the creation of an understanding that an empowered woman is not a threat, but a boon to the country. An empowered woman is the fount of an empowered family, and the empowered family is the fount of an empowered nation. India needs to understand that empowering a woman is not a bad thing, but that the heinous treatment of women certainly is. This can be achieved by starting when they’re young. Parents first need to understand that a girl should not be deemed unwanted, and must teach their sons and daughters the importance of respecting members of the opposite sex. It is also important to teach them that violence brings no benefit, and that asserting violence is not an assertion of power. For those that are old enough, strong training programs and sensitization programs need to be drawn up and implemented for realization to dawn.

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