Opinion – #arrestlucknowgirl: A Reminder of India's Postcolonial Desire to Control Women
Written by Ankita Rathour

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In early August 2021, the hashtag #arrestlucknowgirl was trending in India. In a viral video dated July 30, one can see a woman in a white t-shirt and jeans thrashing a cab driver at the Kesari Kheda traffic crossing in Lucknow's Krishna Nagar. A First Information Report (FIR) was registered against this woman as outrage sparked on social media. While the woman said the cab driver was at fault, the driver threatened suicide urging the police to take action. Feminists will not deny the obvious violence in the video. Violence is not okay and the woman is clearly at fault. But I wonder if this righteous online rage against the "Lucknow girl" functioned from a deep-seated misogynist appetite of punishing women. Where is this outrage when women/girls are gang-raped, killed in broad daylight, and forcefully cremated? Where are such so-called demands of justice knowing that at least ten Dalit women are raped every day? Such a line of questioning is not *whataboutism*. Attention must be called to misguided calls for justice.

For example, in the case of Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput's death last year, cries of "justice for SSR" were acted out through brazen misogyny against Sushant's girlfriend, Rhea Chakraborty. In name of justice, women were classified as good and evil. Sushant's ex-girlfriend was cast as the prior while Chakraborty was the latter. This in turn gave rise to shameless online abuses hurled at her and her family.

Within this fictional world of good versus evil, anyone sympathizing with Rhea Chakraborty was considered a bad woman, bad person, bad Hindu, and in extension a bad Indian. Fact and fiction merged as masculine-nationalist demands for justice began normalizing violence and imprisonment as correctional tools. The pattern continued in the Lucknow case. Violence and state-sanctioned controlling of women appear desirable in order to restore digressing women to the so-called ideal of right-wing Hindu goodness. That is why imprisoned female Indian activists do not find public support. Their imprisonment is seen as something they deserve since they protested the Hindu state. In their desire to seek fairness, these misguided calls of justice end up demanding more violence, more gendered state control.

In postcolonial India, women have been a potent site to construct unique Indian nationalism and ideal femininity. Nationalist masculine violence and state-sanctioned repression have historically been the desired way to restore digressing women to the tenets of ideal femininity. Gender theorists and historians like Urvashi Butalia, Ania Loomba, and many more have prolifically engaged with the intersection of nationalism and native patriarchy in creating ideals of Indian womanhood. Instead of benefitting India and its women, such intersections only strengthened traditional casteist Hindu gender codes. These scholars have also illuminated the role violence plays in constructing ideals of Hindu womanhood in post-partition India.

For example, After partition, Hindu women were forcibly retrieved from Pakistan in India's desperate attempt to solidify its national identity; consent did not matter. The Indian state recruited its women to carry out such forced retrieval. Families separated. Lovers died by suicide. During the Sati era, many Hindu men and women argued that self-immolation was a widow's choice. They wanted to restrict colonial state interference in their affairs. In the ideological battles of colonizer vs native, foreign vs Indian, women faced repercussions, sometimes violent, and always epistemological. With hashtags like #arrestlucknowgirl, one can see residues of anxious nationalist masculinity acting out. These anxieties are more inclined on penalizing women.

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One must not forget that the Lucknow case was also a class-based assault. It's not simply a woman beating a man, but a woman with more class privilege assaulting a man who she considers less human than her. Such violence mimics patriarchy and emerges from various intersections. Historical and cultural subjugation of women has left women with unresolved trauma and frustration. A culture where gender-based violence becomes as normal as the day leaves survivors of such violence with no other choice than to find recourse in more violence. In other words, the abused turns abuser.

Violence is seen as the seductive imperative to feeling powerful in a heavily capitalist-patriarchal society. Inept police system has left frustrated, traumatized people all around. The woman in the Lucknow case has claimed that she was being harassed for the past year and had gone to the police for the same, but no action had been taken yet. Legal lethargy frustrates women trying to seek justice in a patriarchal society. Hence, violent outbursts become a way to make sense of a continuously senseless reality. This does not mean that the "Lucknow girl" is not wrong. It only means that the issue is not as simple as we would prefer it to be.

Furthermore, rising global capitalist ideology renders certain people like the cab driver in this case vulnerable to violence from many sides. He is as vulnerable to a man's assault as a woman's assault as police brutality. Sadly, when these frustrations collide, chaos takes a massive form, and penalizing women appear an easy solution. The woman in the Lucknow case deserves legal action for her outright dehumanizing behavior. But would punishing her solve deeper cultural problems? Did vicious attacks on Rhea Chakraborty solve the issues of mental health, pandemic depression, and drug abuse? No.

Hashtags calling to punish women are temporary reliefs. Performative holier than thou attitudes on social media are not solutions. The root causes of such issues are gender insensitivity, class disparity, systemic casteism, and structural patriarchy to name a few. We are in this together and calls to punish some women are never going to make the world safer for all women. Neither such calls are going to benefit defenseless men. They are simply going to widen the chasm between men and women, giving rise to uncontrolled brutalism. We should begin engaging with postcolonial Indian feminist consciousness by denouncing violence strongly without universalizing a stand-alone issue.

About the author:

Ankita Rathour is finishing her Ph.D. on postcolonial dead girl trope in Bollywood. She is a former Fulbright scholar, currently working as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at Louisiana State University. An ardent cinephile, she writes about postcolonial gender issues, crime, and the Indian state. Her articles have been featured in Feminism In India, Fair Observer, Women's Web and High on Films.