

RAPE IN ANCIENT INDIAN

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Rape in India has been described by Radha Kumar as one of India's most common crimes against women and by the UN's human-rights chief as a "national problem". Since the 1980s, women's rights groups lobbied for marital rape to be declared unlawful, but the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act,

2013 still maintains the marital exemption by stating in its exception clause under Section 375, that: "Sexual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under fifteen years of age, is not rape". While per-capita reported incidents are quite low compared to other countries, even developed countries, a new case is reported every 20 minutes.

A study by Action Aid UK found that 80% of women in India had experienced sexual harassment ranging from unwanted comments, being groped or assaulted. Many incidents go unreported as the victims fear being shunned by their families. The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act was passed in 1956. However many cases of trafficking of young girls and women have been reported. These women are either forced into prostitution, domestic work or child labor.

Talk of the town is "Indians pray to goddesses in temples, but abuse women in the domestic sphere"

Horrific crimes are not new to India. The capital of the largest democracy in the world, New Delhi, has been conquered many times over by successive waves of invaders - their paradigms of conquest were always different.

On August 15, 1947, New Delhi became the capital for the seventh time when as the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said we will endeavor "to wipe every tear from every eye". Sixty five years later, we have a new paradigm now, which is called globalization or liberalization.

After independence, the first wave of global change that has swept India started in 1991 with the opening of economy, media and the zone of the family. New Delhi seems tantalizingly seductive and open to the possibilities of the new world order - foreign investment, women working, call centers, outsourcing, fast cars, late nights, discos, parties, new friends, hypnotic dreams - melting into

delirium and wanton madness.

You can feel it in the air - there is a buzz in the major Indian cities. A new Indian dream is emerging - the spiritual East is taking in the intoxication of the materialistic West. It is bound to lose its moral compass.

Now, more than 20 years after liberalization, predictably, a dangerously psychotic nightmare has shattered the sweet dream. The nightmare has a new look and feel, a veneer - after all we're living in a neon-lit-bright-media-driven-post-modern-age - yet the rudiments of the horrific scenes in the nightmare are as old as the Indian psyche.

On December 16, 2012, a 23-year-old woman was dishonored and brutally gang raped; the cultural idea of *izzat* or *lajja*, honour or shame seems to have been completely thrown out of the window. Young and old are asking themselves, "Where is my India?" For the sake of her privacy, we don't know the girl's name, but in my lexicon she could be called Draupadi, the queen of the Pandavas, the daughter of the king of Hastinapur, near the actual site where Delhi was first constructed.

The story of Draupadi is the central narrative of the founding of early India. At a time like this, it has to be repeated as a moral legend:

"Draupadi, heroine of the Mahabharata epic, is bold and forthright even in adversity. Her husband Yudhisthira succumbing to his weakness for gambling, stakes and loses all (in a rigged game), including his wife. Draupadi challenges the assembly and demands to know how it is possible for one who has staked and lost his own self to retain the right to wager her.

Duryodhana, the winner of the bet, insists that Draupadi is indeed his to do with as he pleases and orders that she be disrobed. Furious at this insult to her honor, Draupadi loosens her coifed hair and vows that she will not knot it again until she has washed it in Duryodhana's blood. As she is disrobed, the more her sari is pulled away the longer it becomes. It is this event which turns Draupadi from a contented, but strong willed wife into a vengeful goddess."

Our real-life Draupadi was an unmarried, impressionable, young medical student, who met a tragic end at a hospital in Singapore. It is now in the hands of her protectors - the "real men" of India - who must deliver her justice.

Will the real Pandavas of India, please, stand up? Where are the "real" and "honourable men" of India?

Or, as Guru Dutt asked poignantly in *Pyaasa* more than 50 years ago, "*Jinhe naaz hai hind par woh kahan hain?*" If Indians are fed-up and tired of asking this question, then the world and the Indian diaspora must remind them again and again that they are inheritors of a great civilization.

India's new gamble on globalization

India has made a new gamble - just like the one in Mahabharata - by hitching its wagon to the liberal forces of change. Many have argued that India did this belatedly, after five arduous seven-year plans of development, which left its industries uncompetitive vis-a-vis the rest of the world. India should have liberalized earlier, shortly after independence, which wasn't to be. The socialist hold on the Indian mind was too strong, especially after years of colonization to liberalize sooner.

Be that as it may. The decision to open up the Indian economy, society and culture has been made. It's game-set-match and there is no turning back now.

In the new India as in Shah Jahan's ancient Delhi, people seem genuinely happy, full of enthusiasm, busy rebuilding their lives and improving their lots according to the new paradigm of development. The new paradigm says "profit is better than poverty", "greed is good" and "chasing after material wealth" is not antithetical to the traditional Indian values, which preach that "one should do one's duty, not worry about the fruits of one's labor".

As a result, women have rightly acquired more power because they are working outside the home, earning more money and raising children in the modern nuclear families. The traditional family has broken down, to some degree, as "the couple" or "the jodi" in a marriage has assumed more importance over the joint family. Women feel empowered at home and may be at the workplace, but are they safe? Has the rapid pace of change in women's lives left men bereft to idle mischief? Has the men's inner world matured with the changing current of the times?

With the access to mass media - opening the floodgates of different languages and cultures - Indians are open to Western influences, both enlightened and perverse, but very few have actually stopped and understood the challenges underfoot. Middle class Indians are swept up by the larger undercurrents, they seem unable to fully understand, let alone control; even the all-powerful central government cannot marshal the resources to contain the criminals or the peaceful protesters.

Thus, one may be inclined to write-off this horrific rape as an "outlier" incident, a "tipping point", or worse, the reflection of a few degenerate and demented minds, not reflective of the malaise of the Indian body politics, but that would be a grave mistake. Larger structural forces underlying here suggest systemic failures in Indian society and culture that have sent shockwaves around the world.

CONCLUSION

"According to mandatory self-declarations filed by candidates with the Election Commission and tabulated by National Election Watch, India's leading political parties have offered tickets to 27 candidates accused of rape and a whopping 260 candidates facing charges for crimes against women, ranging from assault to harassment over the past five years. As a result, two members of the current parliament and six members of the various state legislative assemblies are facing rape charges, while 36 others face charges for lesser crimes against women."

Women politicians do not want to be a whistleblower against male politicians for the fear of retribution and reprisal. With the changing gender roles, women feel they have to walk a tightrope where the laws are not strong enough to fully protect them. There is a clear sense that the Indian democracy has turned into "a gangster nation", where the organized criminal mafia runs the country, as depicted in a new genre of Bollywood films.

Thus, the perennial question has to be asked – "Who will protect Draupadi's honour?" Will the debasement of women continue unabated as it has for centuries? How long can Indian women withstand the crimes on their bodies? Is the Indian experiment doomed because half of its population is never allowed the basic dignity and freedom accorded to a human being?

While the Indian nationalists, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi and Dayananda Saraswati made the national reform for women an integral part of the struggle for independence, there is no such nationalistic fervor evident in India today. Indian powerbrokers seem either blindly oblivious or simply intoxicated with their newfound wealth and place of power in the globalised world to keep sacrificing girls and women to achieve growth and development at any cost.

If even after such horrific events, no legislative change is brought about and law enforcement cannot safeguard women, then Indian democracy is apathetic and doomed to fail - truly "an area of darkness" as Naipaul said 50 years ago. Recall, after almost a year of protest, we still do not have an anti-corruption

Lokpal bill passed in India. It is the responsibility of Indian diaspora to not support the wrong headed pursuits of Indian politicians financially or morally, who are simply rape-enablers.

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