

Representation of Gender Violence in Print and Electronic Media

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One of the recurring images of the year 2013 has been that of hundreds of young people holding candle light vigils across the country praying for the life of the victim of a horrendous gang rape which occurred in the streets of Delhi on Dec 16, 2012. The valiant girl battled on for a few weeks before succumbing to her injuries in Singapore. However, her torture at the hands of the five men and her subsequent death united the Indian middle classes like few issues had done before. The television media, always on the hunt for 'good' news and desperate for their TRP ratings, took the issue on to another level altogether, focusing intensely on the issues of sexual harassment, molestation and rape in Indian society. The gang rape and the brutality with which the woman was abused shocked the international media as well with major television channels around the world doing special interest stories on the plight of women in India. The online social networking sites and news portals continued to carry stories relating to the rape and the treatment of women in the 'conservative' Indian society for months after the incident. Out of curiosity, I googled 'Delhi Gang Rape 2012' and the total matches ran up to 4,910,000! The gang rape, according to author and activist Eve Ensler was a major turning point not just for India but around the world. She pointed out that "having worked every day of my life for the last 15 years on sexual violence, I have never seen anything like that, where sexual violence broke through the consciousness and was on the front page, nine articles in every paper every day, in the center of every discourse, in the center of the college students' discussions, in the center of any restaurant you went in. And I think what's happened in India, India is really leading the way for the world. It's really broken through. They are actually fast-tracking laws. They are looking at sexual education. They are looking at the bases of patriarchy and masculinity and how all that leads to sexual violence."¹ While no news media worth its name could afford to lose out on the opportunities offered by the spontaneous protest which broke out in the capital city following the gruesome incident, the reactions from Western feminist scholars, can only be termed 'cautious'.

In an interesting insight into the manner in which the Delhi gang rape and the subsequent anger in the streets of India was represented by Western feminists, Swati Parashar in her article "The Delhi Rape Case: Rethinking Feminism and Violence Against Women"² talks about the strange silence of Western feminists while addressing feminist concerns of the Global South. She points out that in the case of Savitha

¹ Excerpt taken from Eve Ensler's statement quoted in www.democracynow.org retrieved on 30.11.2013

² Parashar, Swati. "The Delhi Rape Case: Rethinking Feminism and Violence Against Women." *www.e-ir.info*. E-International Relations, 11 Feb. 2013. Web. 16 Nov. 2013.

Halappanavar, the western feminist scholarship actively engaged with the anti- abortion laws prevalent in the predominantly Catholic Ireland and the outrage that Savitha's death sparked off in the First World resulted in Ireland changing its laws on abortion. However, when it came to the gang rape in Delhi, or even the shooting of Malala Yousoufazi in Pakistan, the response of Western feminists was muted. She notes that the "case brought to the fore India's culture of misogyny and yet Western feminists, in a concerted effort to avoid their oriental/racist gaze, were hesitant to take a position calling on the Indian state to do more to protect women or to analyse the (in)securities of Indian women. Clearly the Indian experience has been rendered different; a 'difference that is difficult' to bridge." Parashar goes on to point out that with its strength and vitality and its refusal to back down, Indian feminism needs no western support. However, the question of 'difference' and thereby of 'silence' of western feminism needs to be understood with all its ramifications.

Even while this paper was being written, another mega story of sexual molestation, legally amounting to rape, was seized gleefully by the media. Gleefully, because the accused was none other than the enfant terrible of the Indian media, the one man who had broken new ground in journalism and had established 'sting' operations as the norm of investigative journalism in India – Tarun Tejpal. Tejpal's Tehelka magazine and its brash stories were welcomed by the Indian middle classes, tired as they were of the rampant corruption and double speak of politicians and bureaucrats. The reception within the media itself was guarded to this new wave of bold, brave, break-all-norms kind of journalism. As senior journalist Bachi Karkaria pointed out in her blog *Erratica* "as an old-fashioned journalist, I was uncomfortable with stingfests passing off as investigative reporting"³ Another noted journalist Sevanti Ninan pointed out that Tehelka "seized upon sting entrapments to create sensational journalism, even if it meant recording private conversations of cricketers, or hiring sex workers to entrap officials, or thinking up an imaginary piece of defence equipment to supply."⁴

What is interesting is the manner in which this particular episode has been virtually ruling the media space over the past one week. While on the one hand, there is unbound amusement on the part of the BJP and the RSS, whose activities were consistently targeted by Tehelka, it is the way in which the media has highlighted this particular episode that is raising pertinent questions. The Delhi Gang Rape of Dec 2012 saw unprecedented number of people on the streets of Delhi and elsewhere in India demanding safety of women in public spaces. The Tarun Tejpal 'saga' as CNN editor in chief Rajdeep Sardesai chose to put it, is on the contrary, completely media-driven. Bachi Karkaria correctly raises the question in her piece 'Stinkfest, Slugfest' that in this "clamorous pursuit of justice for the violated girl, our strident demand for the severest punishment, in our counter-

³ See *Erratica*, Times of India blog by Bachi Karkaria.

⁴ See *Tehelka's Achilles Heel* by Sevanti Ninan in livemint.com published 28.Nov, 13.

expose of Tehelka's own murky revenue model, have we turned into a lynch mob?"

The question of representation becomes very important here. Why is it that the Tarun Tejpal issue is being taken up for 24/7 news, with continuous updates throughout the day? Why was it that the media chose to under-represent the gang rape of a minor girl in a moving car in Delhi on October 24 or bury the brutal questioning of another minor rape victim by a Delhi cop, who is said to have asked the girl to 'show' how she was raped? The two other cases, which were reported from the national capital in October were taken up for routine coverage by television channels and were forgotten within no time. The question, therefore, is not about violence or gender, but more about location, class, one's proximity to power and of course, visibility. The selective blindness of the mainstream media is especially glaring when it comes to representing events in places located away from centres of power. During a recent visit to Shimoga, (which to people living here is certainly the centre of the world!) Rajdeep Sardesai and Sagarika Ghose exclaimed in astonishment about the *intellectual rigour* in *mofussil* towns (italics mine). During the question and answer session that followed Rajdeep's lecture, the astonishment on the part of the two media personalities was once again on show, with both speakers expressing appreciation about the 'quality' of discussion which according to Rajdeep surpassed the ones held in metros. For those of us who have chosen to live in so-called mofussil towns, such patronising astonishment is a matter of scorn, since it is just a pointer to the short-sightedness of the 'elite' classes. The joke ends however when it comes to representation of gender violence in mainstream media because all that goes unreported is also forgotten in our media-driven society. A glaring example of media blindness about gender violence in places away from the metros is the rape and killing of a 13 year old minor girl in Thirthahalli taluk of Shimoga district in 2005. The girl, who used to walk through a long stretch of forest and a hamlet to reach her school, was watched by a young man, Chethan. After learning her schedule, Chetan followed her into the forest, raped her and murdered her using the ribbon which she had used to tie her hair. Though the boy was arrested, he was sent to a remand home by the court on the ground that he was a minor at the time of committing the act. Though newspapers in Shimoga carried the report extensively,⁵ very little coverage was given to the incident either by the state papers and certainly not by television news media. Following the court's decision several protests were taken out in Shimoga city by women's activists demanding that the Juvenile Justice Act be revoked and juveniles indulging in adult crimes be treated as adults. Perhaps it is in instances such as this that the class nature of the media and also of public protests emerge.

Another example which shook the collective conscience of the people of India, but to which lip service was paid by mainstream television media, was the acquittal of members of the Ranveer Sena by the Patna High Court for lack of evidence on charges of massacring 58 Dalits in Laxmanpur-Bathe village in Bihar. The victims included 27

⁵ See 'An Incident of Shame and Disgust', Deccan Herald internet edition dated 27.10.2005

women and 10 children. While ‘Who Killed Jessica Lal’ hit headlines for weeks together, similar questions raised by kin of those killed in Laxmanpur-Bathe remain unacknowledged. The victim in the Tarun Tejpal case has asserted, in a letter, that “rape is not about lust or sex, but about power, privilege and entitlement. Thus this new law should be applicable to everybody – the wealthy, the powerful, and the well connected - and not just to faceless strangers.”⁶ The same argument holds good for representation of gender violence. Representation and justice should be applicable to everybody. Not just to the wealthy, the powerful and the well connected but also to faceless strangers.

Gender violence and its increased visibility in India is a concern that is being analysed in all its complexity in recent years. There are divergent views about whether violence has increased or whether the visibility of violence has increased in Indian society. In 2011, more than 24,000 cases were reported in India. In Delhi alone from January to August 2013, 1,121 cases were reported, the highest in 13 years. There is no doubt that the number of incidents which are being reported have sharply increased since the 80s. Social scientists have tried to answer this paradox of how on the one hand women have access to better education and increased opportunities in the public sphere and on the other violence has continued to increase. The questions of power, the fear of woman’s sexuality, the loss of control coupled with cultural stereotypes are all seen as reasons for violence. In a survey conducted by the medical journal ‘The Lancet’ in countries in Asia and Pacific, men who had forced unwilling partners to have sex (the term ‘rape’ was not used in the survey) cited reasons like punishment, entertainment, being drunk and sexual entitlement as reasons for their actions. Not surprisingly, more than 70 per cent said that they had raped because they felt ‘entitled’ to do so.⁷ Clearly, violence, especially sexual violence, has deep patriarchal roots. As feminist scholar Jacqui True points out in her book *The Political Economy of Violence Against Women* “relatively poor access to economic social and political resources for women and men is associated with being both perpetrators and victims of violence.” (2012, 183).

Incidentally, the nature of representation and visualisation of women in the media, especially the new media, has thrown up several challenges to women. Though there is as yet no conclusive proof to link watching pornography to increased violence in society, metaanalysis conducted in 2010 suggested that there is a link between consumption of violent pornography and rape-supportive attitudes in certain populations of men.⁸ In conservative societies like India, where interaction with the opposite sex is limited, the impact is likely to be far greater and far more violent. With little or no internet protection, information or advice, juveniles and school children are getting addicted to watching porn. Three years ago, a teacher in a government school in the remote village of Arabilachi in

⁶ See ‘What Tejpal did to me falls within the legal definition of rape’, *The Hindu* dated 30.11.2013. p 12.

⁷ Jewkes, Rachel, Emma Fulu, Tim Roselli, and Claudia Garcia-Moreno. "The Lancet iPad App: Articles in a New Light." *TheLancet.com*. Elsevier Ltd, 10 Sept. 2013. Web. 16 Nov. 2013.

⁸ See Wikipedia: Effects of pornography

Bhadravathi taluk told me that high school teachers were now asked to check the pockets of boys to discover micro SD cards since several students had been caught watching porn during school hours! For such children, when their knowledge of women and sexuality comes from commercial porn sites, the effects can be far-reaching. According to *TheNew York Times*, the number of people searching for ‘porn’ in India had increased fivefold from 2004 to 2013. The report goes on to say that Delhi had the highest worldwide percentage of searches for ‘porn’ in the year 2012.⁹ As Ranjana Kumari, director of the Centre for Social Research, New Delhi points out watching porn can create heightened sexual desire and aggression in young men, because society in India is highly segregated and young men have very little normal interaction with women.¹⁰

While analysts have consistently pointed out that rape is not about sex or sexual gratification, but about entitlement, a planned assault on human rights, a reiteration of power and dominance, the fact remains that in a complex society like India, which is in a stage of transition, the issues to address are numerous. Patriarchy, gender roles, women’s empowerment and its consequences, fear of sexuality, domination, the economic and financial fall-outs of a rapidly globalising society are all contributory factors for the gruesome incidents of violence in society. Arundhati Roy in one of her essays pointed out to the schizophrenic nature of Indian society wherein one world, a glittering world of wealth and opportunities, was rushing headlong towards a global stage and the other, disadvantaged, ill prepared and uncomprehending, was moving towards an empty, dark world.¹¹ It is in this context that the representation and visualisation of women have to be examined very carefully. On the one hand, women’s achievements in society are either mis- represented or under-represented. On the other, distorted representations of woman, as an object of sexual gratification, are being furthered in the public sphere leading to devastating violence. The other aspect is the cynical politicisation and commercialisation of gender violence, especially by the visual media, disregarding not just notions of ethics and propriety but also of justice. In the case relating to Tarun Tejpal, in an open letter to the media, the woman journalist who was sexually molested by Tejpal pointed out, “(T)he struggle for women to assert control over their lives and their bodies is most certainly a political one, but feminist politics and its concerns are wider than the narrow universe of our political parties. Thus, I call upon our political parties to resist the temptation to turn a very important discussion about gender, power and violence into a conversation about themselves.”¹²

⁹ Thirani, Neha, and Heather Timmons. "India Considers Banning Pornography as Reported Sexual Assault Rises." *NYTimes.com*. NY Times, 22 Apr. 2013. Web. 16 Nov. 2013

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ See Arundhati Roy’s article *Shall We Leave it to the Experts* in *Outlook India*, January 2002

¹² See ‘What Tejpal did to me falls within the legal definition of rape’, *The Hindu* dated 30.11.2013. p

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