

# No country for women

Rage is a tight pit coiled at the bottom of my stomach, with fear jostling for equal space.

BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

Let me explain.

It was a grey and gloomy evening in early December when my friend Malathi and I met at my house for our weekly catch-up over coffee. The mood was equally grim, given the turn our usually cheerful conversation had taken. Like most other women in India at the time, we were discussing the gruesome rape and murder of a young veterinarian in the South Indian city of Hyderabad. Now note, Hyderabad is considered one of the safer cities in the country, with its unhurried pace of life, multicultural if conservative outlook.

At some point, we spoke about the last phone call the woman had made to her sister when her motorbike broke down near an isolated toll gate on her way back home from work. Publicly shared and dissected — the Home Minister of the state even issued a statement that she ought to have called the police instead of her sister — in the aftermath of the murder, this call was her desperate attempt to feel connected to a familiar and secure world outside the dark and desolate road where she was stranded. “Keep talking to me, I feel scared,” she is reported to have told her sister. The sister, sitting far away from the scene, possibly in the secure comfort of her home, could not possibly fathom the very real threat lurking around the corner, casually dismissing the vet’s unease about a group of men staring at her. “This is the way my sister and I talk to each other,” said Malathi, “Actually, this could have been a conversation between us.”

What she did not say aloud — just like me and a million other women across India — was that it could have been me on that road that night. If not that very road, then any other road, in any other city in India. And I would likely have met a similar fate. It broke my heart when my husband of 19 years looked up from his newspaper the other day to say: “I am glad we chose not to bring any children into this bleak world. This is no country for women.”

India has been seeing a spate of sexual assaults against women in the last few years. Another cold December in 2012, the brutal rape and murder of Jyoti Singh, a bright 23-year-old training to be a physiotherapist in New Delhi shocked the nation and stirred



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Students in Mumbai, India, hold a candle march in early December 2019 to protest against the growing incidents of violent crime against women. Days earlier, a veterinarian in Hyderabad was gang raped and burnt to death



Protests following the December 2012 gang rape of a female medical student in New Delhi. She died 13 days later after undergoing emergency treatment in a Singapore hospital

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the collective conscience of 1.3 billion people. There were angry media reports and peaceful protest marches in various cities, where both men and women stood together, seeking not just justice for Jyoti but also from the government an assurance of safety for all women.

But that turned out to be just the tip of a particularly sadistic and vicious epidemic of violence against women. A two-year-old child raped by a neighbour. A woman raped over three days by 40 men. Another woman raped and burnt to death. Rape victim killed by mercenary assailants on her way to a court hearing. The stories come out fast and furious every single day, turning my stomach and leaving me deeply furious and helpless at the same time.

Unable to deal with the turmoil of these conflicting emotions alone, I look to my women friends for their thoughts. Aparna Karthikeyan, my writer pal from Mumbai, flatly stated: "None of us are safe." As the mother of a 21-year-old daughter who has just entered the megapolis' teeming workforce, she added: "I get paranoid and worry endlessly when a particularly violent incident happens."

Of course, India is not alone in being a place where rape is a common, everyday occurrence. Indeed, the threat of sexual violence — by intimate partners, by family members, by ominous strangers, by those in power — is one many women across the world live with all the time.

But there are a few factors that uniquely mark this crime in India; the chilling pervasiveness of gang rape, for instance. Anywhere else, rape committed by a group of men, known rather flippantly as gang rape, occurs in situations like war, where rape is a display of power rather than lust. Here in India, bands of men seem to wander the streets, planning and executing their rape fantasies together. Harini Calamur, a highly respected journalist and social media commentator, told me: "I think the first issue to address is that we have a rape problem. We also have a gang rape problem. And we need to ask why this happens in a relatively peaceful nation (not one torn by strife), and what emboldens men to hunt in packs and commit rape as a gang."

Then there is the staggering savagery of the attacks, the extent of physical pain inflicted on the victim. The unending assaults, the mutilations, the murders. All of this is bookended by a shocking indifference from the government and unwillingness to

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provide justice for those affected (the women themselves and their families) or enforce stricter law and order to curb this scourge.

Add to this the strange and stomach-turning Indian notion that a woman's sexuality is intractably linked to her honour. A rape victim, especially in non-urban areas of this vast country, is believed to have invited shame upon herself and her family. And in some cases, the rapist comes forward to marry his victim, thus offering a closure that assuages the family, even as it leaves the woman's emotions and choices unacknowledged. Why, in 2015, a judge at the Madras High Court came under fire for authorising the release of a rapist on bail so that he could "mediate" with his victim (according to a report in the *Washington Post*) and arrive at a "happy ending", which in this case meant marriage.

Harini summed it up this way: "If you look at the official numbers on rape, they seem low, but that is because most women don't report it. At one level, it is societal attitudes towards rape that condemns the woman. The other is the way the criminal justice system works for women, especially women from economically weaker sections who accuse a man of rape, and especially if the man is from a more powerful strata in society."

Madhumita Pandey, a lecturer of Criminology at Sheffield Hallam University, conducted interviews with 100 rape convicts in New Delhi's infamous Tihar jail in 2015. One common thread that she found was victim-blaming, the suggestion that the fault lay squarely with the woman. Even a five-year-old girl who had been raped by a 23-year-old man — "she provoked me by touching me inappropriately," he claimed in his interview. Surely enough, when the young vet's family alerted the police as soon as she failed to return home, the authorities responded with callous suggestions that she had possibly eloped with someone.

Aparna lamented over email: "What gives men the right over women's bodies? Are we not collectively responsible for this? Sure, we are raising daughters to be fearless and conquer the world, but what are we telling our sons?" In these few lines, my friend expressed her disquiet over the toxic notions of masculinity ingrained in men by familial upbringing and social conditioning.

Patriarchy... that overarching word that seems to explain Indian society, is one that has lodged itself permanently in my consciousness. Malathi defined it as the need for men to assert their superiority by oppressing women in every possible manner.

“Thanks to our culture of separating the sexes from childhood, and taboos surrounding sexual activity before marriage, there is seething sexual frustration, that manifests as a ‘let me grab what I can’ attitude towards women.”

Harini said something similar. “With ever easier exposure to pop culture, young people are growing up with highly sexualised images of women, and highly objectionable depictions of consent. While you cannot ban anything, you can mitigate the harmful effects by intensive gender sensitisation programmes and sex education, starting from early school.”

I have been calling these affected women “victims”, but the media lauded Jyoti Singh’s bravery and labelled her “Nirbhaya” (“the fearless one” in Hindi), as she lay fighting for her life in hospital. As someone who now looks over her shoulder every time she walks on a lonely road even in broad daylight, and pays the exorbitant fare demanded by the cab driver rather than incur his wrath, I can vouch for the fact that Jyoti must have felt anything but brave in those bleak and painful days following her brutalisation at the hands of four men, among them a teenager.

Aparna said: “Every single day, I try not to let paranoia grip me and stop me or my daughter from going about our lives, but...” Malathi echoed this sentiment: “I feel scared. While I may call myself a feminist and talk a lot about women’s liberation, I would still be cautious about what my teenage daughter wears when she goes out, who she hangs out with and how she travels.

Outrage and dismay around the increasing sexual violence is becoming the norm in the new era of right-wing politics in India. Was I alone in feeling this impotent rage? It turned out, no. Malathi expressed her frustration to me. “I wish that every time someone even intends harm to a woman, she transforms into Kali, kills them, and becomes her normal self again.” She was evoking the fierce warrior goddess that Indians venerate, but fail to transpose into any kind of respect for regular, not-so-divine women.

The two sexes have been standing together in protest, with an outpouring of ire on conventional and social media, and demands for politicians to wake up to a situation fast getting out of control. Unfortunately, public attention is easily and quickly diverted by the rise of communal conflict in the country, fuelled by the same politicians for their electoral gains. As of today, the clamour over the issue of sexual violence has again died down, and will only be rekindled at the next such horrific incident.

Aparna ended her email weakly with, “My daughter and I, we take precautions — it’s sadly a necessity — but we do try and keep a little faith in humanity.” As for me, I am finding it more and more difficult to hang on to that faith with every passing day. 



Women’s rights activists during a demonstration in Bangalore, India

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