

B.D.R, A.D.R. or Anno Domini

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The Christian era is marked by two initials, B.C. or Before Christ and A.D. or Anno Domini, which means in the Year of Our Lord. However, when we read the newspapers today it would almost appear as if these two initials have been replaced by B.D.R or Before Delhi Rape and A.D.R. or After Delhi Rape. In the B.D.R. era rape cases were reported somewhere on the seventh page of a newspaper as a tiny item, but in the A.D.R. era right from the front page headline every page has mention of some rape case or other in some part of the country. Were we all **celibate saints** in B.D.R. and in A.D.R. have we all become a nation of **satyric, priapic** devils from whom no woman is safe, especially if she is a child?

In every society and in every religion the use of force against women for fulfillment of sexual desire has been looked down upon. In Roman legend the rape of Lucretia by the son of Tarquinus Superbus, the man who ruled Rome, led to her suicide and this, in turn, caused the Romans under the leadership of Brutus to rebel against the Tarquinus and expel them from Rome. The man of character, Ram, the chaste woman, **Sita** and the **Immaculate Conception** have always been the ideal and chastity and virtue have always been considered the hallmarks of a civilised society. What, then, has happened to this society in A.D.R. so that we are now projected as a nation in which no woman is safe? Is it a sudden epidemic of machismo in which rape and conquest of women are the only true proofs of masculinity or is the phenomenon much deeper, more serious and indicative of moral degeneration which should cause us much worry? Is it a build-up of sexual frustration in a society where men and women do not mingle very freely and, therefore, male sexuality has to be satisfied through rape?

Actually what is being experienced and reported now is part of a very complex situation in which a number of factors are operating simultaneously. Traditional society had a value system, partly religious, partly social in which because society was close knit, there was an extent of social pressure and peer pressure which made people behave in a particular desirable manner. This is not unique to India because other societies also had and have their own norms and mores of behaviour. The breakup of the joint family, urbanisation and rural-urban migration, the new heterogeneity of population have all led to a breakdown of old values without being substituted by a new value system. Peer pressure has more or less disappeared and the social organisation of a mohalla has been replaced by the anarchy of the slum. These are factors we must bear in mind if we are to understand and deal with the present phenomenon of forced sexual attention on innocent women by irresponsible men.

There are certain organisations which have to be in the vanguard of restoring respect for women in India. The first is organised government at the level of the Centre, the States, the Municipalities and the Panchayats. By encouraging community level institutions which can interact socially with the people of a mohalla or village we can create a structure which helps to evolve new social values and provide a platform for people to come together and discuss social issues. The second institution would be the education system where the teaching of moral values must find equal place with reading, writing and arithmetic. It is in the school and at the knee of the mother that a child imbibes values and we must emphasise that moral values are absolutely essential if the nation is to prosper. We also need an excellent professional

counselling service which identifies people who need help and then proceeds to render psychological advice to troubled people, potential criminals and youth who have strayed from the path of virtues. With all this we still need government to perform its duty of governance. The Police is a part of government and police officers must understand that a sexual assault on a woman is a heinous offence and it is the duty of the Police both to prevent it and take swift and firm action if an assault has taken place. The Police cannot be everywhere, but if would-be criminals know that the Police can appear unexpectedly and that no sexual crime will go unpunished, it would have a strong deterrent effect.

The latest incident in Delhi indicates that the Police did not appreciate the seriousness of the offence and that has led to public protest and many administrative complications. I firmly believe that swift police action, speedy trial and condign punishment have a key place in our system of criminal justice and if strict police action puts the fear of the law into would-be wrongdoers, crime would certainly reduce. That includes rape. The proof of this is that when Guiliani became Mayor of New York, then considered one of the most dangerous cities in the world, he ordered the Police to adopt a zero tolerance attitude to crime and to prosecute even the most minor offence. When I was in the IAS Training School fifty-six years ago we were told that when a law and order situation develops we should crack down on minor offences, enforce Minor Acts and create an environment of fear of the law. It worked for us and it certainly worked for New York because today it is a safe city. Therefore, let policing not be aimed only at rape. Let the general level of policing become stringent so that even a minor offence invites police intervention. This would create an environment in which all criminals, including would-be rapists, would be deterred.

In India we are very poor at law enforcement. People build illegally, in violation of Building Byelaws and it takes a major house collapse in Thane to temporarily awaken us. People encroach on public land with impunity, knowing that some politician, well bribed, will prevent its removal and in any case before the election it would be regularised regardless of the party in power. Traffic laws are violated, street protests, including the one currently under way in Delhi, disrupt normal life, but any action to curb it raises howls of protest from the agitators. Criminals extort money from shopkeepers and we do nothing about it. The day we enforce laws strictly, all laws, not only those relating to rape, people will begin to respect the law and the **phenomenon of rape** would **take a nosedive**. Let policing be firm, consistent and relentless if we want a society rooted in law, that is my mantra.
