

The Status of Women And Media Militancy

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A twenty-three-year old girl was raped by six brutes in a moving bus in Delhi, she was internally assaulted with an iron rod and so grievously injured that despite the best efforts of medical teams in India and Singapore, she died a few days later. This incident was widely reported in print and electronically and it caused nationwide revulsion and outrage. The media played a significant and laudable role not only in reporting the incident but also in waking us up to how insecure women were in India. It also exposed the weaknesses in the male psyche, the male attitude towards women and our failure after so many years of independence to change how men view women and to genuinely empower women so that they share a relationship of equality with their male compatriots. Sexual assault is one proof of this failure, but even worse is the skewed sex ratio which is weighted against women and symbolises the totally irrational preference for boys in Hindu society. For the media to give a clarion call for change, therefore, is welcome.

The anger of the people spilled on to the streets, forcing even our lethargic government to come out of slumber and take action. The Justice J.S. Verma Committee was constituted and it submitted its report and suggestions in a record one month. Government accepted 14 out of 16 recommendations and the President has promulgated an Ordinance tightening anti rape laws. Courts dedicated to trying cases of sexual offences have been set up, with directions from the Supreme Court to deal with them with due dispatch. In States across the board courts have started disposing of such cases and there have been some convictions. For this the media and the force of public opinion can rightly claim credit.

Since this incident every day there is reporting of a whole spate of sexual abuse of children, rape by adults, molestation, eve teasing and worse. In fact so much of media space and time is now being occupied by such reports that reading the newspaper the impression is created of a country of sex hungry maniacs, of ravaged maidens, of humiliated women, all living in an environment in which women are objects of male lust and all males are wicked ogres. The situation is depicted as being so bad that compared with us Sodom and Gomorrah were models of purity and goodness. The daughter of a friend, who lives in America, came visiting with her infant daughter. She was so horrified with what she read that she expressed grave doubt about ever letting her daughter settle in India. This is a shameful situation and must set us all thinking.

The accused in the bus rape case have been arrested, their trial has begun and it is on the fast track. But the newspapers are still full of ever newer rape cases from all over the country. It is almost as if before the Delhi rape case everything was normal and now suddenly the country has become bestial. Is this a fact, is there exaggeration, or is it only the tip of the iceberg? Before we answer these questions let us try and see how our society is constituted and why are we behaving the way we do or are reported to be doing. India has been and is largely a rural society, fairly homogenous at settlement level, conservative by nature, traditionalist, perhaps both religiously and socially orthodox, in which women were generally confined to the household. Early marriage ensured that from the sheltered environment of the parental home the girl passed to the equally sheltered environment of her married home, that is, the household of the in-laws. This was easy where people lived in joint families, but the system became stressed

as people shifted towards the nuclear family, in which the couple moved out of the family home and created an independent home of their own.

In the nuclear family the husband worked and earned, but the wife also set out on her own to earn, either for her own self or to augment the family income. Girls, too, began to be educated and they were certainly not amenable to blindly accepting the parental choice of a life partner. The working wife, the educated girl who wanted to stand on her own feet, would naturally move out of the family fold and lead a life whose terms are suggested, if not dictated, by westernised behaviour patterns, mores and norms of dress and deportment.

Indian society is more complex than in the West because though class may be a determining factor in the West, in India it is class, caste, religion, region and a plethora of other factors which create layer upon layer of society. At the same time there is a dynamism in our society which is creating ferment of different kinds, some social, some economic, some relating to mobility, some political which has simultaneously unleashed flux on the one hand and transition on the other. Flux creates its own energy fields and transition makes society mobile in both physical terms and in social behaviour. Conservatism and orthodoxy versus liberalism is a phenomenon of this transition, the latest example of which is the three-member all girls band from Kashmir in which the girls tried to give a voice to their desire for emancipation and for living life on their own terms. Muslim orthodoxy won in this case and a fatwa snuffed out the endeavour of these liberal minded girls, who now hide in fear of their lives. If India were ever to be branded a failed State I would accept as irrefutable evidence our government's surrender to bigotry and its inability or unwillingness to protect the girls. If government were strong in its resolve to promote secularism, liberalism and a scientific temper it is the Maulanas who issued the fatwa who should be hiding in some cubbyhole, trembling with fear at the retribution that would overtake them.

This is not a solitary case. Every Valentine's Day the hooligans of the Bajrang Dal ransack shops and restaurants and harass young boys and girls who might be together. The State stands by and watches, whereas it should be delivering a good hard kick to the vandals. Some historian writes something about Shivaji which the Shiv Sena dislikes and one of the best historical libraries in Pune is set ablaze. Salman Rushdie cannot visit Jaipur or Calcutta because a panicky government prefers surrender to bigots rather than to enforce the law. Where the lumpen overwhelm the forces of liberalism is it surprising that women become targets of violence rather than be hailed as representatives of the liberal forces in India?

These social phenomena need to be recognised and understood to at least partially explain why the status of women is at such a low ebb. As more young women come into the education fold the number of students who go to school and college and are released from the confines of the parental home grows, ever increasing number of girls meet boys in class, their dress habits change as they copy their more modern peers from liberal homes and there is greater absorption of western attitudes and behaviour. This does not mean that the Indian girl student is totally western in her behaviour, mores and life style because she is, after all, the product of a fairly conservative society, but she is certainly more assertive than her stay-at-home compatriots and she is seeking means of articulation of her aspirations and desires. Dressing differently, a greater inclination to mix freely socially, sometimes even speaking frankly on issues hitherto taboo, are some of the manifestations of how girls try and exhibit a modern picture of themselves. It is also this class of girls which is under the maximum attack by the champions of orthodoxy on the one hand and on the other by the hooligans who are free of social inhibitions

because they are male, are not constrained by the social norms they are trying to escape and who look on women, particularly slightly liberated ones, as prey.

We shall return to the Indian scene a little later, but let us look at two different kinds of societies. One is the Taliban kind of society in which a woman is clearly subordinate and subject to the whims of the males. Here Taliban does not mean Muslim, because some of the views about women in the Old Testament would make Abdullah-el-Wahab appear a liberal. Similarly, orthodox Hindu organisations such as VHP and Bajrang Dal hold very similar views about woman's place in society, but especially how she is expected to behave. Here the woman is probably safe from rape, but she has no personal freedom, is required to implicitly obey her parents, her husband, her in-laws and certainly she has no independence of thought, of behaviour or of movement. I am sure that this is not the safety that the Indian woman seeks.

Then there is western society in which women's emancipation at one stage was symbolised by bra-burning, free love, the hippy movement, drugs and a complete departure from conventional norms. Haight-Ashbury became the capital of the new emancipation, which embraced both men and women. However, as drug abuse caused incalculable damage to the user and revulsion in society, as the Vietnam war reached closure and removed a major cause of protest and revolt, as H.I.V. loomed large as the new killer virus, as non conformist behaviour itself became the new conformism, the movement showed down and is now only seen as a marginalised fringe. Western society became even more liberal, but its pace became more sedate as it settled down to a life with values and definitive norms and patterns of behaviour.

Today's western society accepts men and women to be equal unless, of course, one is talking of a metaphoric glass ceiling, especially in politics. Marriage as an institution is now in a peculiar 'take it or leave it' state, but the senseless promiscuity of the 60s and 70s of the twentieth century is also a thing of the past. Western women now seem to exercise more choice in dress, personal behaviour, education, career, parenthood, entertainment and mate selection. However, there is an unwritten but well understood dress code. Dressing for work is more uniform than casual dressing for leisure. For formal entertainment there are formal clothes, but it is permissible to dress provocatively if one is frequenting a place where one can choose a mate – for the evening, for a longer relationship, or permanently. However, dressing to attract does not give every male the right to be attracted or to be excessively forward or disrespectful. It is clearly understood that on the basis of mutual attraction one can choose one's companion, but for everyone else it is "eyes front, hands off, buzz off". Society may be permissive but it is the woman who is allowed to decide what is permitted.

In India, which is a society in transition, we are not quite orthodox, nor are we quite westernised. Some women are more westernised than even western women, but they inhabit a world of the rich and the influential and are beyond the reach of the brutes and the lumpen. The middle class and the lower class have acquired a thin veneer of modernity, but deep down they are still traditional. Women here may express liberal thoughts, may be slightly more adventurous in dress, may even meet boyfriends on the sly,. But they do not totally adopt the life style, norms and mores of their western sisters. They might want to adopt the romanticised versions of boy meets girl, but unlike a Spanish maiden at the evening 'pasaeo' who would be chagrined if she did not merit a wolf whistle or two, or the Italian girls who might even tolerate a pinch, the average Indian girl would scream blue murder at lascivious looks, remarks and gestures. Quite rightly too, because unlike the Spanish or Italian 'gallant' who understands the rules of the game of flirting, many of our youngsters who accost women are frustrated hoodlums for whom every

slightly liberated woman is fair game. Their inability to distinguish between a signal of invitation and what are only outward signs of modernity is one of the major reasons for the feeling of insecurity among women.

Rape is the ultimate crime against women and the forms of sexual offensiveness would be only a notch below. Society must react strongly to deviant behaviour and must respond fast, ruthlessly and effectively. By doing away with the link between sin and repentance, by not punishing wrong doers we have only encouraged lawlessness. Strong policing, quick trial, condign punishment does deter crime and these methods must be used by the State with great determination. But it is also a fact that unless we can bring about a virtual revolution in male thinking and behaviour women would not find their right place in a liberal society of equality. For this we need:-

1. Proper management of social flux and transition to prevent lumpenisation of male society.
2. A reiteration of traditional respect for women without forcing them back into purdah
3. A massive upsurge in women's education so that they themselves begin to inculcate liberal values.
4. A mass campaign by the media to educate men in liberal values without rejection of traditional values, so that they willingly accept women as equal.
5. A similar campaign to educate women to recognise gender realities as they exist today so that they can modernise without provoking, become contemporary without becoming rootless, exercise a choice in mate selection, but in a manner which fits into our value systems so that neither are wrong signals sent, nor is a situation created in which freedom is read as availability and to generally evolve a behaviour pattern that is liberal but not overly provocative.

The last made point might attract criticism as an attempt to curb the freedom of women. When Sheila Dixit advised caution she was severely criticised by the activists. In one T.V. programme compered by Barkha Dutt one angry young woman said that if she wanted to walk down the streets of Delhi in the nude does that mean that she should be raped? Of course not, but indecent exposure is an offence under section 290 read with section 268 IPC, as also section 294 IPC. Suppose I were to state that in a country which drives on the left if I insist on driving on the right does it mean that I must suffer an accident? The answer is that if I do something idiotic I would have to suffer the consequences. Women must feel safe, they must be safe, but surely they should also be sensible. That means that a degree of reasonable caution should not be construed to be a curb on freedom, nor modesty in dress and behaviour a curse or an attack on liberalism. In this the media has a vital role, to educate both men and women so that we evolve into a gender equality society.
