

India: 'Defend women's right to freedom without fear! Ensure swift and sure punishment for rape!'

Thursday 27 December 2012, by [KRISHNAN Kavita](#) (Date first published: 24 December 2012).

This is the cover story of the forthcoming January 2013 issue of Liberation, magazine of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation. It is posted at Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal with Kavita Krishan's permission. Kavita Krisnan is secretary of the All India Progressive Women's Association (AIPWA).

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December 24, 2012 — In the midst of the unspeakable horror of a rape and attempted murder in Delhi is a spark of hope that we nurture, cradling it with our hands lest it be snuffed out, helping the spark to grow into a steadier flame - and then spread into a forest fire.

A young woman, a 23-year-old student of physiotherapy, boarded a bus in Delhi with a male friend. They were alone on the bus but for a group of men, who began taunting the woman for being out at night with a man. She and her friend didn't take the taunts lying down - and eventually the group of men decided to "teach her a lesson". They beat her friend senseless. And they ganged up to rape her, brutalising her and leaving her intestines torn.

The hope lies in the huge numbers of people who have come out to protest afterwards. The spontaneous anger and determination to bring rapists to justice was good to see. But even better was the willingness to direct that anger against the society and culture that justifies rape and sexual violence. The popular will - on part of ordinary women and men - to address the roots of sexual violence and end it, is what inspires more hope and confidence than all the fire-spewing rhetoric of MPs in parliament.

Challenging rape culture

One woman who saw a video of our protest demonstration and the speeches of activists at Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dixit's house wrote to me to say that the protest struck a chord with her: "Younger girls have been writing to me, absolutely distressed, because their parents are using the Delhi gang rape case as an example of what happens when you 'stray'. Now, they are unable to do anything: from having conversations with their male friends to go to a college of their choice.

Watching your protest gave me so much hope and a sense of solidarity.”

Sexual violence is, indeed, a way of imposing patriarchal discipline on women. Women who defy such discipline are punished for their temerity by rape. And the fear of rape and sexual violence works as a permanent internal censor of women’s decisions. And “protection” from sexual violence most commonly takes the form of restrictions imposed on women: curfews in college hostels are the most common instance, followed by dress codes, bans on mobile phones, restrictions on mobility and friendships (especially with men friends), discouragement from taking admission in a college away from home, and so on. If sexual violence and the measures commonly used to contend with it breathe the same patriarchal air, no wonder women feel suffocated.

Some years ago, when journalist Sowmya Visvanathan was shot dead, Delhi’s chief minister commented that Sowmya had been “adventurous” in being out on the street at 3 am. The last Delhi police commissioner had said in a press conference, “If women go out alone at 2 am, they should not complain of being unsafe. Take your brother or a driver along.” Of course, these statements were greeted with a chorus of protest, with many pointing out that women who work have no choice but to be out late at night. In the present case, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders in parliament said that the victim had done nothing “rash” – she had not been out very late in the night. One national English TV channel discussing the rape in Delhi kept carrying these bulletins prominently – “She wasn’t dressed provocatively... She wasn’t out late at night... She wasn’t alone.”

The idea remains: that women ought not to be out at night unless they have good reason for it, that women ought to dress in ways that are not “provocative”. That it is acceptable to expect women to restrict their mobility and choice of dress in the interests of their safety. That it is acceptable to put women who face violence in the dock and ask them to “justify” themselves. In other words, there is a widely accepted notion that women have to acquit themselves of the charge of having “invited” rape. But in the protests this time around, it was refreshing to see and hear many women challenge this rape culture – a culture that justifies rape and blames women for “provoking” or “inviting” rape – head on. One placard said – “Don’t teach me how to dress, teach your sons not to rape.” Another declared, “My spirits are higher than my skirt, my voice is louder than my clothes.” And yet another handwritten placard held aloft by a student who was probably participating in a protest for the first time, declared, “You raped her because her clothes provoked you? I should break your face because your stupidity provoked me!”

When women are offered “protection” on patriarchal terms (terms that impose restrictions and regulations on women), it is time to say “Thanks but no thanks! We don’t need patriarchal ‘safeguards’ for women” – instead we must demand that the government, police, judiciary and other institutions stand in defence of women’s unqualified right to be adventurous, to dress and move and conduct themselves freely at any time of day or night, for any possible reason or no reason at all, without fear of sexual violence. After all, this freedom to be adventurous and to be safe in public spaces is one that men can take for granted; the adventurousness of men is valorised endlessly in popular culture.

Patriarchal ‘protection’ and ‘honour’

Look at the recent ad campaign by the Delhi Police against sexual violence, and you are struck by the fact that it has no women in it. Instead, there is actor-director Farhan Akhtar, saying, “Make Delhi safer for women. Are you man enough to join me?”. Another ad Delhi Police have been using for several years has a photograph of a woman being harassed by a group of men at a bus stop with some men and women simply looking on. This poster proclaims, “There are no men in this picture...”

or this would not happen” and urges “real men” to “save her from shame and hurt”. It suggests that sexual harassers are not “real men”; that women facing harassment feel “shame” (rather than anger); and that only “real men” can protect women. There is no attempt by the state machinery at asserting or propagating the idea of women’s freedom and rights.

The problem is that machismo is being prescribed as a solution – when in fact, it is the root of the problem of violence against women! Rape is not the only form of violence against women. Recently, there have been a series of incidents (in different parts of the country), where a father or a brother has chopped off the head of a woman for having an extramarital affair or for marrying outside their caste. A man in Tamil Nadu’s Dharmapuri district killed himself when his daughter married a Dalit – sparking off severe violence against the entire Dalit community. Men are being exhorted to defend women’s “honour” from “shame”. When they police their sisters’ or daughters’ relationships – even to point of murdering her in case of her defiance – do they not claim to have acted in defence of “honour”?

Then, there is the notion that rape robs a woman of “honour”. The Rajput queens of old are said to have preferred to burn themselves alive en masse rather than wait to be raped by conquering armies. One factor in the large number of suicides of women following rape is no doubt the fact that they are told their life is “ruined” and not worth living.

BJP leader Sushma Swaraj, speaking in parliament, declared that even if the Delhi rape victim were to survive, she would remain a zinda laash – a “living corpse”. Reacting to this statement, a woman student of Jawaharlal Nehru University, participating in a vigil at Safdarjung, said: “We’ve come here to let the rape survivor know we’re with her. We angry with the statement made by Sushma Swaraj that a woman who has been raped remains a “zinda laash”. We’re here to say we hope she lives the fullest life with her head held high – and it is the rapists who ought to suffer and be shamed, not the survivor!”

End custodial, communal and casteist rape

The outrage and anger over the rape and attempted murder of a young woman in Delhi is welcome. The outrage, solidarity and struggle for justice should also embrace the victims of custodial, communal and casteist rape.

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* <http://links.org.au/node/3158>