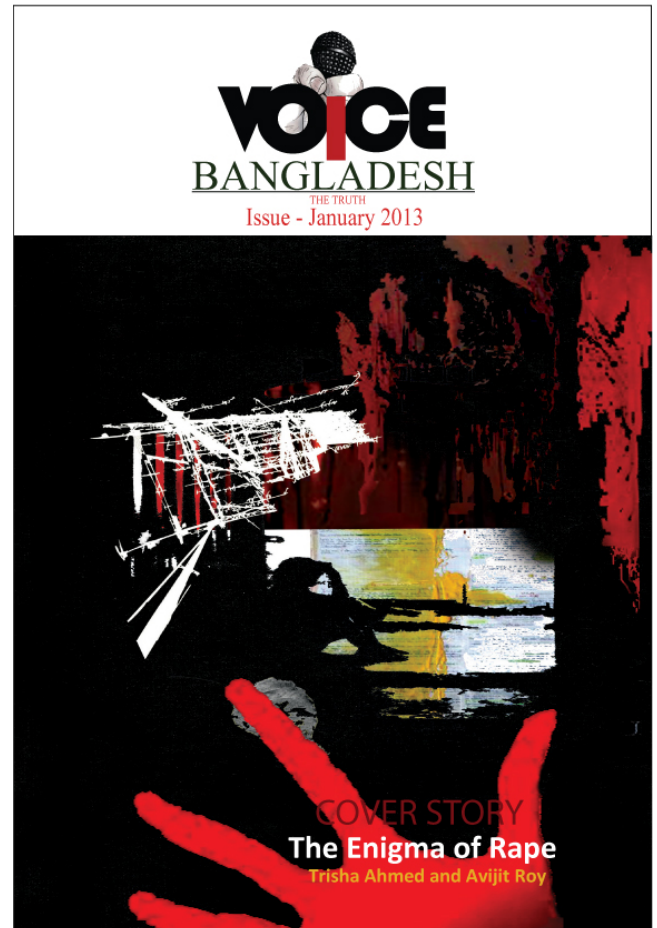


The Enigma of Rape

By Trisha Ahmed and Avijit Roy

The gruesome gang rape and subsequent death of a 23-year-old physiotherapy female student in Delhi has sparked an outpouring of national grief and outrage in India and beyond. According to the case report published in various newspapers, six men, including the bus driver, rode in an otherwise-vacant public bus and picked up the woman and her male companion, a 28-year-old software engineer, on Dec. 16 at one of the bus's stops. The driver, Ram Singh, drove his vehicle around for more than an hour as the other five men beat the woman and her friend. The group then stripped the two and raped the woman before throwing the bleeding pair out of the vehicle and onto the street. The woman's intestines and genitalia were severely damaged, most likely due to an iron rod allegedly used during the assault. She died of severe organ failure last Saturday at Singapore's Mount Elizabeth Hospital. Her name has not been released in public media, so various news organizations and Indian civilians have given her fictional names such as 'Nirbhaya' [Fearless One], and 'Damini', by the name of a Hindi movie character who was also a rape victim and fought for justice in the movie. After her death, the body was flown to New Delhi, where it was received by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi, the president of India's ruling Congress party. "Damini" was cremated a few hours later.

Just as the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut forced American politicians to rethink gun control laws, the late December rape incident in India has also spurred discussions regarding women's status in the country and the subject of rape in general. The topic of rape has historically been approached from a multitude of angles; it has been justified as an act of uncontrolled emotion of sexual attraction by some, and as a display of supremacy by others. Rape is often regarded as a despicable act that is conducted to display male domination over females, but is power really the only factor in explaining why men rape? Some scientists have pointed out that rape is not geographically unique to any society; it is a *cultural universal*, meaning that rape occurs in all known cultures. From this perspective, it becomes hard to believe that rape is fueled only by the desire to establish dominance stemming solely from societal influences. If power and social class are the only determining factors, then we would have noticed rich and powerful to be the culprits of the crime. On the contrary, researchers found the overwhelming majority of predatory rapists to be men of lower class and status – men with very dim prospects of gaining 'legitimate access' of women. For example, four of the suspects involved in the recent Delhi rape incident lived in a nearby slum, and one of them was the regular driver of the bus. Their wealth and social status were significantly lower than the status of the young psychology student and her male friend. Perhaps, from



this line of thinking, many experts are now beginning to believe that power and social status are *not* the driving forces for rape.

The bulk of this conclusion surprisingly came from one core scientific area: biology. The biological concept of evolutionary psychology is central to human and animal behaviors, and it explains how many of our daily behaviors are dictated by instinct, instead of by conscious thought. It is easy for society to label rape as a simple display of power or sexual attraction, but what is often overlooked are the underlying, crude 'benefits' rape has provided to the male race during times when mating partners were scarce. Because of this sexually-fueled psychological adaptation, along with contributing societal influences, the topic of rape indeed has many more layers and explanations than simply being an unpolished display of power and desire.

There are various reasons for why some scientists see rape as a psychological adaptation for men, which is summarized in the *rape-as-adaptation* theory. This theory gained fame in the year 2000, when biologist Randy Thornhill and anthropologist Craig Palmer published a book titled '*A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion*'. Thornhill proposed that men have evolved specialized psychological mechanisms for forcing sex on unwilling women as a reproductive strategy. Craig Palmer, on the other hand, argued that rape is a by-product of other instincts, such as the male desire for sexual variety which is easily-fulfilled via rape, assuming there are no later consequences for it. The two theorists published their combined thoughts in their book, which kindled immense controversy and a flash point of rage. The media along with many feminists, sex-crime prosecutors, and social scientists denounced the book at rallies and in the press for being a justification for rape.



In their defense, however, the two researchers (Thornhill and Palmer) later mentioned that the justification of rape was not their goal; they were simply trying to investigate the numerous possibilities regarding the evolution of rape and how, in some cases, the trait could be beneficial for some men from an objective viewpoint. In their opinion, such "evolved psychological mechanisms" exist which may ignite some people to commit rape. From the evidence derived from their study – i.e. that 'most rape victims are women of childbearing age', that 'rape is treated as a crime against the victim [in many cultures]', and that 'rape is common in war' — they tried to portray rape as 'a natural, biological phenomenon... a product of the human evolutionary heritage'. They also received partial support from other researchers, at the very least. David Buss, the professor of psychology at the University of Texas, for example, references author Randy Thornhill in many occasions while explaining the components of the *rape-as-adaptation* theory; however, he confessed that the evidence so far is inconclusive. Nevertheless, he indicates that all the elements of the theory show that males' sexual psychology might be the product of evolved rape adaptations which are "specialized psychological mechanisms for forcing sex on unwilling women as a reproductive strategy". Furthermore, men have historically raped women as a way to increase their chances of reproduction for a multitude of reasons: men who are not sexually appealing to consenting partners resort to rape so they can have a chance at passing their genes on; women in the teens to late twenties age group are targeted the most by rapists because they are the 'most fertile' during this period of their lives; some scientists believe that women are the most attractive to men at this time because it is a reproductive advantage and that there is a "male adaptation that leads to raping fertile women more often than non-fertile women". In one of the studies conducted in the west, among 1035 rape victims, women between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five, were far more likely to be raped than women in any other age category. In fact, eighty five percent of all rape victims worldwide are less than thirty-six years old. This is further emphasized in the observation that "men's sexual ardor is, in ultimate terms, a product of past selection pressure that favored it because it increased sexual access to many females of reproductive age"; as studies indicate, there are more opportunities to increase sperm count—which equal a higher number of

chances for reproduction—if a man rapes a wide variety of women, instead of only having sex with women who give them his consent.

Many researchers did not buy their story though. Biologist Joan Roughgarden of Stanford University called it “the latest ‘evolution made me do it’ excuse for criminal behavior from evolutionary psychologists”. Jerry Coyne, another reputed evolutionary biologist at the University of Chicago and the author of *Why evolution is true?*, discussed the scientific weaknesses of the adaptation of rape from the evolutionary scenario. He also disclosed some unsavory fiddling with statistics by the rape-adaptation theorists, who had distorted what the primary data on sexual assault really said. In many cases, the evidence supporting these hypothesized adaptations is either absent or ambiguous. Indeed, rape is common in war, but so are theft, looting, and property damage. Nobody claims that such acts have any biologically beneficial roles, which makes many questions why rape should receive any ‘evolutionary justification’. Critics of the rape-adaptation hypothesis also pointed out that many infertile women get raped as well. A few studies find that nearly a third of all rape victims are girls younger than 11 or are post-reproductive women older than 45, both of which are difficult to reconcile with the rape adaptation theory. Accordingly, 200,000 to 400,000 women were raped in the space of nine months by the Pakistani army during Bangladesh’s liberation war, and neither nine year old children nor eighty year old grandmothers, both being pre- or post-reproductive females, were spared.

One of us (Avijit Roy) wrote the book *Bhalobasha Kare Koy? (What Is Love?)* — the first Bangla book written on the topic of evolutionary psychology to analyze the attributes of love, infidelity, violence, orgasm, and psychological attractiveness from an evolutionary perspective. The book discussed the adaptive problems that we faced during our arduous journey in becoming human; among them was the tendency to rape. In analyzing the complex behavioral trait, the book referred to the work of Professor Kim Hill, who was then Thornhill’s colleague at UNM and is now at Arizona State University. For decades, Hill studied the Ache, a hunter-gatherer tribe (which arguably resembles our evolutionary past) in Paraguay, and tested the claim if rape really could increase a man’s fitness. Kim Hill calculated the fitness-cost and benefits of rape in that tribe. He constructed a hypothetical scenario in which members of the Ache tribe would gain and lose ‘fitness points’ depending on their personal behaviors and the consequences that accompanied them. For instance, rape would cost a man fitness points if the victim’s husband or other relatives kill the man in response to the rape. He could also lose fitness points if the mother refuses to raise a child of rape or if being a known rapist (it is assumed in a small hunter-gatherer tribe, rape and rapists are in public knowledge) makes others less likely to help him find food. Rape increases a man’s evolutionary fitness based on the chance that a rape victim is fertile (say 15 percent), that she will conceive (say, 7 percent chance), that she will not miscarry (about 90 percent) and that she will not let the baby die even though it is the child of rape (about 90 percent) etc. Hill then ran a simulation on the reproductive costs and benefits of rape. His findings showed that the cost of rape would exceed the predicted benefit by a factor of 10 – the benefit was not even close to matching the cost. Thus, Hill concluded that the likelihood of rape being an evolved adaptation is extremely low, giving us the impression that the *rape-as-adaptation* theory does not stand strongly on its own feet.

Furthermore, one should also analyze the abhorrence of rape from the victim’s point of view. If rape is viewed as an adaptation for man, it must also be noted that women do not want to be raped, that they do not experience rape as a sexual act, and that rape causes them to suffer from long-term physical and psychological damage. The psychological trauma experienced by a rape victim — including rage, fear, self-loathing, humiliation, shame, and disgust — must surely rank among the most traumatizing experiences anyone can undergo. Their sentiments of feeling guilty, used, violated, and polluted haunt victims well-after the initial rape occurs; self-blame is among the most common of both short- and long-term effects, often leading many victims to commit suicide. The rest of them have long-term phobias of leaving their houses — they avoid contact with men, isolate themselves socially, and live in a psychological prison, built by post-traumatic stress disorder and psychiatric disorders. Each scenario indicates that women may have actually evolved adaptations to prevent being raped. Given the enormity of the adaptive problem for ancestral women, their psychological pain upon rape, the evidence of the alliances they form with other males for security, their female-female coalition, and the tendency for means to avoid risky situations in which they might be in danger of rape, it is

plausible that human females have evolved a set of counter-adaptations to protect themselves from being raped; moreover, anti-rape adaptations would very well be activated, specifically, during the periovulatory phase (the woman's most fertile period) of their reproductive cycle. So if one argues in favor of the *rape-as-adaptation* for men, a completely opposite case can be formed for women as well. In fact, many evolutionary scientists such as Tara Chavanne, Gordon Gallup, Patricia Gowaty, Sarah Mesnick, Sandra Petralia, and many others seriously think that women have indeed evolved disgust and defense against rape; otherwise they would have always enjoyed it.

Of course, evolutionary psychology is not the only dictator of all the inherent complexities of rape psychology. The debate of "Nature versus Nurture" shows how evolutionary psychology cannot be the sole factor in determining all of a person's behaviors, because human conduct is majorly impacted by individual backgrounds and societal influences as well. Perhaps evolutionary instincts are the foundation for why men rape, but the holes in the *rape-as-adaptation* theory (such as the fact that women who are not in the maximum-fertility age group are also raped) force us to take society's influence on the individual into account. For example, men are more likely to rape in cultures where the blame of rape is bestowed on the victim; there is also more rape in areas "where young women live in social circumstances often devoid of the close protection of extended kin". In contrast, men are less likely to rape in cultures where the blame and punishments are high for the rapist himself. This emphasizes the point that an individual's background—which relates to their personal wealth and how women are perceived by their society in general—molds a majority of men's opinions regarding rape.

An example of when evolutionary psychology might not be at play is in wars. Men have an extensive history of raping women during wars as a display of crude dominance over the enemy. Dominance, sexual attraction, and sociopathic tendencies have shown to be the most widely cited reasons for rape, but how much do they truly explain about the deeper psychology of a rapist? Some scientists believe, evolutionary psychology does not relate only to human behaviors, but to animalistic ones as well. Rape in the animal kingdom often occurs in a more blunt form than human rape does, because animals have less societal boundaries. From the meticulous work of zoologists and animal behaviorists, we now know that rape is fairly common in the animal kingdom. It is observed in insects, at least thirty-nine species of birds, reptiles, fish, marine mammals, and the great apes; in parallel, we are yet to discover a community of *Homo Sapiens* in which rape does not occur. Some organisms in nature, such as the scorpionfly and the waterstrider, have evolved specific mechanisms for committing rape. Among scorpionflies, for example, males have a special anatomical clamp that functions solely for 'raping females', and is not used in the 'normal mating' process. In one study, scientists literally sealed the clamp with wax to prevent the male from achieving forced copulation, and it worked! For the reason quite apparent, scientists have decided to study rape cases in the animal kingdom and compare them to humans. Although human mating is not exactly like scorpionfly mating, psychological and physiological experiments have revealed some disturbing facts. Some laboratory studies have tested males' reactions to audio-visual depictions of rape vs. mutually consenting sexual encounters, and many men were found to display sexual arousal in cases of rape or in the disgusted reactions from female victims of rape. In another study mentioned in David Buss's book, '*The Evolution Of Desire*', male participants were told to imagine a scenario where they could force sex on a female without any damage to their own reputation. In the study, about 35 percent of the men indicated that they would take the opportunity and commit rape, if there was no chance of ever getting caught.

Of course we are troubled by the statistics, but they also make us hopeful, because they show that the majority of men are apparently not potential rapists. We need stricter laws, rules, and regulations to protect people from opportunistic predators. Murder and cannibalism, for example, are also present in the animal kingdom, they are neither justified nor glorified in the context of human civilization. However, they do explain why our ape relatives commit such act regularly, and, perhaps, our human ancestors did as well. All instinctual acts can be explained by biology, and since instinct is typically the ruling factor in rape cases, evolution can effectively explain (mind it —'explain', not 'justify') the majority of rape, if properly studied. Because rape appears globally, scientists have determined that the action has to be related to psychology, instead of only being a learned practice. Through all this, society should gather that culture, power, and elements of evolutionary psychology all contribute to the reasons for

why men rape. But, while knowing why men rape from a scientific perspective or historical account is somewhat important, it is more crucial to find methods for prevention. Steven Pinker, a professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University, makes an interesting point in his latest book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. He argues that literacy, democratic laws, urbanization, mobility, women rights, and access to mass media have fostered social movements and a sense of shared humanism during the last 65 years and that violence has declined over long stretches of history. Being informed is a key component to solving societal problems, so education regarding rape as well as strict laws should be enforced to ensure that rape among humankind also decreases overtime. Because humans as a species have showed that they have the capacity to rise above many animalistic, biological behaviors (such as attack, murder etc.), they should be taught to do the same in the case of rape. For this reason, schools and work places must have mandatory sessions and increased awareness about the issue. From a young age, all children must be taught about the dangers and about precautionary measures that can be taken. Males will learn about the psychological factors behind rape, and maneuver around them. Through this education, females can also be taught to be more cautious by not going out at night alone in suspicious locations and not putting themselves in potentially life-threatening circumstances. By taking these simple measures, our society, and eventually our world, can evolve into a safer community for women.

In countries like Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan the issue is more severe. Sexual harassment of women — known by its euphemism, “eve-teasing” — is widespread and includes behaviors ranging from lewd remarks to physical assault. While Indian and international media were focusing on the Delhi rape incident, a Marma school-girl of class-eight was gang raped on December 21 in Bangladesh. Three “Bengali settlers” raped the 14-year-old girl and then killed her at Rangamati. Another separate incident was published in early December, describing the alleged gang rape of a teenager by four men over four days in Tangail. The men are thought to have made videos of the attack



before leaving their victim near a rail track where she was eventually found by her brother. Such recent incidents of barbarism to Malala of Pakistan, ‘Damini’ of India, and the numerous rape-victims of Bangladesh show how vulnerable the women living in these areas are. Over 40 percent of the child marriages in the world take place in our subcontinent. Sex-selective abortions, wife beating, child abuse etc. also occur at staggering rates. *Odhikar*, one of the human rights groups in Bangladesh, highlighted in a recent report that almost 3,000 women were raped in Bangladesh in the last four years. Among them, over 500 were killed after rape, and about 300 women committed suicide after being raped. In many cases, victims were not able to file any case for fear of further harassment by the rapists, or they were forced to withdraw cases because of threats by influential figures of the society and even by some political leaders. Reports of rape have increased in India over the past few decades. In 1973, fewer than 3,000 cases were registered with the police; that number jumped to over 20,000 by 2010. Many have pointed out that the problem lies in the low conviction rate; only a few of the alleged rape perpetrators were actually convicted. There are 40,000 to 100,000 rape cases pending nationwide. Besides this, countries like Bangladesh and India must also confront the inherent sexism that is prevalent in their societies. In many parts, rape victims are harassed and often humiliated, rather than protected and treated with sympathetic minds. They are considered somewhat *out-casted*, unfit for marriages, and, in many occasions, they are pressured to actually marry the rapist. In Pakistan, the status of women is, perhaps, even worse. Few years ago, Zafranbibi, a 26 year old Muslim lady residing Pakistan was sentenced to death by stoning. Her crime was adultery, punishable by death according to Islamic law. Zafranbibi had been raped by her brother in law, she testified. No charges were brought against the brother-in-law because under the *zina* (the Islamic statute in use there), rape can only be proved with the testimony of four male witnesses, a standard that is almost impossible to meet. Ultimately, Pakistani courts had to free Zafranbibibefore she was stoned, due to public outrage.

There is definitely a ‘sexist mindset’ and a ‘woman raped, woman blamed’ attitude that exists in these countries that must be critically analyzed. Gender insensitivity is ingrained in our collective unconsciousness. Politicians are seen

making silly remarks about women and how they should wear modest clothes, not go to parties, etc. In fact, misogynist remarks of a sexual nature intended to silence female leaders are quite common: when women took to the streets to protest against coordinated attacks in Mumbai in 2008, Muqtar Abbas Naqvi, a politician of India remarked, “some women wearing lipstick and powder have taken to the streets in Mumbai and are abusing politicians and spreading dissatisfaction...”; Congress MP Sanjay Nirupam dismissed the rival political party, and former TV actress Smritilrani, during a TV debate, saying: “you were swiveling your hips on TV and now you have turned into a political analyst.”; SharadYadav, the leader of the *Janata Dal*, once said he opposed an affirmative action bill, because it would only benefit the rich, or “women with short hair”; Om PrakashChautala, the ex-Chief Minister of Haryana, once suggested ‘child marriage as remedy’ for rape. But we are hardly the only ones to notice such acts of both subliminal and conscious sexism. KrishtaMahr justly pointed out in an article published recently in *Time* that “while India is rightly praised for its economic growth and other modernization, its attitude towards women seems stuck in dark ages.” Countless men and women worldwide have recognized how our subcontinent’s economic progress starkly contradicts its archaic and obsolete attitude towards half of its population. And as much as we may hope for a conducive atmosphere in India, Bangladesh, and other south Asian countries, we can expect very little social progress if their views towards women remain the same.

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