

India's Rape Culture: Urban versus Rural

By Ram Puniyani



While the horrific rape of Damini, Nirbhaya (December 16, 2012) has shaken the whole nation, and the country is gripped with the fear of this phenomenon, many an ideologue and political leaders are not only making their ideologies clear, some of them are regularly putting their foot in mouths also. Surely they do retract their statements soon enough. Kailash Vijayvargiya, a senior BJP minister in MP's statement that women must not cross Laxman Rekha to prevent crimes against them, was disowned by the BJP Central leadership and he was thereby quick enough to apologize to the activists for his statement. But does it change his ideology or the ideologies of his fellow travellers? There are many more in the list from Abhijit Mukherjee, to Mamata Bannerji, Asaram Bapu and many more.

The statement of RSS supremo, Mohan Bhagwat, was on a different tract as he said that rape is a phenomenon which takes place in India not in Bharat. For India the substitute for him is urban areas and Bharat is rural India for him. As per him it is the "Western" lifestyle adopted by people in urban areas due to which there is an increase in the crime against women. "You go to villages and forests of the country and there will be no such incidents of gang rape or sex crimes", he said on 4th January. Further he implied that while urban areas are influenced by Western culture, the rural areas are nurturing Indian ethos, glorious Indian traditions. As per him ancient Indian traditions gave great respect to women, and it is due to these values of Indian tradition, that villages are free from crimes against women.

The statistics from India fly in the face of Bhagawat. In a significant statistical observation and study of rape cases Mrinal Satish, faculty member of National Law University, Delhi, tells us another tale. He has used the court data and observes that 75% of rape cases take place in rural India. His observations are based on the cases reported in Criminal Law Journal from 1983 to 2009.

The cases of rape in villages, like that of Khairlanji and rape against Adivasi women may not be on the radar of the Hindutva boss, Bhagwat, but those engaged with the issues of dalits, Adivasis and gender issues cannot buy the simplified rural versus urban divide. One knows that patriarchy which looks at women as secondary beings, primarily as sister, mother or daughter, rather than a person in her own right. She is not a being with *swayam* (selfhood) of her own. As for as RSS ideology is concerned only men have *swayam* (selfhood). The full form of RSS, the male organization is *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* while its women's organization is *Rashtrasevika Samiti*, do note that the word *swayam* is missing here, in the name of women's organization.

The myth that women had a place of honour in ancient Indian period is a well constructed one. During the long span of ancient Indian period the status of women kept changing, but women being subordinate beings was the running theme. During the Aryan period of pastoral life the women were supposed to commit symbolic self immolation after the death of husband, later this got converted to actual burning of the widows. It is probably around this period that two great epics were written, Ramayan and Mahabharat.

In Ramayan Lord Ram banishes his pregnant wife Sita, because of the rumours about her character amongst the subjects of Ayodhya. In Mahabharat, the Pandavas use their common wife Draupadi as a 'thing' and use her as a bet in a gamble. Not to be left behind their cousins try to disrobe her in the court in front of the King Dhritrashtra! So much for the glorious place of women in ancient India! Later period's values are well reflected in Manusmriti, where the women were explicitly denied education and serving the husband and household chores were regarded as equivalent of education for the women. Manusmriti gives the detailed code for women and it leaves no doubt about women being

subordinate or the property of men. The Gupta period (3rd to 7th Century), which is regarded as the Golden Period of Ancient India, the women were having limited access to education and barring few names which are dished out to prove the glorious condition of Hindu women, mostly the women were having limited access to education. Their participation in Yagnas was secondary to husband, the *Yajman*, who was the primary being who had solicited the priest for the Yagnas. Yajman word interestingly has no female equivalent.

The ideologues of the Mohan Bhagwat parivar attribute all the prevalent ills to the coming in of Muslims. This is a very clever ploy to externalize the internal suppression of women, and also of dalits. It's not too long ago in history that during British rule, the continuation of this religiously sanctioned Hindu norm, Sati, had to be fought against by social reformers. The ghastly sati system, occasionally surfacing even now, and supported subtly by conservatives has not been easy to eradicate as religion was cited as the argument for preserving it. In the wake of sati of Roopkanwar in 1986, BJP's Vice President Vijaya Raje Scindia, not only defended the sati system but also took out a morcha to oppose passing of the bill against sati. BJP of is the political child of RSS.

The travails of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in struggling against Sati system are a legend. The child marriage was/ is another such evil. While British wanted to bring in the law in early twentieth century to abolish child marriage, the argument to oppose it came from the sources of Hindu religion. It was asserted that as per Hindu norms the girl must be married before her first menses, Garbhadhan. It was argued that our religion's norm about early marriage cannot be violated. The introduction of widow remarriage, the struggle to abolish Devadasi system, each of these has a long and painful story to tell about the status of women in India, in Ancient India, not influenced by modernization.

The education is the key to the empowerment of women and an integral part of democratization process. It was a painful journey and the efforts of Savitri bai Phule in this direction are revolutionary in the true sense of the word. These efforts were downright opposed on various grounds, the main obstacle being the Hindu traditions.

As such what is being criticized by Bhagwat as modernization is basically the process of democratization of society. This gentleman is stuck in the feudal mode thinking and is upholding feudal of social relationships in the garb of Hindu glorious traditions. As per these traditions; caste and gender hierarchy rules the roost. The atrocities against women are not due to democratization, which this worthy is calling modernization or westernization. The core of modernization is caste and gender equality. The essence of modernization is abolition of hierarchy, based on birth-the hierarchy of caste and gender. The process of democratization is the march of society from formal values of equality to substantive equality, and this the march has to be the agenda of social movements. The roots of oppression of women lie in the patriarchal values, which is the carry forward of ancient and medieval values, related to feudal society, society with the rule of kings, where woman was regarded as the one whose arena is the domestic work. The condition of widows and the women who were burnt alive as sati reflects the glorious ancient tradition to which Mr. Bhagwat wants to push back the Indian society, undoing all what Indian society has been able to achieve through the struggle for Independence, which was not merely a struggle to throw away the British rule but also a struggle to do away with caste and gender hierarchy.

For Bhagwat, the ancient glory is a cover to hide the gender inequality. Modernization is seen in a superficial way by many. Here the ancient traditions are glorified without going to the core of the social relationships. One is not criticizing the past, but understanding it in the context of the social milieu, the system of production, the level of education etc. is what is needed. Blind glorification of the past or blind condemnation of the past, both take the conclusions off the mark. To look down upon modernization as a crass process is a deliberate one, to try to bring in social equations, the epitome of which in a way is Manusmriti.

Here even the facts of statistics are being put upside down to prove a political point which is retrograde but covered in the cloak of ancient glory. The borderline between India and Bharat is not an iron wall, it is a fluctuating zone, merging and separating in a very fluid way. The need of the hour is to look deeper into the issue of violence against women. While all needs to be done to create a safe atmosphere, women's safety and space for their work and creativity, we need to give a look at the social movements to overcome the chains of patriarchy, which is at the root of violence against women.

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