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RAPE CULTURE IN INDIA**Abstract**

The women of this country, the world actually, are victims of a horrific plague and it is not the coronavirus. And it is not just the women, it is the men too. Everyone can be a victim of these predators and sadly, nobody is able to prevent it.

This is not something that has been happening of late. This has been going for aeons, but no one has wanted to speak up about it and now finally, they are stepping up. The patriarchal social system as well as common misconceptions of shame, which dog a person that already has to deal with the mental, physical and emotional trauma of being raped, makes it hard for a person to come forward.

Rape culture is the common normalisation of sexual violence. It is the sociological phenomenon in which rape, sexual harassment and abuse against women have become widespread as a result of society's attitudes toward them.

Rape Culture in Hindu Mythology

Hindu mythology perpetuates rape culture in multiple instances.

Ahalya, the wife of Gautama Maharishi, was turned into stone as punishment for Indra tricking her into having sexual intercourse with him by disguising himself as her husband.

Dandaka, the son of Ikshvaku, was blinded by lust for Arāja, the daughter of Shukracharya, and forced himself upon her despite her protests and screams for help. Arāja relayed the story to her father who was only stricken with grief and shame for his daughter and sent her away to 'purify' herself.

The story of a demon named Jalandhar describes how he uses his powers to appear to women as their husbands and trick them into having sexual encounters with him. On finding out, the respective husbands would be enraged and want to start wars against him, but he was always saved by his loyal and chaste wife, Vrinda. Vishnu then used Jalandhar's own *modus operandi* against him and tricked his wife, destroyed Vrinda's chastity. This rendered Jalandhar vulnerable enough to be killed in war.

Almost all mythologies have tales of gods 'taking' women as retribution, conquests or for gratification, rendering the victim's consent irrelevant in the grand scheme of things.¹

Rape Culture in Religion

Hinduism, like most other religions, is patriarchal. Although in comparison to its counterparts, it is also feminist. It contains many feminist ideals that are often missed, sometimes on purpose, by male Hindu leaders and activists who are traditionally anti-feminist.

The female body was considered inferior to the male body in Buddhism and Jainism. To achieve the highest level of intelligence, one had to reincarnate in a male body, since a male body produces life outside of itself, while a female body creates life inside itself.

A god, in Hinduism, was considered incomplete without a goddess. Shiva is incomplete without Shakti; Krishna is incomplete without Radha; and Rama is incomplete without Sita. Similarly, the housemaker, rather than a single man or a woman, was seen as a balancing force in society.²

The continued use of the goddess figure to portray an Indian woman raises many issues of insecurity and the controversial correlation of divinity and feminism. Women in Hindu households of the upper caste have long been likened to goddesses, but their life prospects do not improve when they worship goddesses. Goddess worship is Hinduism's oldest contradiction for freeing itself from patriarchy and caste oppression, which are deeply ingrained in the

¹ Feminism in India. 2021. *Tracing the Origins of Rape Culture in Mythology | Feminism In India*. [online] Available at: <<https://feminisminindia.com/2017/10/06/origins-rape-culture-mythology/>> [Accessed 27 March 2021].

² Dailyo.in. 2021. *Is Hinduism feminist or patriarchal?*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.dailyo.in/variety/hinduism-feminism-patriarchy-vagina-worship-linga-devdutt-pattanaik-jauhar-sati-rajputs-bollywood/story/1/22114.html>> [Accessed 27 March 2021].

religion. It consistently reacts to these accusations by pointing out that Hinduism worships goddesses.³

Rape Culture in Society

Prejudice against women still exists in Hindu cultures today, both in India and abroad. Traditional gender inequality and disparities still afflict our society in different ways. Although many educated Hindus and people in power talk publicly about the importance of gender equality, it is clear that this seldom happens in practice. Women are continually exposed to domestic violence and harassment. Majority of women are discriminated against and exploited. This reveals that our society is a long way from realising the concept of gender equality. The fact that both genders are of equal importance is difficult for us to fathom shows that we have not progressed as much as we believe.

Most cultures are so preoccupied with virginity, chastity and progeny that restricting a woman's sexual freedom has become acceptable even in this day and age. Sexual violence is often considered a way to avenge insult or injury. Women's sexual integrity was and still is associated with the honour of the family or clan.

The emergence of rape into a culture involves the use of women's bodies as battlegrounds for male domination. Acts of sexual assault are used as instruments of discrimination or hate against groups that have been traditionally oppressed due to faith, caste, orientation, gender identity or disability. Rape culture is rooted in power structures and social hierarchies. As a result, sexual harassment is used to exploit and persecute people based on their ethnic, tribal, or religious identities.⁴

Victim Blaming

Rape is almost always considered the fault or the responsibility of the victim. It is always 'what were you wearing'; 'where were you'; 'who were you with'; and never 'let's help you out.' It is always the women who are enticing the men to commit acts of sexual assault and never the mental stability of the perpetrator that could be the real problem.

Assessing victims of sexual harassment based on their clothes and acts puts the responsibility of their protection on their conduct. Victim blaming is accepted, creating an atmosphere

³ Hinduwebsite.com. 2021. *Hinduism and Gender Equality*. [online] Available at: <https://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/h_gender.asp> [Accessed 27 March 2021].

⁴ Feminism In India. 2021. *Infographic: What Is Rape Culture? | Feminism In India*. [online] Available at: <<https://feminisminindia.com/2020/05/04/infographic-rape-culture/>> [Accessed 27 March 2021].

conducive to rape. Casual sexism in everyday situations, such as moral policing women, discriminatory school dress codes for young girls or the use of slurs, amplifies the issue.

The victim of a sexual offence, especially rape, is treated worse in Indian society than the perpetrators of the crime. Identification of the survivors, whether by names or other identifying features, has resulted in mistreatment and in some cases, abandonment of the survivors by their families.

The practise of blaming the victim is all too familiar, but it isn't always clear. It comes in a variety of ways. It is when a mother is afraid of losing her dignity if she immediately reports her daughter's vaginal bleeding to the police. It is when the officials refuse to file a report right away because 'she's probably just being emotional' or 'why was she out so late?' It occurs when doctors fail to prioritise a rape case or provide relevant details about the victim in their report.

It happens when people of society make statements like: one-handed clapping is impossible; men are enticed by girls who wear revealing clothing; girls should be married by the age of 16 in order to eliminate the need for them to seek sexual fulfilment elsewhere.

Except for the rapists themselves, anything can be blamed for rape.

The definition of honour is one of the reasons for this. In essence, between a woman's legs where the family honour is held. When a child gets up to mischief, they reprimanded. When specifically, a girl does this, it brings the whole family into disrepute.⁵

We are a country that will protest for a woman who has been raped after she has died, but we won't stand up to defend her while she is alive.

Rape Culture in Bollywood

We have been encouraged to sexualise women our entire life. Be it photographs, videos, actors in movies or television shows, even pornography; they all encourage the same thing. Misogynistic songs, objectification, problematic lyrics, slut shaming, romanticism of abuse amongst other elements of rape culture are fuelled by the media. The general language about rape or violence is often problematic. No one has been encouraged to stand up against these issues. And if one does, they are immediately dismissed and disregarded for having an opinion.

⁵ Medium. 2021. *Revisiting India's Rape Culture*. [online] Available at: <<https://medium.com/@anannya.sh/revisiting-indias-rape-culture-99d51eca70f7>> [Accessed 27 March 2021].

Rape culture has been normalised time and again in the Bollywood industry. They have avoided showing any actual, unadulterated depictions of sex but continuously depicts crime, abuse and rape as "romantic entertainment." This affects one's perception of sex, rape or consent. When they see an actor they admire or look up to behave in a certain way on film, they are compelled to mimic those acts in real life.

Even if it wasn't always this way, sex is taboo in most Indian communities. In the third century BC, the Kama Sutra was written. Early Indian culture was forward-thinking. Then came colonialism, which was mixed with religion and nationalism and sex became a sinful, unforgivable act. It was no longer permissible to address it in public, neither was it acceptable to do so on the big screen. Since it was difficult for Bollywood to display realistic representations of sex, nudity or even a simple kissing scene, the filmmakers got imaginative and used some visual metaphor or subtle song lyrics to suggest sex.

In the 1930s, item songs were introduced. They were originally a type of escapist cinema for presumably, majority male audiences before they became a hugely successful trend in every Bollywood movie. The only publicly available outlet for something pornographic was movies. Back then, there was no internet or pornography. The Indian film industry began serving these male audiences' scenes and plotlines in the 1980s, with the aim of satisfying their imagination. Since honour prevented sex from being portrayed in a positive light, it was depicted in a negative light.

Rape or sexual harassment were the most convenient ways to portray sex as immoral. The hero would rush in to rescue the woman from being raped, followed by a lengthy battle scene and the rape would be forgotten entirely. The act seemed to be motivated by a desire to defend the man's honour more than anything else.

Actors who play rapists are often idolised, which has become a significant issue. Even if it was exaggerated, more violence seemed to make the scene more exciting. Rape scenes were often purely for the audience's amusement, with the woman on screen being heavily and violently dominated. Given Bollywood's clout, setting a bad example is a risky proposition. Other times, the raped woman was portrayed as mocking the man, portraying the scene in a harmless, humorous light.

According to one study, nearly 70% of sexual abuse in movies from the late 1990s was presented as humorous, showing a poor definition of consent. These types of rape scenes faded away from Bollywood over time, but were replaced by subtler aspects of rape culture, such as

careless rape jokes and a lot of the same tension around consent. As a result, all Indians now believe that stalking and eve-teasing are permissible in both movies and real life. It progressed to 'man doesn't take no for an answer' and proceeded to normalise sexist behaviour on a daily basis. Though Bollywood films portray rape and rapists as evil and unforgivable, men who violate, stalk or harass women appear to be forgiven.

We have basically internalised women's inequality, which is why when sexual harassment is portrayed in comedies, people laugh and enjoy it without worrying about how it affects real life.

Following the rape case of Nirbhaya in 2012, several Bollywood films got it right. Rape was not taken lightly and sexual assault was handled with caution. However, these films were never as popular as those that made use of sexist analogies. Actors who have been convicted of sexual misconduct and abuse appear to be revered. Many of the troubling things they have said have been dismissed as irrelevant. Because of the respect they receive onscreen, most people do not understand the ramifications of their real-life actions. Misogyny continues inside and outside the industry as a result of these acts.⁶

Misogyny

From a male-dominated perspective, socio-culturally transmitted attitudes toward women, rape and rapists are often internalised. Women are portrayed as the weaker sex in patriarchal societies, which leads to sexual harassment against women. This illustrates the misogynist mentality that pervades Indian society.

Our laws are rife with misogyny. One might argue that the Indian Penal Code is a Victorian-era colonial remnant and that Indian women are well-treated. Women being treated as property is an ancient Indian custom that is reflected in our epics. Yudhishtir gambles Draupadi away in the Mahabharata, as if she were not an independent human being but rather his possession.

India's skewed sex ratios may be directly related to the dehumanisation of women as a way of fulfilling various male impulses. It is no surprise that the rates of female infanticide are so high if girls are seen as a liability.

Misogyny isn't just limited to Hinduism.

⁶ Youtube.com. 2021. *How Bollywood Normalizes Rape Culture*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mfgjLttbcA>> [Accessed 27 March 2021].

Misogynistic themes flourish in Buddhist writings from about the same time period. The story of Sudinna, a young monk who breaks his vows of celibacy after his old parents beg him to give his wife, whom he had deserted, a child so that his family lineage can continue, is told in Vinaya Pitaka (the book of monastic discipline). When the Buddha discovers this, he chastises him, saying that it would have been better for him to put his manhood in the mouth of a venomous snake than in a woman.⁷

According to Christianity, no woman can teach or have power over a man and she must remain silent. Wives must regard their husbands as their Lord and submit to them.⁸

It isn't just something that happens to women

Around 38% of respondents in 7 Indian cities said that "men are as vulnerable to sexual abuse as women" in today's workplaces. The main reason these cases were never recorded was because of "social mockery" and a fear of not being believed due to India's social beliefs.

Both heterosexual and homosexual men have a negative perception of male rape and sexual harassment. Men find it difficult to even address abuse, let alone report it, in a patriarchal society. Men make up a large percentage of rape, molestation, and other forms of sexual assault victims. Rape is described in Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code as a crime committed solely against women. A man is not considered a "victim" and a woman is not considered an "offender" in Indian law. In India, cases of male rape are prosecuted as sodomy. Males are not included in any of the laws.

According to a survey of adult men in India, one out of every five males has been raped or molested at some point in their lives. Women are the perpetrators in a variety of situations. The majority of these men are aware of male molestation and rape, but they are uncertain what constitutes molestation.

Male rape and molestation are surrounded with taboo, which is why men do not report the crime. It is said that sexual harassment does not impact men and it calls into question a person's

⁷ Devdutt. 2021. *Global misogyny - Devdutt*. [online] Available at: <<https://devdutt.com/articles/global-misogyny/>> [Accessed 27 March 2021].

⁸ @businessline. 2021. *Misogyny is the oldest Indian tradition*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/talk/misogyny-is-the-oldest-indian-tradition/article9800756.ece>> [Accessed 27 March 2021].

masculinity. One of the most common male rape myths is that women cannot practically rape men. As a consequence, it can take years for a man to even recognize that he has been abused.⁹

Discomfort and humiliation are the most common explanations for not being conscious of assault. Male rapes and molestations have always been shunned off, not only in India, but across the world. Still believing that men can't be coerced or taken against their will is sexist, stereotypical and obsolete. Male rape and molestation are still concealed in the shadows in a male-dominated culture where men have traditionally been considered the stronger sex.¹⁰

The Facts

We saw the case of Bhanwari Devi of Bhateri (Rajasthan) in the 1990s, who was abducted by higher caste men who were outraged by her attempts to prevent a child marriage in their household. The way she was handled by the police and how the convicted were discharged by the Court attracted widespread nation and worldwide attention and it became a major turning point in the Indian women's rights movement.

In 1972, we were shocked to learn that in Mathura, a 16-year-old Maharashtra tribal girl, had been raped by two officers who were then exonerated. The Supreme Court decision sparked widespread protests by women across the country. Since then, rape has been a big concern in the fight for women's rights.

The rape and murder of a 23-year-old physiotherapy student made international headlines in 2012, triggering outraged protests across India. The court's decision came just weeks after a group of men, including two of her suspected rapists, set a woman on fire and killed her. A group of men attacked the 23-year-old girl on her way to a hearing in her rape case in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, dousing her in gasoline and lighting her on fire.

A 27-year-old veterinarian was raped and set on fire in the southern city of Hyderabad in November 2019, igniting nationwide protests. The suspects were apprehended and killed later in suspected police "encounter." The Supreme Court chief justice has condemned this "justice as vengeance," which has been cheered by the public. Telangana Chief Minister K Chandrashekar Rao instructed transport staff to keep women out of night-shift jobs, stressing

⁹ The Times of India. 2021. *Men too are victims of sexual harassment - Times of India*. [online] Available at: <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/relationships/love-sex/men-too-are-victims-of-sexual-harassment/articleshow/16336627.cms>> [Accessed 27 March 2021].

¹⁰ Gonewsindia. 2021. *Sexual Abuse of Males: Shrouded In The Shadows*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.gonewsindia.com/latest-news/health/sexual-abuse-of-males-shrouded-in-the-shadows-553>> [Accessed 27 March 2021].

that women bear the brunt of the responsibility for their own safety. This is a flawed strategy. Men should be held responsible for an issue that is solely their fault and has little to do with women. A culture of misogyny, aggression and normalised sexual harassment of women is the issue.

An 8-year-old girl was brutally raped and murdered in Jammu and Kashmir in January 2018. The Muslim girl was reportedly abducted, sedated and gang-raped several times in a temple. She was strangled and her head was beaten in with a large stone.

We have seen politicians, especially those in the BJP, get involved in rape cases in recent years; on June 4, 2017, Kuldip Singh Sengar, an MLA of Uttar Pradesh, was accused of raping a Dalit girl in Unnao. Two BJP ministers were accused of assisting the perpetrators in the Kathua rape case of an eight-year-old Asifa Bano in January 2018. From January 10 to 17, the girl was repeatedly raped in a temple.¹¹

A young woman was allegedly gang-raped by four men on September 14, 2020, within the Hathras district, Uttar Pradesh, and struggled for her survival for two weeks until eventually surrendering to her trauma on September 29. Her body arrived in her hometown early the next morning, where police officers decided to cremate her regardless of her family's permission or involvement.¹²

These repeated instances prove that nothing is being done to stem sexual violence against women. The statements by politicians show that the work of preventing rape is being put on the victim rather than the criminals. A woman's behaviour or dress can no longer be called into question at a point where we have children being assaulted. Rape is a hate crime.

Surveys and Statistics

Based on the most recent government statistics, Indian police reported 33,658 rape cases in 2017. According to experts, a woman in India is raped each 16 minutes. Many human rights advocates have called India "the most dangerous country for women."

As per government figures, approximately four women are sexually assaulted in this country every hour. Realistically, this means that only around 90 women every day muster the

¹¹ Chakravarty, G., 2021. *India's rape culture: Rape amidst 'religious fervour'*. [online] National Herald. Available at: <<https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/opinion/indias-rape-culture-rape-amidst-religious-fervour>> [Accessed 27 March 2021].

¹² Times, E., 2021. *Sexual Violence: India's Serious Problem, Its Men*. [online] Economic Times Blog. Available at: <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/sexual-violence-indias-serious-problem-its-men/>> [Accessed 27 March 2021].

confidence to report being sexually assaulted. Many rapes go unreported, hidden under guilt, uncertainty and terror, so the true number is likely much higher.

According to the Global Peace Index's 2017 report, India is the fourth greatest dangerous place for female travellers. The Ministry of Women and Child Development's Gender Vulnerability Index of 2017 found Bihar, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand to have been the bottom four states in terms of women's protection.

According to the results of a recent Economic Times-Synovate poll, the men need to be included as soon as possible. 19 percent of the 527 people surveyed in seven cities – Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Mumbai and Pune – said they had encountered sexual harassment at work. 51% of the participants in Bangalore, said they had been harassed sexually, 31% in Delhi and 28% in Hyderabad.

Over the past year, the number of crimes committed against women has gradually risen. As per the latest NCRB survey, over 4 lakh cases of crimes against women were registered in 2019, rising from 3.78 lakh in 2018 and 3.59 lakh in 2017.

According to NCRB data, Uttar Pradesh ranked first among states in terms of crimes against women in 2019, with 59,853 cases, trailed by Rajasthan with 41,550 cases and Maharashtra with 37,144 cases.

Rajasthan has the highest number of confirmed rape cases, with nearly 6,000. With over 3,000 events, Uttar Pradesh came in second.¹³

Prevention

There is a way forward from this; here is a way to prevent this:

- To counter sexual offences against women, the government must establish a separate department underneath the Union Home Ministry.
- Schools should stand up for the rights of sex education, as well as sexual health.
- Initiatives in the police force to gender sensitivity to help them in dealing with sexual assault situations.

¹³ News, I., 2021. *India sees 88 rape cases a day; conviction rate below 30% | India News - Times of India.* [online] The Times of India. Available at: <[Dejurenexus.com](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-sees-88-rape-cases-a-day-but-conviction-rate-below-30/articleshow/78526440.cms#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20latest%20NCRB,of%20all%20crimes%20a%20against%20women.> [Accessed 27 March 2021].</p></div><div data-bbox=)

- Putting the Justice Verma Committee's suggestions into action to ensure that justice is delivered on time.
- Create a list of sex offenders, similar to those used in Western countries to track down paedophiles.
- The media, whether visual or print, should be sanctioned if they publish the victims' names and photos.
- A census of missing children in India, especially of young girls, could reveal information about children who are being trafficked.
- Introduction of laws for the protection of men from sexual assault.
- Putting an end to victim blaming.¹⁴

Women's rights are essentially reduced to those of second-class citizens as they go about getting educated, working or simply performing everyday tasks due to the state and society's failure to give them safety or justice.

Women have historically been at a disadvantage in the equation between the sexes. Since politicians are mainly men who are motivated by their own biases, women have a small chance of having fair representation in the formulation of any laws. Many social, political, technological, and legal barriers still exist for women. Men in influential positions, as well as men who act as policy makers, authority figures and institutional leaders, continue to influence their lives and destinies.

India has limitless potential. We are a melting pot of cultures; however, rape and its culture have become synonymous with our country's name. If things don't change now, they will only get worse.

¹⁴ IAS gateway. 2021. *STOP THE BRUTALITY: THE RAPE CULTURE IN INDIA - IAS gateway*. [online] Available at: <<https://iasgateway.com/stop-the-brutality-the-rape-culture-in-india/>> [Accessed 27 March 2021].