

PERSPECTIVE

Delhi, eternal shameless

And now the rest of India has to carry the cross for a capital like this!



SWARN KUMAR ANAND

On January 1, *The New York Times* carried the poignant reminiscences of a former Delhi girl under the headline, "The Unspeakable Truth about Rape in India." The writer, Sonia Falerio, wrote: "I lived for 24 years in New Delhi, a city where sexual harassment is as regular as mealtime. Every day, somewhere in the city, it crosses the line into rape." "As a teenager, I learned to protect myself. I never stood alone if I could help it, and I walked quickly, crossing my arms over my chest, refusing to make eye contact or smile. I cleaved through crowds

shoulder-first, and avoided leaving the house after dark except in a private car. At an age when young women elsewhere were experimenting with daring new looks, I wore clothes that were too large. I still cannot dress attractively without feeling that I am endangering myself."

"Things didn't change when I became an adult. Packs of men dawdled on the street, and singing Hindi film songs, rich with double entendres, was how they communicated. To make their demands clear, they would thrust their pelvises at female passers-by."

"If only it was just public spaces that were unsafe. In my office at a prominent news magazine, at the doctor's office, even at a house party — I couldn't escape the intimidation."

Delhi was never safe for women. Not in living memory at least.

According to a city-specific survey done by MaRS, an overwhelming 92 per cent of men (18-25) say that some or all of their friends have sometime or the other made passes at women in public places, and over 78 per cent women said that they have been sexually harassed in the past year.

The mean mentality was reflected in 52 per cent of the respondents saying that it is okay to pass comments on women, as long as one doesn't touch! The National Crime Records Bureau report of the 2011 says that among 53 mega cities, Delhi topped with 13.3 per cent (4,489) of crimes against women.

The recent brutal gang-rape provided a platform for mud-slinging match between political parties, the Delhi Government and the Delhi Police, and exposed authorities' lack of will to take responsibility for the job assigned to them. Interestingly, the city abounds in varieties of crimes against women cutting across social and economic class. While the Tandoor case, the Jessica Lal and Aarushi murders were the examples of filth in the urban heartland of the NCR, the Nithari serial rape-murders exposed the disgraced underbelly of rural NCR.

The situation is so grim that even broad daylight is not safe for women in Delhi. A study conducted by Centre for Social Research, based on 58 FIRs lodged by rape victims in Delhi between January 2009 and July 2011, at least seven victims were raped between 6 am and Noon.

Further, it is not only the *aam aurat* who suffers at the hands of the predator males. Actress Gul Panag, who was in Delhi to attend the Airtel Delhi Half Marathon 2010, had vent her ire over the behavior of some Delhi men who touched her inappropriately during an unexpected stampede during the run. However, the actress had then added that she was not surprised at the molestation during the Marathon considering that the city in question was 'shameless' Delhi.

The moot point is what makes Delhi so unsafe for women. This is a systemic problem. Primarily, the deep-seated psyche of a male-dominated society is to be blamed, but this does not acquit the police, judicial system and the government of their responsibilities to endeavour for a positive change in the social system.

In most of the cases women put up with abuse even in their house for they know remedy is few and far between. Their unequal status in society and all the corresponding social pressure force them to bear it in silence.

However, this is compounded by the apathetic attitude of government machinery, particularly the irresponsible police and the sluggish judiciary. And this gives devastating results. Last December, a rape victim in Patiala committed suicide after police refused to register the case, and humiliated her and allegedly offered her money to keep quiet.

Incidents like ogling, which is a daily affair in Delhi, do not attract the attention of the law-enforcing agencies. Also, in many cases, the victim does not report the matter as police pester the victim with unwanted questions and public support to her is minimal. Also women don't feel safe to approach police station particularly when alone and after sunset as there have been cases of girls being raped in police stations.

The Government is too busy to look into the law and order problem. India has a strange system of commissioning an enquiry after an accident to mollify the anger of citizens. But the same government doesn't think twice before rejecting the commission's report if it does not suit its agenda.

And, therefore, against the backdrop of the countrywide protest against the December 16 brutal gang-rape, the Union Home Minister's admission of Government's failed responsibility to make Delhi safe is nothing but eyewash. There is no dearth of promises. While these plans look good on paper, they have either failed to deliver the intended goals or have been non-starters. The Delhi Police was directed to deploy women constables in areas lacking in civic amenities to identifying potential offenders in 2009. The same year, the then Delhi Police Commissioner planned to make biometric photo-identity cards must for drivers of public service vehicles. But the two proposals yellowed away on the paper they were printed on.

What happens in Delhi has spillover impacts on the rest of the country. A recent survey conducted by ASSOCHAM Social Development Foundation has found that BPO companies have registered a significant decline in work productivity during the last fortnight. The incident has impacted productivity of women workforce not only in Delhi-NCR region, but also in other cities such as Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai, Hyderabad, etc.

It is reasonable to state that women's lack of safety is a societal problem, but it will be ridiculous to give the State a walkover. One can't prevent a mentally sick person from committing a crime, but the State has the capacity to take measures that could instill fear in the minds of other potential rapists. But sadly, the Government has failed on this count so far.

Sentencing December 16 gang-rapists cannot bring the victim justice if a thousand others continue to prowl free. Therefore, the government must stop testing the patience of citizens who are on the verge of turning into vigilante judges.

It is high time we prepare and prevent, rather than repair and repent.

(The writer is News Editor, *The Pioneer*)

Give me my Dilli

Buried in the chatter and verbose over Delhi's latest big tragedy was a simple question — how can a city which fails to produce its own art, poetry, literature, music and cinema be home to a population with gender sensitivity?



DR HARSH VARDHAN

Few people noticed that the coming and going of Delhi's centenary as India's capital happened without its Government and civil society bothering to raise an obelisk or even plant a sapling to mark the historic milestone.

Those embarrassed by this realisation still have a chance to make up. The 65th year of modern Delhi, as capital of the world's largest democracy is still on. Within the next eight months, given the tremendous eruption of resolve among both Government and citizens following the brutal gang-rape and murder of a 23-year-old medical student, it shouldn't be hard to set things on the right course.

But the hackneyed way of commissioning a grand monument (forget for a moment that the Government has failed to even maintain Coronation Park as a symbol of Delhi's history) won't work. We could, for a change, make a resolve to make Delhi more of a people's city and set in motion a cultural trend which could end forever its domination by a hedonistic, over-consuming and, plainly unsophisticated, elite.

History as soberer
The huge uproar which we are presently seeing over the destruction of a young life is actually not unprecedented.

In his reaction to the passing of the brave victim, the Prime Minister had said, "It would be a true homage to her memory if the emotions and energies generated by the brutal assault on her are channelised into a constructive course of action." Such solemn resolves were heard before.

In the last week of August, 1978 the entire country joined Delhi's grief when teenaged siblings Sanjay and Geeta Chopra were abducted and murdered pitilessly by two hardened criminals. There was no 24x7 TV in those days, and newspapers were fewer and more conservative. Yet, common Delhiites treated the tragedy as if it had happened to each one of them. Parliament too was rocked. Prime Minister Morarji Desai too mouthed sentenced dripping with regret.

I recall the words of Captain MM Chopra, the bereaved father of the two children and how it had sent a knife through our collective heart: "These days no mother and father feel secure about their children. It's mine today, tomorrow it can be another's."

The apathy of Delhi Police towards the safety of the city's ordinary folks was as much a



part of life then as it is today. A brave scooterist called Inderjeet Singh, who was then a junior engineer with DDA, had followed the mustard-coloured Fiat car in which the kidnapers, Billa and Ranga, were making off with the children for quite a distance before being out-speeded. He had rushed to Rajendra Nagar police station and lodged a complaint, but the police there had been indifferent. Had it promptly relayed the matter to police control, maybe the lives of the children would have been saved.

While upholding the death sentences on Billa and Ranga, the Hon'ble Supreme Court had severely castigated Delhi Police. "We can only trust and hope that the police of Delhi will take the public reports seriously and act promptly if they want the public to co-operate. The public is likely to refuse co-operation till the apathy of the police lasts." Their Lordships V Misra and F Gill had observed.

Those who don't care for history are condemned to repeat it. The same old lamentations are heard each time an innocent girl is waylaid, raped and murdered. Delhi's lack of an accountable police force remains a reality. A huge home guard force, which could have been utilised

for neighbourhood patrolling, is deliberately kept inactive.

By dubbing Singh as "rape capital", its intelligentsia washes its hands off every responsibility. The same trick is played by the Government by promising "stern action" and, now, the capital punishment. But nobody is willing to guarantee that the streets will be safer for our children.

Nothing will change eventually. Unless the rotten culture of Delhi is surgically addressed.

Delhi's wrongs
For 65 years, Delhi has been some kind of a Government zoo. All the successes of nation-building are sought to be showcased here, but unwittingly the failures get better display.

Thanks to Government patronage, Delhi's roads are wider than other Indian metropolises — even outside the Lutyens zone one finds more motorable streets than other Indian cities with comparable population. There is also great filth, pestilence and misery. The stink of human defecation fills the nose even as one walks on the footpath outside Parliament House. Scratch the surface and Delhi is just another anarchic, rotting Indian metropolis.

But at least Kolkata makes great cinema. It's litterateurs are the pride of India. Mumbai is almost a world

capital of all forms of popular artistic expression. And Chennai? One's ears are always filled with soul-filling music there; it streams out of every home at sunset as little children sit with their parents around the family harmonium to keep alive a thousand-year-old tradition.

And Delhi has what? It has cars. More cars than all Indian cities combined. To Delhiites, the car is a subject of envy, rivalry and murder — its posse to put up signs saying "Tyres will be deflated" when asserting right over parking space. Often, neighbour kills neighbour over self-defined parking rights. Road-rape murders are also common.

Delhi also has more shops than elsewhere in India selling — not books and music — but vanity stuff. Clothes, perfumes, imported foodstuffs (not necessarily good for consumption in India), furnishings and — booze.

Drinking is treated as a right in the capital of the country which claims to uphold Mahatma Gandhi's vision.

All day round, people can be seen with one hand on the driving wheel and another holding a bottle of whisky. Ugly men hang about liquor dens flouting a Delhi Excise threat of fines, teasing women and creating brawls. All the five accused in the gang-rape

were drunk and yet nobody talked of the lack of checks on drinking while driving. Not one "intellectual" talked of the Delhi Government's policy of submerging Delhiites in whiskey through industrial scale issuance of liquor licenses which has led to shops mushrooming in even residential areas.

Renaissance?
Delhi, among Indian cities, has the best literacy rate. Thanks to decades of exceptional federal support, the city has more schools and colleges. Money for human resource development has never been in short supply here.

At the root of the thought "why is Delhi the rape capital?" is my proposal "Does this city have its own intellectual tradition to counter its infamously unreformed backwater?" The answer is a resounding No. The average Delhiite is still the stereotypical north Indian — rooted in ostentation and misogyny.

Add to that a new, yet-unidentified tragedy. This city is losing its professional middle class. With land prices being dictated by officially patronised land sharks, offices are leaving Delhi's once-booming hubs. Housing has become unaffordable for the salaried classes and so large numbers of people are leaving Delhi each year for the

concrete jungles coming up around it. Many are even transplanting themselves in other cities of India.

The environment clock is ticking away. On December 19, the National Geophysical Research Institute announced that Delhi's groundwater may run out in 3-5 years, making most parts of the city bone dry. Meanwhile, air pollution levels are back to pre-CNG introduction levels.

Clearly, the imagination which has run this city to the doors of doom cannot be relied on to save it from a horrific end. We need a renaissance, and this must be led by artists and philosophers — facilitated by a ruling elite with new ideas.

New Imagination
Delhi's creative class, bred in its homes, schools and Government-run academies must be retained here. This city could do with neighbourhood informal schools where every afternoon little children could go to learn how to draw, play an instrument, learn a dance form — or simply be with art. In Kolkata and Chennai, it's common to see housewives supplement the family income by teaching children how to draw or the rudiments of Bharatanatyam. Delhi's children should not be deprived. With time, a new art form would grow from the soil of Delhi.

This city could do with its own film industry and Government support would be crucial for that at both the production and distribution ends. Our boys and girls make Bollywood proud. Maybe, with a little push, we could have a Delhi school of cinema within a generation.

Many would scoff at the idea of State-sponsored cinema. I am not even remotely suggesting that a cinema producing class can be "sponsored" by the Government. But let's recognise the tremendous talent base we are frittering away or gifting to other cities for lack of an infrastructure.

Could Satyajit Ray have made "Pather Panchali" without the backing of Bengal's famous Chief Minister Dr BC Roy? Certainly not, by the master filmmaker's own admission.

Corruption, rape and violence are children of hedonism. If these could have been bred with State support, why not the obverse? Would Raja Rammohan Roy have succeeded in mobilising a public campaign against Sati without the support of a progressive Governor-general like William Bentinck? Never. (The writer is a National Executive member of the BJP)

THE OTHER VOICE

Delhi's culture supports Rape Inc.

As Delhi is the capital of India, it's bizarre social order which manifests through rape, loot and chicanery, is a matter of shame for the rest of India. Here's a southern view



KESTUR VASUKI

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It is quite difficult to bring the Delhi incident under the purview of standard definitions and theories of social psychology. Social psychologists typically explain human behavior as a result of the interaction of mental states and immediate social situations. But a male dominant culture has once again proved its superiority physically and psychologically. This needs more benchmark analysis of the place and people who are part of a social structure in an urbanised Delhi.

Why this cruelty in society? This is not first incident of its kind in Delhi but the people's upsurge gave strength to a populist movement which has shaken the government. The young woman, in her death, has become a symbol and rallying point for protests across the country. This is a beginning for demanding gender justice, a significant move as far as Delhi is concerned. The anger is just

not feminist euphoria as a typical case in the West but India has to question this shame.

Professor Suresh Misra of Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), Delhi has very interesting observations on this entire episode which has shaken the very psyche of the entire nation. He feels we not only have to go beyond the State and police, to confront a deeply entrenched patriarchal society in the north which is relevant to the situation in the Capital. He said, "I personally believe the entire episode is now about confronting patriarchal culture which has become obvious in Delhi. This has destroyed the very fabric of society."

"The sexual violence in Delhi is part of a frustrated culture. The male domination and the complex social attitude is more visible in Delhi," observes Professor MS Krishnan of Political Science department, Bangalore University. He further says the attitude of a culture has made

Delhi very unsafe place for the women folk who undergo sexual harassment in each social encounter. Professor Krishnan observes this is the typical characteristics of a decaying society and a particular culture. He finally says Delhi has become a victim of the cultural brutality of conscience.

Kushwath Singh's novel "Delhi" even though gives a sketch of spatial dimension of Delhi is also descriptive of a changing culture of the place. Singh brings the story of Delhi to life by alternating between autobiographical accounts of several characters from different eras of the history of the city and his accounts of his relationship with his hermaphrodite mistress, Bhagmati. The book draws a parallel between the half-man, half-woman Bhagmati and the city of Delhi and they both are described as the "favorite mistresses" of the author — indication of a tradition of perversity.

Professor DS Poornananda of Kuvempu University, a keen observer in class and caste conflict, finds the incident and the consequent upsurge as a middle class movement but finds the accused from a working class background. He finds Delhi's rape culture a tragic consequence of growing class rage let loose on women. Looking at Delhi's social structure and changes this argument holds good to understand the beyond police perception on the incident.

Delhi has always been infamous for being the most unsafe place for women and surprisingly, even for the police. EG Jaideep, a prominent businessman in Bangalore, finds in Delhi, a direct nexus between a criminal and politician which has increased crimes. He said, "Under such circumstances, the first target would be women. Every rapist thinks that he can get away with murder, literally!"

The complexity of culture has also exposed the other face

of Delhi with male domination having no respect towards women as other beings. As Delhi is still struggling in transition of feudal society to democratic form, the prevalent patriarchy is at the root violence against women. Delhi is a great symbolic witness to the halt of transition for equality of both sexes. As in Delhi the feudal values have always opposed to the values of gender equality where rapes become a regular phenomenon of a decaying culture. The Khap culture of controlling the lives of women in the name of Gotra is another aspect which gives men the added impetus to suppress women.

Women in Bangalore find Delhi very unsafe. They feel that the northern culture is such that male dominance gives the added sanction to harass women. Mamta Bharadwaj, a consultant who spent her childhood and teenage in Delhi, says the city has not changed over the

years. They had to fight harassment then and now it has only accelerated to rape and murder. "It's the very social fabric that has to change. Gender equality in society can only bring about an inherent change," she says.

Babita Shenoy, a home maker, feels it is the government that has to be blamed. "If the police and the government take care of basic safety like providing safe transportation be it in an auto or a bus, these problems would not occur," she asserts. Roopashri Sanjay, an HR consultant, says she would not like to live in the country's capital if she did not have any influence in the corridors of power. But she is also optimistic that with an uprising of the middle class, a mass revolution will happen. "Nobody can stop an uprising from happening. How much can the common man take? Delhi is definitely not fit to be the capital city," she says.