

RAPE CULTURE AND SEXISM IN GLOBALISING INDIA

Kavita Krishnan

- *How politics, economics and caste ideology* •
shape women's rights in India

ABSTRACT

Following the 2012 gang rape of a woman in Delhi, the spotlight was turned on women's rights in India. A 2014 BBC documentary reignited the debate as it – and much of the international debate – was quick to suggest that this violent and misogynistic act was an expression of Indian culture and tradition. Here the author argues that such an explanation is incorrect. Rather, Kavita Krishnan suggests that there are more complex contemporary forces in play that actively work to maintain women's subordinate role in society – specifically, caste, politics and capitalism.

KEYWORDS

India | Sexism | Women's rights | feminism | capitalism | India's Daughter

In India and in the West, there is a tendency to see gender violence and misogyny in India as an expression of “culture” and “tradition”. This is an inaccurate and distorting lens through which to look at gender violence and misogyny.

In an interview in the 2015 documentary *India's Daughter*, directed by Leslie Udwin, Mukesh Singh, one of the men convicted for the 16 December 2012 gang-rape and murder in Delhi, justifies the rape on the grounds that the victim had overstepped the lines of prescribed gender roles and feminine morality. His lawyer echoed the same victim-blaming sentiments, boasting that he would burn his daughter alive if she were to behave in a dishonourable way. These interviews were widely condemned across the globe as expressions of a brutal and uncivilised culture of rape and honour crimes. The film itself explains such attitudes as products of poverty, deprivation and a culture of masculine privilege in India.

Mukesh Singh and his lawyer Manohar Lal Sharma invoke “Indian culture” as the source of their victim-blaming remarks. A range of other influential Indian figures of authority, including members of parliament and assemblies, leaders of the Hindu political right, heads of most religions and sects, police officers, and even a head of the national women’s commission, have also expressed opinions very similar to those expressed by the rape convict and his lawyer.¹ And all of them invariably invoke “Indian culture” as the basis for their beliefs, blaming “western” influence for rape.

In spite of their claims, their victim-blaming remarks are not a straightforward expression of an “Indian culture” or “tradition”.

When politicians and other powerful figures seek to define “Indian culture” in terms of misogynistic traditions, they are not expressing a pre-existing culture, they are trying to create and craft such a culture. It is a myth told for political purposes.

“Honour crimes” (feminists prefer the term custodial killings), especially the murder of women and their lovers or husbands, are often defended by invoking “tradition”. However, the “tradition” of punitive killings of self-choice couples is not really a mere vestige of an outdated tradition.

In the Indian state of Haryana, for example, the so-called “honour killings” – ordered by *khaps* (dominant caste clans) – are a modern phenomenon. They are an attempt by landed clan leaders to invoke tradition in order to retain control over land, property as well as political hegemony. Such control is under strain from challenges by oppressed castes as well as young women who are making claims to the land and property.

“Tradition” and “culture” is invoked by ruling class politicians to consolidate the support of dominant classes, castes, and religions. But it is also invoked to create a fictitious unity of men across classes. The class divide between the powerful section that owns land and factories, and the landless working class, is disguised by a unity of clan/caste identity. And

one of the most powerful ways in which this identity is forged, is by the notion of a shared “honour” that lies in control over sisters and daughters.

Misogynistic culture is therefore not static and unchanging. It is shaped by modern anxieties and economic, social and political motives. The “Indian culture” invoked here is therefore a myth, narrated to unite working class and landless men with landed men and capitalists.

What we need to ask is, not “Why is Indian culture so brutal to women and why does India defend rape and honour killings” but instead “in whose interests, and through what processes, is an “Indian culture” being produced, that simultaneously blames women for rape, and justifies surveillance and denial of women’s autonomy in the name of protection of rape?” Why, in India (and elsewhere in the world too), are we seeing loud pronouncements of victim-blaming and rape culture from influential politicians?

Capitalism needs to draw women into the labour force as cheap, under-paid labour, and it also needs women’s unpaid work in the home to bear the bulk of the burden of social reproduction (bearing children, replenishing labour power daily by providing food, care and psychological comfort for the exhausted worker, and caring for the past and future labour-force - children and the aged).

In India therefore, the current spate of sexism and culture of justifying rape and surveillance on women, is best explained as a means of disciplining women’s labour in a neoliberal capitalist economy, rather than as a mere vestige of a backward culture.

In the late 1980s, India’s ruling class imposed neoliberal economic policies (popularly called LPG – Liberalisation, Privatisation, Globalisation) on India.² Those policies, the rulers claimed and still claim, would lift India out of poverty, create jobs, and empower women.

Women have, in the past few decades in India, come out in increasing numbers to seek paid work. However, women’s workplace participation rates are still low, and women are still mostly employed in the ‘3-D jobs’ (jobs that are ‘Dirty, Dangerous, Demeaning’). While women are being drawn into exploitative wage labour, they are also called upon to bear increased burdens of household labour.

It is not just oppressive families, then, that seek to hold women down to these roles. The very processes of capitalism and globalisation that seek to draw women out into wage labour, also seek to hold women down to their domestic roles in maintaining social reproduction.

In India today, ideologies of domesticity and the “Indian family” are under strain, thanks to women being drawn into wage labour and women’s increasing assertion of their autonomy within their natal and marital homes. Yet, the ideologies continue to be invoked by the government as well as by factory owners producing for global capital.

The ideology of gender, family and national/religious “culture” are invoked in contemporary Indian political, economic and social narratives to justify gender, caste, class hierarchies and religious divides. That is why the fight against caste, gender and communal violence in India cannot merely be a fight against “backward culture” or “regressive mindsets,” as is popularly understood in mainstream media in India and the West. Those battles, along with those of India’s workers and peasants, need to integrate with each other and confront capitalism and neoliberal policies; and battles will have to be fought together, for freedom and autonomy in fields, factories and families.

NOTES

1 • Sahil Rizwan, “18 Comments Glorifying Rape That Have Been Broadcast In India,” *Buzzfeed*, March 4, 2015, accessed July 10, 2015, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/sahilrizwan/the-r-word#.fuAwwWxo1>.

2 • C.P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh, “The Indian

economic reform process and the implications of the Southeast Asian crisis,” *International Labor Organization* 1999, accessed July 10, 2015, http://www.oit.org/wcm/sp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_120391.pdf.

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