

1-1-2008

Stepping outside the sacred circle: Narratives of violence and disempowerment of the contemporary Indian woman

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Recommended Citation

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STEPPING OUTSIDE THE SACRED CIRCLE:
NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE AND DISEMPOWERMENT
OF THE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN WOMAN

GOEL

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Stepping Outside the Sacred Circle: Narratives of Violence and

Disempowerment of Contemporary Indian Women

(TITLE)

BY

Koeli Moitra Goel

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in Communication Studies

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2008

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Running Head: THE SACRED CIRCLE

Stepping Outside the Sacred Circle:

Narratives of Violence and Disempowerment of the Contemporary Indian Woman

Masters Thesis

Communication Studies

Koeli M. Goel

Spring 2008

Abstract

India is a secular socialist republic and one of the largest democracies in the world. It prides itself on its modern constitution, extensive educational system and progressive society. The sophisticated mainstream English print media – frequently staffed by erudite, internationally acclaimed journalists and managed by India’s biggest business houses – sketches the image of a prosperous, “rising” and “shining” India through glossy publications. Beneath this superficial veneer of the story of India’s progress is an underbelly of repressive practices, gender-based discrimination and human rights’ violations which reveal a society in which women’s rights are minimal, oppression is endemic and economic progress or emancipation is elusive. This thesis posits that the mainstream Hindu patriarchal society uses the metaphor of Sita, a religious and mythical figure, as the ultimate feminine symbol, to discipline and dominate the contemporary Indian woman. This project seeks to explicate the connection between the myth of Sita and the modern woman’s position through narratives of women, including the author, who have ventured outside their boundaries rather than maintain the code of silence imposed on them by Indian society. Most of the narratives take place within the context of a crisis surrounding an agricultural movement against land acquisition by big business in West Bengal’s Midnapore district. The thesis also scrutinizes the print media coverage of this farmers’ movement in an effort to show how the mainstream media often ignores the woman’s experience even when they are the ones who have to pay the heaviest prices for being part of a political environment. In exploring the way these women craft their stories within the constraints of their political and social existence, this project identifies very distinctive efforts by the women to enact their resistance.

STEPPING OUTSIDE THE SACRED CIRCLE:
NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE AND DISEMPOWERMENT OF THE
CONTEMPORARY INDIAN WOMAN

Chapter 1

Introduction

This was the house I grew up in. There was a beautiful rose garden in the front lawn with exotic blooms tended carefully by my mother. I still remember how I would walk around the garden paths, lined with cute little bonsai lemon trees, studying literature or history. The big rooms with their high ceilings, white washed walls and shuttered windows saw many of my lazy summer afternoons, as I lay in bed staring up at the whirring ceiling fans, soothed into midday slumber by their drone. These same rooms and balconies saw me on monsoon evenings reading the forbidden novels of Mills & Boon or Barbara Cartland or Ian Fleming's James Bond hidden inside my Charles Dickens' or organic chemistry books. The distant tinkling of the shepherd's bells mixed with blares of long-distance buses on the interstate highway to form a background for many of my winter mornings. Cosseted inside the closed bedroom doors in the cold evenings, warmed and charmed with the fragrance of the

smoking "dhoopdaan," the incense lingering in the air long after they had been set up at dusk to ward off mosquitoes, soothed by the warmth of the heavy, thick, cotton blankets lined with gorgeous red silk, I remember listening to Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline," "Play Me," "Song Sung Blue" or "Soolaimon" on Yuvavani channel's program of Western music, "Jukebox".

This was the same house to which I returned for my first confinement and held my firstborn, Gogol, to my breast without feeling much of that proverbial "bond" till he clutched my index finger with both his little hands one day. The taste of the warm saffron-laced milk, the scent of the hot-oil massages, trays of hot food carried up to the bedroom with steaming plates of buttered rice and chicken stew, all get mixed up and played over and again in the memory of days which are no more.

But were they ever really there? Because this house of fifteen rooms did not have a small space for me when I returned there bruised and beaten, clutching two little hands. Where was the fragrance, where was the warmth? Neither its spacious rooms had a secure corner for me nor could its heavy gates and sentries ensure that I would not be harmed, assaulted, maimed, killed. My

family, my affluent family did not have enough strength to carry the burden of one of its daughters who had dared to speak up against a cheating husband. They had been deprived of their moral courage because she had wandered outside her "Lakshman Rekha," the charmed Sacred Circle, within which she should have confined herself. She had broken the strict moral and social codes which guide the trajectory of Indian women to this day and therefore violated an order of things which should not have been disturbed. Women are assigned their place and they have to remain within their parameters no matter which family, society or class they belong to. And in every sphere of life, they have to obey their husbands and their families.

This is the real India. My experiences of violence and oppression in India are commonplace for many other women who spend their days not in the glamorous India of beauty queen Aishwarya Rai (Parameswaran, 2004), not a "shining" or "rising" India (Nanjundaiah, 2005; Deb, 2005), but a very different India. This India – stripped of the economic data which adorn it on covers of financial magazines the world over, barren of the powerful political rhetoric accompanying its emergence as a world power (Owen, 2006), devoid of the glorious tales of the IIT breakthroughs in information technology – has no claim to being one of the "Asian tigers." This is the real India of everywoman. It is swathed in a cloak of silence because it has scars of the numerous rapes which are

reported in minuscule single-column inches in its newspapers, because it hides the scream of the tiny infant as she is drowned to death in milk, it smothers the agonized cry of millions of domestic abuse victims. It is the India where laws are structured within 19th century British guidelines (Menon, 2000), an average court has a backlog of 50,000 cases and the average woman and her children are the “property of the man” who has acquired her in the matrimonial exchange. The aim of this project is to examine the problematic dynamics of a democratic country which has evolved into an economic giant of the 21st century without ensuring basic human rights for half its population. This thesis scrutinizes the foundation of a strong patriarchal society where ancient traditions and religious customs have been so normalized into the everyday social structure that even the potentially powerful combination of a relatively independent press and a large number of educated women has not been able to bring emancipation and empowerment to India’s everywoman.

This project was initially aimed at an analysis of India’s oppressive social practices against women based on a scrutiny of the problematic dynamics underlying the myth of the ultimate feminine in ancient religious norms. I adopted a qualitative approach in order to conduct a discourse analysis of the public dialogue emerging from women’s efforts to resist the oppression which was a regular part of their existence. Eventually a quantitative analysis was incorporated in order to analyze a specific event which took place within a political and cultural setting while this project was in progress. The event was part of a resistance movement in West Bengal’s Midnapore district. The discourse was very typically Indian and consequently novel to most studies on violence conducted in the United States. Since I was analyzing print media texts reporting this violent event, a quantitative evaluation had to be incorporated into my paper.

My thesis uses the narrative as a literary form and as a mirror reflecting how women frame their identities, carry on their struggles and voice their resistance against the societal abuse which is perpetrated against them even as they are peddled as pawns and traded as trophies. This project combines a case study of rampant human rights abuses during the peasant's struggle in Nandigram of Midnapore district in West Bengal, a discourse analysis of the print media coverage of that massacre, the narratives of women victims of sexual violence during the unfortunate event and reports from independent non-governmental organizations to highlight the plight of women in this part of India. It accentuates the silence that surrounds many violations against women, the negation of the woman's rights within the family system and the normalization of a subliminal, gender-based discrimination in contemporary Indian society.

This project examines four different types of artifacts collected through a period starting in the Fall of 2007 and ending in the month of June 2008. Among them are videotaped narratives of women and children subjected to sexual violence in different parts of Bengal, videotaped narratives of members of the Midnapore peasants' movement who were subjected to extreme torture and sexual abuse at a week-long massacre, newspaper reports on the carnage provided by my sister, Dr. Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar, a political and women's rights activist working with the area women at the time, newspaper reports collected by me, and an "Independent Citizens' Report" of the same incident provided by a non-governmental organization called *Sahayog*. My personal narrative is woven into this multi-textured article not only because my effort is to show the universal nature of the brutal oppression of women from all backgrounds but also because its personal lived experiences lend a depth and richness to the tapestry emerging from the combination of this multi-media, multi-textual, multi-layered project. Through Kakoli's

involvement with *Udaan*, a women's rights activist group working in the area of women's health, and her contact with the women of the resistance movement, and my close communication with her, I explore the intimidating effect of sexual violence which affects even those who witness it, the tangible fear which shakes up the most courageous woman's soul and the utter devastation it wreaks on the victim.

The Myth of Sita

The question which pre-empts all other discussions is regarding the weakness underlying the Indian woman's position in society. The issue demands not simply the recognition that the woman is often at the bottom of the totem pole in familial, societal, economic settings but a thorough understanding of where this position has emerged from. Combined with this is a scrutiny of the metaphor of the religious myth of Sita which has a huge influence on Hindu ideology, arguably the most dominant force in modern India even among other religious communities. Together, they form a concrete base for understanding the hegemonic formations of Indian patriarchal society and the atrocities which disgrace an otherwise rich cultural heritage.

My aim is to show that by making choices towards promoting the pre-eminent position of Sita at important historical conjunctures, Indian society, its nation-builders, opinion makers and its feminist leaders regulated the flow of later discourse towards regressive religious tenets for women, set boundaries beyond which the woman could not venture and ultimately imprisoned the same woman they had set out to liberate within a maze of orthodox, archaic, religious traditions.

Who is Sita? The simple answer is that she is a goddess, wife of the Hindu god, Rama. At the other end of the spectrum, Sita is the embodiment of all the virtues that

Indian society expects its women to have. Between these two extremities fall variations of meanings based on the Hindu perception of the ultimate feminine. Over centuries, India's patriarchal society chose to promote the popular versions of Indian womanhood as represented by mythical figures like Sita and Savitri because their lives embodied the values which suited the hegemonic Hindu structural principles the most (Robinson, 1999; Natarajan, 1994). Both these figures were idealized as faithful and devoted wives and revered for the sacrifices they made for the benefit of their husbands. A scrutiny of their lives, however, shows that the greatness which they were most acclaimed for was dependent more on their self-effacing natures, an erosion of their own identity, and a selfless commitment to their men (Kinsley, 1987). It had not much to do with their intellectual and personal accomplishments.

Savitri was the wife of Satyavan from *Mahabharata*, the second of the two great Indian epics. She is often cited along with Sita because of the loyalty and commitment she showed when she was prepared to sacrifice her own life in order to bring her husband back from death. The reason I prefer to focus on the myth of Sita, explicated in the primary Hindu epic *Ramayana*, is because she is referred to far more commonly in Indian popular culture – films, music and literature – as well as in everyday discourse. Moreover, while Sita's character has been profoundly influential in carving out the Indian Hindu woman's prototype, in no other character is the woman's complete lack of agency more clearly accentuated than that of Sita's.

It is logical to begin the analysis of Sita's evolution with one of the most important canons of Hindu scriptural text, the *Valmiki Ramayana*, variously dated between the 500 B.C.E. and 100 B.C.E. Sage Valmiki, who lived around 400 B.C.E. was

said to have composed the first written version of this ancient scripture in Sanskrit according to attributions in the text itself. According to Hari Prasad Shastri's translation of the *Valmiki Ramayana*, (Kinsley, 1987; Robinson, 1999) Sita, the wife of crown prince, Rama of Ayodhya, started out by showing exemplary independence and moral courage when she insisted on abandoning the luxury of her royal palace to accompany her exiled husband to the forest. In exile, she not only suffered great hardships but also abduction and imprisonment by Ravana, the demon king, who was her husband's arch enemy. After rescuing her, Rama insisted she prove her chastity and faithfulness to him not once but on two occasions. When Sita was rescued from captivity, he refused to reinstate her as his wife since she had spent some time in Ravana's home (Valmiki Ramayana, 6.17, as cited in Kinsley, p.74). Consequently, she was forced to take the "*agni pariksha*" or a fire test to prove her purity and Sita "emerged unharmed from a burning pyre" (Robinson, p.92) thereby proving her innocence. However, soon after he had been crowned the king of Ayodhya, Rama banished her from his palace anyway, on the demand of his subjects and when she returned after fulfilling his dictum, he demanded another *agni pariksha*. Devastated by the ignominy and injustice, Sita returned to mother earth: a metaphorical embrace of a live burial and her only silent protest against an unfair, pitiless treatment. This story of Sita, one of unmitigated suffering and injustice piled on a woman of great chastity and commitment has endured in Indian society as the abiding force which qualifies, determines and frames the contemporary Indian woman's existence.

There is no doubt that the deification of Sita as the ultimate role model for the Indian woman is problematic. The dynamics emerging from an abiding reference point

which has been debated, contested and yet, has retained its original identity since 400 B.C.E. has created a situation of immense dialectical complexity in determining the exact position of the Indian woman even for the most committed of feminists. Is Sita the captive princess or the royal consort of Rama? Is she the highly-evolved epitome of intellect, grace and beauty or a disempowered weakling in need of constant protection from marauding violators who get attracted to her physical charms? Plagued by all these questions, the figure of Sita has been examined and scrutinized in Indian popular culture to the effect that hers has become a living image and her destiny a living inspiration guiding the discourse on the modern Indian woman's existence.

Through the ages, several literary versions of the original *Ramayana* have emerged and a few translations have gained in prominence. Among these are Tamil poet Kampan's *Iramavataram* (11th C.E), Krittibas Ojha's Bengali *Ramayana* (14th C.E), Kannada poet Narahari Kavi's *Torave Ramayan* (14th C.E), and the Hindi *Ramcaritamanasa* by 16th century poet Tulsidasa. Whereas it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in a detailed comparative study of Sita's character as it is presented through these versions, a quick review of Tulsidasa's *Ramcaritamanasa*, the popular and widely read Hindi version and its comparison with the original *Ramayana* of Valmiki yields an amazing insight.

The representation in Valmiki's creation is of Sita the perfect wife who does not hesitate to immolate herself to live up to her husband's expectations, who is an embodiment of virtue but whose existence is overwhelmingly qualified by the various captivities she has to undergo and who is positioned firmly within a sacred circle. Beyond this magic circle or *lakshman rekha*, initially drawn by Lakshman, her husband's brother

(Muni, 1999), Sita is prohibited from venturing at the cost of her dignity and life. In most instances Tulsidasa is fairly consistent with the original depiction of Rama's story in Valmiki's Ramayana. However, in depicting some of the crucial travails undergone by Sita, Tulsidasa is strangely ambiguous and even vague. He neither mentions the *lakshman rekha* which was drawn around Sita and beyond which she was asked not to venture, nor does he mention her second exile when Rama banished her at the behest of his subjects. The poet glosses over the terrifying *agni pariksha*, with a fabrication about how Rama and Sita had agreed that Sita would "reside" in the fire and had jointly created an illusion of Sita entering the fire and being purified by the ceremony. It was an effort to rewrite an ancient text especially with reference to the experience of the woman protagonist so as to impose a curtain of silence on the great injustice meted out to her.

Chapter 2

Contextual Backdrop and Literature Review

Looking Back

It is hard to forget the sense of loss and confusion I underwent soon after my divorce when I no longer felt like using my married name and was already too distanced from my maiden one. It seemed to me that in moving from my father's family to my husband's and then back again, I had lost, along with the ten years of my life and part of my soul, also a chunk of my identity.

The man looked at me oddly. I remember his expression clearly even after so many years. His thick bushy right eyebrow slightly raised to express his growing suspicion, he asked: "So who are you?" "I am Ms. Koeli Moitra," I replied. "Really?" The eyebrow had climbed higher. "I think this paper says you are a Mrs. Chowdhary," he waved the copy of my son's birth certificate. "Oh, that, ... no ignore that, I am Ms. Moitra," I replied, hoping that my firm tone would settle the matter. He made a resigned face, "If you say so! So who is this child with you?" "Oh, this is my son." "Really?!" The falsetto was unmistakable. "But his birth certificate says Chowdhary. How can your son be a Chowdhary and you a Moitra?! I cannot help you. Please see the

principal in the other room and come back with his permission. Only then I will allow you to fill up the admission form.” Final.

Over the past decade and a half, one of my biggest challenges has been trying to be a mother and an independent woman at the same time. It seems that Indian society allows one or the other, not both. The production of the child is my sacred duty but according to Hindu law the possession of that child is undoubtedly the father’s privilege, as my divorce lawyer once clarified to me.

After having gone through custodial battles within the Indian court system, after scanning through pages of matrimonial law, this is no longer a surprise to me. As legal scholar Agnes’ (2000) examination of Hindu family law and its subordination of the woman’s rights shows, the woman herself is under the supervision of the husband who becomes, after marriage, the guardian of her person and property.

Within the patriarchal family structure, the Hindu woman loses her rights to acquire and control property upon marriage, loses her rights of residence and maintenance within her natal home at the time of her physical transfer from the natal family to the matrimonial family, and her possessions are limited by the complexly debated concept of “*stridhan*” (literally translated as “woman’s property”) mainly consisting of gifts given to her at the time of her marriage. With strict limitations on her rights to own material property or demand inheritance, it is not surprising that her custodial rights to her children were also severely limited. However, deprived of this precious knowledge, my attorney’s clarification of Hindu matrimonial law – that the woman and her children were “possessions” of the husband – had stunned me at the time.

A Preview

In an effort to map out the demise of the empowered Indian woman, the debilitating myth of Sita and the Sacred Circle is frequently referred to in different parts of this thesis. This reference point and its prevalence in the contemporary Indian woman's life is illuminated with a review of previous literature and historical information to show how ancient religious texts have been cleverly co-opted by the dominant patriarchal societal forces to harness and discipline women and perpetuate the hegemonic male-dominated structure of Indian society.

The position of the contemporary Indian woman may be reviewed in terms of the emergence of the feminine identity within the structure of an evolving Indian society since the time of British colonization. This portion of the thesis includes a reconstruction of both – the society and the feminine within it – from a postcolonial perspective to shed light on how the woman's role was eroded and her anguished cries silenced. The overall framework within which this scrutiny is organized is marked by dialogic and dialectical complexity because of the historical, political, social and religious issues which acted as normative influences on the environment. This is in no small measure due to the nature of India's complex, multiethnic heritage and its strong reliance on religion as a way of life. To understand why Indian women occupy the twilight zone between emancipation and subordination, I scrutinize a few landmarks within India: the exact nature of "Hinduism" which qualifies the lifestyle of a majority of the country's population, the impact of and reactions to drafting of Hindu personal law by the British administration under the guidance of orthodox and reactionary Hindu religious leaders, the Indian women's movement, and finally how multiple ways of reading ancient Hindu scriptures have eroded the legitimacy of an abiding stance on the woman's position in society.

Of Female Bondage

In Indian civic society, the concept of rule of law is largely limited to the legal volumes except in one significant aspect: The fact that the woman is the property of the men in her family is picked up from the annals of matrimonial and family law and repeated at every turn and corner so that it not only retains its currency and gains momentum but so that it can act as a deterrent to any woman raising her head to take actions towards self-determination.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1998) throws light on the dichotomy inherent in the woman's position: "the figure of the woman, moving from clan to clan, and family to family as daughter/ sister and wife/ mother, syntaxes patriarchal continuity even as she is herself drained of proper identity" (p.302). This paper finds consonance with many of Spivak's views apparent through her commentary in the book, *In Other Worlds*, where she examines several Indian literary texts from the postcolonial perspective and reviews the "male" Marxist paradigm of production in which the role of the woman as well as the fruits of her body and labor are overlooked.

The clearest conceptualization of the Indian woman's position is probably attained through Spivak's (1998) exposition of the basic premise in Indian society of the mother-in-bondage theme and the Indian ideology of the nation-state as a mother figure. Spivak delivers a scathing evaluation of the Indian woman's position in her critique of the literary text, "Stanadayini" or "Breast Giver," by feminist scholar-author Mahasweta Devi. In drawing a comparison between the breast-giver mother protagonist of the story and the Indian ideal of the country as a symbolic mother, Spivak (1998) shows the

dichotomy inherent in the position of resting the weight of divinity on the shoulders of the same mother figure which is exploited by all.

Like the protagonist Jashoda, India is a mother-by-hire. All classes of people, the post-war rich, the ideologues, the indigenous bureaucracy, the diasporics, the people who are sworn to protect the new state, abuse and exploit her. If nothing is done to sustain her, nothing given back to her, and if scientific help comes too late, she will die of a consuming cancer.... the ideological construct "India" is too deeply informed by the goddess-infested reverse sexism of the Hindu majority. As long as there is this hegemonic cultural self-representation of India as a goddess-mother (dissimulating the possibility that this mother is a slave), she will collapse under the burden of the immense expectations that such a self-representation permits. (p. 337)

Spivak's passage is almost like an allegorical reading of the Indian woman's asymmetrical situation in which she is worshipped as a goddess-like mother-figure while having to manage a parallel identity as the possession of the man, as a property, a commodity which is exchanged between families. She is also heavily burdened by this weight of living up to the image of the ideal woman, Sita.

From the late nineteenth century onwards, starting at the resurgence of militant Hindu nationalism, the nation state has been figured as a woman and a mother (Natarajan, 1994). Indeed, litterateur Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's "Ananda Math" encapsulated the fervor of the times in the famous Indian slogan, *Vande Mataram* (Victory to the Mother) and it became the battle cry for Indian nationalists against the British throughout the next century.

'Mother India' is an enormously powerful cultural signifier, gaining strength not only from atavistic memories from the Hindu epics, Sita, Sati Savitri, Draupadi, but also its use in moments of national (typically conflated with Hindu) cultural resurgence.... *Woman*, symbol of Hindu nationalism, covers real *women* in India, heterogeneous, various, of many castes, religions and geographical regions.

(Natarajan, 1994)

The difficulty of dealing with the immensely varied, multidimensional identities of Indian women was handled superbly by the country's elite patriarchal forces when they wanted to harness this powerful "Mother India" social phenomenon by casting the standardized mould of Sita as the ultimate feminine role model into which every woman had to squeeze her existence and identity into.

The dialectical complexity of the Indian woman's position may only be understood through a systematic, multidirectional evaluation. This involves analyzing the many dimensions of the woman's identity within the Indian context: The first dimension is that of the woman as the ideal mother, a goddess-like creature with all the accompanying qualities which she is expected to live up to; the second is of woman as property, a commodity or slave, who belongs to an inferior sub-set of human beings and have to be disciplined and punished for aberrations on one hand and taken as a consumer good on the other; and finally the coordination between these two disparate images of womanhood through the symbol of Sita confined within the Sacred Circle. Lost in this intricately woven tapestry is the idea of the woman as an independent entity with her own rights, liberty, free will and self-determination. In the crossroads between these myriad

images, expectations and values, the Indian woman's identity has become increasingly complex especially since the latter half of the 20th century.

The woman's position has moved from one set of problems to another in many societies. Spivak (1998) points this out through her feminist review of the Marxist paradigm of economic production through scrutiny of the concepts of use-value, exchange-value and surplus-value. According to Spivak, a feminist reading into the Marxist perspective would show that the "woman in the traditional social situation produces more than she is getting in terms of her subsistence, and therefore is a continual source of the production of surpluses, *for* the man who owns her, or *by* the man for the capitalist who owns *his* labor-power" (p. 105). However, this gives rise to a more difficult question when the contemporary woman (presumably in Western societies) asks for compensation for housework, as to "What is the use-value of unremunerated woman's work for husband or family? Is the willing insertion into the wage structure a curse or a blessing? How should we fight the idea, universally accepted by men that wages are the only mark of value-producing work?" (Spivak, p. 105)

In a brilliant overture, Spivak (1998) suggests a questioning and rereading of Marx's philosophical trajectory because therein is a "major transgression where rules for humanity and criticisms of societies are based on inadequate evidence" (p.106). The Marxist perspective on the capitalist system is structured so as to externalize the labor process and the worker as commodities. A feminist reading would then definitely situate the woman and her "possession of a tangible place of production in the womb" (Spivak, 1998, p. 106) as an agent in any theory of production. However, the immense physical, emotional, custodial, sentimental dimensions which qualify the woman's relationship

with her product, the child, are overlooked in traditional Marxist thought. The neglect of the agency of the woman as well as the complexity of the relationship between labor and its product even in discourses like Marxism is the point to where this paper wants to draw attention.

In both so-called matrilineal and patrilineal societies the legal possession of the child is an inalienable fact of the property right of the man who 'produces' the child. In terms of this legal possession, the common custodial definition, that women are much more nurturing of children, might be seen as a dissimulated reactionary gesture. The man retains legal property rights over the products of a woman's body. (Spivak, p. 106)

The persistent oversight of the inherent perversion in this system is at the root of the disempowerment of the woman in societies across the world, no less India. It is also the ultimate reason underlying the domination of man over woman, the former being consistently enriched by the products of the latter's body and the latter being continuously impoverished and devoid of any capability to perpetuate her own lineage or heritage despite being the source of production.

The Mother Load

Spivak's discussions explicate many of the angles of the Indian woman's predicament, where she is on one hand idolized in the position of a mother and simultaneously treated as chattel, to be used for production of children and surplus labor in the home. The highest honor given to a newly-married woman is often in the form of a blessing, "May you be the mother of a hundred sons" (Bumiller, 1991, p.10). In her study on the reproductive health and birth control practices of Indian women from West

Bengal, Mookerjee (2003) outlines the powerlessness of the female subjects in making decisions about their own health, reproductive rights and overall welfare. The author studies the dialectical situations which qualify women's lives under the pressure from the government and health agencies to safeguard their health and finances through family-planning measures and traditional codes of conduct which have been inculcated in them. "Ideologically, Indian women have traditionally been placed within the context of the home and valued principally as wives and mothers. Children, therefore, are tremendously important for women within this framework", (Mookerjee, 2003, p. 1). According to Mookerjee, India is still in the transitional period which started after Indian Independence in 1947 and this places the country in "chronological borderlands" where "the values of the old world are frequently in opposition with the values of the new one, and this makes it difficult to negotiate decisions that involve conflicting views" (p. 2).

Traditionally, the social worth of the woman is always in terms of her ability to bear children but the modern Indian societal norms of having a small, healthy family create immense pressure in the women's lives because this puts the woman at odds with her husband and his family. Mookerjee (2003) states, "there are myths, legends and folktales that have reinforced the ideal of the woman who protects and cherishes her family even at considerable cost to herself" (p. 8). She cites Swami Venkatesananda's reading of the Ramayana, which "deifies women who sacrifice their selfhood at the altar of their husband's duties and obligations and for the ultimate good of their children" (p. 8) as an example of the ideological material which inspires the common Indian woman.

Religious leaders frequently draw on the myth of Sita to control women and ensure their agenda but hardly any discourse is devoted to how Sita meets her end. Sita's

end comes when she is asked by Rama, the same husband for whom she sacrificed so much, to walk through the fire and pass through an *agni pariksha* (a fire test) not once but twice, to prove her purity and innocence after being imprisoned by the immoral Ravana. Curiously enough, this ritual of *agni pariksha* in Ramayana set the stage for centuries of repression in India by providing a religious litmus-test practice in which women are punished for the slightest infraction by being doused with kerosene and burnt mercilessly (Sen, 2001). The insane premise is that if a woman is pure and guiltless, she will survive the fire.

Fire is also a special presence in the lives of Hindu women. From earliest childhood, little girls are told the story of Sita, the paradigm of the loyal, long-suffering wife, who threw herself onto a burning pyre to demonstrate her purity....Sita's ordeal has left an indelible mark on the relationship of Indian women to fire, which remains a major feature of their spiritual lives, a cause of their death and a symbol, in the end, of one of the most shocking forms of oppression. (Bumiller, 1991, p. 45)

Bumiller cites the well-known story of Roop Kanwar, a young Rajput bride who was forced to die at the funeral pyre of her husband as recently as 1987 and the little-known tragedy of Surinder Kaur, a Sikh woman who had been set on fire by her husband and his family to punish her. Bumiller (1991) tries to show how women in India are "victims of a society in which women are not only burned to death but are raised to see self-immolation as their only escape from miserable marriages – or, worse, as an act of courage and religious inspiration" (p. 46).

Mookerjee's (2003) study elaborates the vulnerable and fragile position of the woman within her marital home where the slightest protest or proactive decision-making on her part may bring immense hardships to the extent that she is thrown out of her marital home. The narratives of women show how they try to adopt birth control measures in secret because of the fear of being abandoned by their husbands if they are no longer deemed to be "fertile." Especially chilling is the account of a woman narrating the pressure on her from her marital family against adopting birth control measures: "My mother in law says that if I use anything to stop having babies, she will take my children away and throw me out. She says that I will never see them again. Why should I take this risk?" (Mookerjee, 2003, p. 19). Even more alarming is Mookerjee's observation that this sentiment is not an anomaly, but is in fact, echoed by many women.

The total powerlessness of these women regarding their own reproductive rights, the threats of violence, abandonment, warnings about their children being taken away from them, are common themes among Indian women. This kind of intimidation through which men as well as women in power (mothers-in-law) achieve complete subjugation of the women under their authority is a devastating, absolute and pervasive factor dominating India's multilingual, multiethnic, multicultural society. From childhood, the Indian girl is taught values of selfless devotion to her husband and his family. Once married, she comes to understand her identity in terms of being a wife and in the familial pressures around her, a mother. Consequently, the prospect of being abandoned by the husband might be like an exile to her but the threat of having her children taken away from her sounds like a death knell. Across society, this threat is held like a naked sword, hanging over the mother's head, a disciplinary measure which can be summoned at the

will of her man and his family. The fear of losing her children in a custody battle or to a kidnapping becomes a tangible reality in a woman's life especially if she dares to step outside her sacred circle and adopt radical measures like file for a divorce. Often enough, these fears are proved all too true, like they were for me.

From the time I had spoken up against my erstwhile husband's erring ways, I had been subjected to threats, veiled or blatant, about the dangerous grounds I was treading. Everything around me had become insecure: my place in his family, in his home, in his community. What shook me was the constant reminder that I was the mother of *his* children. As if my motherhood was a right which could be taken away at his will.

She lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling fan, eyes wide open, unseeing. She did hear, though. Little whispers spiraling through the air like wisps of smoke from the incense stick. Some faces surfaced and sunk again. Ma was there but she noticed Baba more. She was to remember later an expression in his face, she had never ever seen before or after. The fair, handsome, haughty, royal demeanor she was used to was tinged with a strange expression – of sadness and compassion mixed with an apologetic look as if he was sorry he could not control himself. There were others, too. Her sisters were there, doctors, maybe a nurse? She slipped in and out of consciousness for a few days. Nobody gave her a count. She just remembers feeling like she had been buried under a

black mountain so dark and deep that she could not see her own hands if she stretched them in front of her eyes.

She was now officially childless. All those times they had told her she would lose her baby if she did not go on complete bed-rest, all those nights she had stayed up staring at the tiny face to see if he was still alive, all those times she had feared her elder son might die of malaria, and all those times they had told her she had no right to be a mother because she had walked out of their father's home. Now they were all relevant. Which of those fears had come true? How did she lose her children? Out of what carelessness, what fault of hers? Then, was it true? What they had told her all along? That the children belonged to the father?

No, wait. That could not be. She was the one who bore the scars of two C-sections on her lower abdomen. She did have children: two boys. Fair, chubby cheeks, beautiful curly eyelashes. But she had not been able to take care of them. None of them. She tried remembering who had taken them away. So many scenes got mixed up that she would get tired and doze off under the heavy sedation.

A blue sari. A blue sari and something else. A blue silk sari fitted in

and out of her mind's eye. She was wearing the beautiful blue silk sari and

balancing little three-year-old Gorky on her lap as the three-wheel rickshaw

jerked its way to the bus stop. She would drop him off at the day care and head

off to work at the day desk of The Statesman newsroom. Suddenly someone

blocked the road and a blow fell on her left arm. Her arm loosened from where it

had circled the little boy. She was more stunned than hurt as she looked at the

man. More men approached. The rickshaw puller tried feebly to pull away and

was taken care of. The baby was snatched away. ~~She knew she did not try~~

~~hard enough to hold on to him. That was it. That was what always got mixed~~

~~up with the blue silk sari. That she did not try hard enough to hold on to her~~

~~child, save him from the kidnapper, scream, yell, gather a crowd, hit the man,~~

~~shield her baby with her own body. Her baby, she knew he had tried to hold on~~

~~to her, desperately.~~

Ma...oh ma...my baby, they took away my baby.....

Now she remembered why she could not scream for help, could not cry

out. Her mouth had been dry as parchment. She saw the father, the owner of

the baby, standing next to a car as they snatched him away. Her baby.

Ma...my baby, they took away my baby.

Losing Ground: Religious Reconstruction of the Feminine

What must be noted at this stage is that the Hindu identity has been, and continues to be, an ever-present aspect of India's society, always evolving, ever-emergent, always contested. According to Robinson (1999), the controversial nature of the woman's place in Indian tradition has its roots in the very nature of Hindu religion. Religious leaders and upper caste members like the Brahmans always tended to revert to ancient texts to find support for their subordination of women whereas women leaders refuted this, also resorting to Vedic sources for empowerment of women.

The ensuing controversy was one in which competing versions of the position of women were produced taking different stances on the issue, including polemics against the tradition, apologetics for it, and a particular ambivalence in which it was depicted as having a dual nature, often expressed in terms of ancient splendour and present shame. This controversy has exerted a profound influence over understandings of the position of women....it has largely determined the selection and interpretation of material, giving rise to a limited repertoire of 'facts and figures' and a conventional set of judgments and assumptions. Thus, through a complex and convoluted process of claim and counter-claim, the position of women in the Hindu tradition has been interpreted and reinterpreted.

Consequently, some aspects of the Hindu tradition have been adduced again and again as points of reference in the course of arguments for a given stance, these arguments proceeding from one commonplace pronouncement about the position

of women to another. For instance, based on the Vedic scriptures it has frequently been declared that the position of women in ancient India was a favourable one, contrasting this with the adverse position of women in later times, perhaps reconstructed by reference to *Dharmasastra* literature, especially the work of the lawgiver Manu, or some other later texts, if not blamed on Muslim invasion or British rule. (Robinson, pp. 8-9).

At this stage, a description of the term "Hindu" and its affiliations would illuminate its exhaustive influence over Indian life. It is easier to trace the origins of the term "Hindu" than to explain the underpinnings of the Hindu way of life. The latter can be equated neither simply with a religion nor with only social practices (Robinson, 1999), but rather with a worldview dating back several centuries and actually "connected with the indigenous culture and civilization which evolved on the sub-continent over millennia" (p. 7). Derived from the Indo-Aryan word "sindhu" the word "Hindu" was used by the Vedic people in reference to the land of vast rivers, especially river Indus which wound its way through the main plains of the Indian sub-continent. They also used the term to refer to themselves as well as to their way of life, culture and ethnic practices.

Till date, the indigenous name for India in Hindi, its national language, is "Hindustan," the land of the Hindus. In popular culture and discourse, the terms "Hindu" and "Indian" are often used interchangeably. In this paper, I use the terms interchangeably to make a scholarly point. India's Hindu ideology is a strong force which dominates the lives of most communities in the country, including the Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians. There are two dimensions of this phenomenon. Whereas this means that different communities participate in the celebration of each

others religious festivals and customs, it also connotes that the ideology of the mainstream Hindu majority has an overriding effect on the smaller communities' familial and social customs.

In India, during the Muslim rule in the Medieval period, the term "Hindu" gained religious connotations and was used to differentiate inhabitants of the sub-continent from Muslims and Buddhists. It was in the modern age that the word "Hindu" acquired a positive religious sense and scholars like Omvedt (1995, as cited by Robinson, 1999) identify this period as one in which Hinduism came to be considered an original ancient Indian religion, a unified entity, originating from the Vedic scriptures. This view of Hinduism, with its ambivalent position between a religion, a worldview and a lifestyle manifesto continues to dominate discourse in India as well as in Western scholarship.

As the British imperialistic venture was transformed in India from the commercial and mercantile presence of the East India Company to the establishment of British Raj (rule of British monarchy), the social dynamism emerged in two main streams. There were reformers who promoted change of the orthodox Hindu values to include some Western ideals and practices and there were the revivalists who insisted on going back to Hindu religious and cultural norms excluding any Western intervention. One important topic of such discussion was, according to Robinson (1999), "the woman question" in which several western observers and scholars commented upon "the manifold abuses, restrictions and miseries perceived to be the lot of Indian women," (Robinson, 1999, p. 30).

Historian James Mill declared in his 1817 book, *The History of British India*, that "nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which the Hindus entertain for their women"

(Robinson, 1999, p. 30). In their effort to uplift and improve social practices, the British imposed their own system on the complex, caste-ridden, multiethnic population of India. In this, they accepted the self-proclaimed superiority of the highest caste-holders, the Brahmans, as the normative standard of society and depended on their orthodox interpretation of Hinduism in order to find a basis for framing legislation with which to rule their new subjects.

By giving primacy to the orthodox Brahmans, who, they realized, occupied principal place in Indian society and by accepting their orthodox Hinduism as the main indigenous ideology, the British might have been following a pattern which dominated their imperialistic, hierarchical social worldview of the dominance of the intellectual and social elite. According to Robinson (1999), "By thus privileging orthodoxy in the way that they did, it was the British who effectively dictated the agenda for campaigns to change the positions of women..." (p. 31).

This was an important historical juncture for the Indian woman as far as her status in society and within the purview of law was concerned. Agnes (2000) attributes a big portion of the responsibility regarding the erosion of women's legal rights to colonial influences. In examining the erosion of the Hindu woman's rights, Agnes (2000) traces how real life practices violated the stated policy of the British government not to interfere in the personal law of the natives and "a judicial bias crept into the Indian legal system by the introduction of principles of Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence" (p. 118). Basing their procedures on the concept of legal precepts from Britain, British jurists in India assumed the role of commentators and interpreted ancient Hindu texts, the "*Smritis*" according to their understanding of what was required by the contemporary Indian society. But their

limited understanding of the plurality in Indian society of the non-state legal systems, local practices and established customs created a disconnection between law and real life. The British jurists over-emphasized the ancient texts and undervalued the later commentaries and local conventions.

British interpretations of ancient texts became binding on Indians and made the law certain, rigid and uniform. This could have been welcomed as a positive intervention if only these notions of modernity and uniformity had benefited women. But ironically the concepts provided a forum for the collusion of local patriarchal interests with the anti-women biases of British jurists and laid firm legal ground for the diminution of women's rights in India. (Agnes, 2000, p. 120)

The British colonial government's decision to give primacy to ancient Hindu texts was a twofold blow to the position of women because primarily, it gave orthodox Hindus a new power to reinterpret and enforce ancient religious norms. It also started the subsequent discussion on the position of women in India within the parameters of a religious and social rubric which has been hard to overcome. The orthodox Hindus proclaimed the dictates of Hinduism on women as timeless and unchanging and therefore revived such practices as *sati* (self-immolation of the wife in the funeral pyre of her dead husband), prohibition of widow remarriage, institution of child marriage and male monopoly over education.

There is no doubt that the Indian woman's destiny was largely predetermined by the earlier depiction of woman as an inferior being in lawgiver Manu's (200 B.C.E.) *Dharmashastra*. It is a part of the Hindu Vedic scriptures and widely held as the original source for Hindu law (Agnes, 2000; Robinson, 1999; Bumiller, 1991). It prescribes

peculiarly biased dictums for women: "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent..." (Dharmashastra, 5.147, as cited in Fieser & Powers, 2004, pp 51).

Bumiller (1991) further quotes from Manu: "Woman is as foul as falsehood itself; when creating them, the lord of creatures allotted to women a love of their beds, of their seat and ornaments; impure thoughts, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct," (p. 16).

This fact was noted by several social activists at the beginning of the women's movement. Sarala Devi Choudurani, born into one of India's premier reformist families, was the granddaughter of Debendranath Tagore, the founder of the Hindu reform movement of Brahma Samaj. She was a prominent nationalist leader who worked for women's emancipation throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century (Robinson, 1999). In her 1911 article called "A Woman's Movement" she described how progressive men, even social reformers committed to women's welfare, disparaged the work of her woman's association, *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* (Great Circle of Indian Women). She attributed this not only to the men's reluctance to relinquish their authority over women but also to the reformers' disinclination to allow women to exercise leadership functions because they were "influenced by Manu, the most famous of the Hindu lawgivers whose law-book occupied a pivotal position in modern polemic" (Robinson, p. 62). As one of India's earliest feminists, Sarala Devi Choudurani interpreted Manu's teaching as inspiring men's distrust of women and she attributed men's continued tendency to exert control over women to this influence.

Indian Feminist Movements

The problematic position of the contemporary Indian woman is also a result of the meandering course the Indian women's movement has taken over the past century and a half, and its complicated nature. The current bondage is partly because many early feminists were themselves influenced by regressive religious elements in the Indian society. As Robinson (1999) explains, the term "Indian women's movement" itself is a "convenient umbrella label" (p. 9) for organizations which are either religious, political or community-based, which operate at the local or regional or even national levels and women's outfits working for a single cause or on a broad social agenda. Therefore, the movement is more "heterogeneous rather than homogeneous in its make-up, composed of many groups instead of a monolithic institution," (Robinson, p. 9).

For the sake of simplicity, however, it is possible to trace the underlying ideology of the movement in terms of the two legacies used by scholars and historians in grappling with the complex diversity qualifying the movement. Robinson (1999) talks about the two typologies: "First Wave Feminism" described by Jana Matson Everett as being centered on demands for women's uplift and equal rights and "Second Wave Feminism" discussed by historians like Leslie Calman mainly comprising of organizations geared towards empowerment and rights. What is noteworthy is that both of these schools of thought originated from western thinkers like John Ruskin and John Stuart Mill.

The "First Wave Feminism" emphasized the need for reforming social practices so that the woman's position could be uplifted and she could enter public life and utilize her feminine talents for the welfare of the nation. This view, which demanded a larger

role in politics for women was based on John Ruskin's philosophy on the "incommensurability of the qualities of the sexes" (Robinson, p. 12). In his book, *Man and Woman*, first published in the 1860s, Ruskin rejected any notion of superiority of one sex over another and connected men and women to two different spheres in life. In Ruskin's view, man was more suited to the rough work in the outside world of society and women better suited to a domestic life within the home where she would not only be protected from dangers or brutalizing effects of society but could also create a haven where the man could find comfort and consolation. Ruskin's idea of the moral and spiritual excellence of "true womanhood" as an essential quality of femininity and of the home as a "'a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods'" (Robinson, 1999, p. 13) found great resonance with the contemporary revivalist spirit and the philosophy of the Hindu elite culture which emphasized the feminine roles of wife and mother as the center of the home and such virtues as chastity, piety, selflessness and faithfulness as essential feminine qualities.

Whereas the concept of true womanhood was used often by feminists in western societies to highlight qualities which made a woman especially suitable for a public career, its adoption by Indian feminists was affected by the Hindu elite's emphasis on the seclusion of women within the home. Consequently, when the "First Wave Feminism" did receive endorsement from important women leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant, much of it was indigenized and recast into archaic moulds based on religious traditions. Toward its later stages, this effort was redirected towards acquiring "equal rights" for women (Robinson, 1999, p. 16) by removing social barriers which acted as impediments to women assuming active developmental roles in society as citizens,

educators, workers. This wave was focused on changing the legal status of women in familial, economic and political spheres.

The “Second Wave Feminism” was to a certain degree a continuation of First Wave Feminism’s endeavors even though its origin lay in an ideology quite different from that of Ruskin. John Stuart Mill argued in his 1869 essay, “The Subjection of Women,” (cited in Robinson, 1999) in favor of natural equality of women and described the social inequality of the sexes as a social phenomenon which had no basis in nature. He denounced the resulting inequality of women as a deterrent to public good. Professing the utilitarian philosophy of greatest good for the greatest numbers, Mill argued that it was not only unjust toward the woman to be relegated to secondary status in the legal system but also detrimental to human improvement.

Mill’s philosophy, arguing in favor of “perfect equality,” formed the basis for efforts by feminists in western societies to trace the root of women’s inequality to the legal system, revamp their social practices by working for legal changes and arguing for abolition of the legal superiority of men. Mill’s idea of natural equality was accepted by many British people in India as well. Among advocates were western feminists who lent support to India’s women’s movement. However, this spirit clashed with the patriarchal and hierarchical Hindu society dominated by hierarchy of the caste system in society and a hierarchy of the sexes within the family. Therefore, despite the fact that this second ideology did receive endorsement from liberal elite groups among the westernized Indian people, Robinson (1999) traces how “it too was indigenised and archaised as a means of advocating improvements in the position of women...” (p. 19).

According to historian Leslie Calman (Robinson, 1999) this second movement is qualified by its diverse and heterogeneous nature, comprised of various political and social organizations originating from different levels and ethnicities and mainly classifiable into two ideological clusters: one involved with issues of rights and equality and the other with empowerment and liberation. The two groups were less conflictual and more complementary and their overall ideological agenda was geared toward working on altering attitudes so as to create a consensus supporting change. Their aim was to “seek to raise the consciousness of men and women, first to understand that women in contemporary India occupy an inferior position relative to men economically, socially and politically, and then to realize that this position is unjust and unacceptable,” (Calman as cited in Robinson, 1999, p. 19). Organized within a loose infrastructure with a “rights” and an “empowerment” wing, this conglomeration of myriad women’s bodies continued to work through the twentieth century towards a legal program for the recognition of women’s issues as those of human rights and thereby protected under the constitution of the secular democracy of India.

The Indigenous Feminists

Even during the British Raj, this formation of various women’s associations, led by the All India Women’s Conference, worked ceaselessly to ensure equal rights for women and also towards influencing government decisions and legislation so that laws in favor of women were executed. These were laws which give women equality in family matters requiring legal intervention, laws which improve their access to education, employment and health benefits, and most importantly, towards passage of and implementation of laws relating to oppressive dowry practices and rape so as to ensure

their protection against violence. Indian feminists who worked towards such reformist goals were led by personalities like Swami Vivekananda - one of the greatest Hindu philosophers of all times, Ram Mohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, known as India's "Father of the Nation," was also among the strongest forces in modern history working for emancipation of Indian women. The unique nature of his work on social rights of women was the seamless and creative way in which he integrated powerful Hindu traditions and customs into progressive enunciations toward establishment of a contemporary, egalitarian society. Not only did he work tirelessly to improve the position of women and members of the lower castes but his work laid the foundation for modern India and its progressive constitution. Feminist scholar Madhu Kishwar (Robinson, p.165) talks about how Gandhi's characterization was a "selective and sympathetic reworking" of tradition where Sita is not necessarily a self-effacing, fire-ordeal-facing helpless woman but whose chastity and moral strength force men to respect her.

Sita's adoption of a simple lifestyle in exile became, through Gandhi's rhetoric, an inspiration for Indian women to move towards a modest, unadorned style of dressing in an adulation of *swadeshi*. *Swadeshi* was one of the foundational strengths of the Indian freedom movement of *satyagraha*. For women, *swadeshi* meant wearing simple home-spun clothes and rejecting the use of imported consumer products. *Satyagraha* meant civil disobedience and non-violent struggle through insistence on pursuit of truth (Gandhi, 1927; Parekh, 1997). The concept of *swadeshi*, literally meant "the way of my motherland," but for many, it became a mantra of self-reliance against British colonialism and initiated an ideology of self-sufficiency. This ideology gained momentum during the

Indian freedom movement in the 1930s and 1940s and became the underlying force behind assimilation of women into the work force in postcolonial India's economy. It also contributed to India's efficacy in producing basic goods and services, and later progress in agrarian, industrial and technological sectors.

Gandhi was tilted in favor of the complementary nature of gender roles but vehemently opposed to any insistence on man's superior status. Despite attaching a great significance to the concept of chastity, Gandhi opposed gender-based segregation because he was of the opinion that chastity could not be ensured by confining women but only through personal and moral choice, (Robinson, p. 214). An excerpt from an article he wrote in his journal, "Young India," demonstrates how vocal and opinionated the great social reformer was about the unequal status of Indian women:

[Why] is there all this morbid anxiety about female purity? Have women any say in the matter of male purity? We hear nothing of women's anxiety about men's chastity. Why should men arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity? It cannot be superimposed from without. It is a matter of evolution from within and therefore of individual self-effort. (Gandhi, 1962)

Gandhi frequently regretted the fact that his wife, Kasturba had not been educated either by her parents or himself and acknowledged his failure in the matter because he felt this created an intellectual gap between an otherwise well-suited couple (Gandhi, 1927).

Gandhi used his own money to publish progressive journals like "Young India," "Navajivan" and "Indian Opinion", in his tireless effort to change the world for the better. Referring to this literature as "a mirror of part of my life," Gandhi (1927) said he "poured out my soul" in the columns of these journals (p.213). In one such column in the

September 1921 issue of "Young India", he takes a strong stand against the social injustice to women:

Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity – to me, the female sex, not the weaker sex. It is the nobler of the two for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge.

(Gandhi, 1962)

The committed efforts of Gandhi and many other social activists who preceded and followed him are apparent in the structure of India's historical and legal framework. The imprints that the 19th and 20th century torchbearers left on the political agenda of free India definitely regulated the flow of history towards a politically liberal democracy and women were allotted equal rights with men per the first Constitution of post-colonial India in 1950.

The Indian nationalist movement's agenda of women's emancipation was added to the earlier efforts of innumerable pre-independence social pioneers like Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), Ramabai Ranade (1862-1924), Sarala Devi Choudurani (1872-1945), and Saroj Nalini Dutt (1887-1925), which had led the British government to introduce several legislations for the improvement of women's status. Ram Mohan Roy's vehement opposition to the hideous custom of *sati* or widow-burning had resulted in prohibition of the practice in the Bengal Code of 1829 (Robinson, 1999). Vidyasagar's tireless campaigning in favor of widow remarriage improved women's status when a bill was passed under British government's Civil law procedures in 1855 removing all obstacles for widowed women, (Robinson, 1999). Even revivalists like Dayananda

Saraswati, who ardently promoted social change based on restoration of ancient Hindu beliefs and ideals, focused on the amelioration of the woman's lot by opposing child marriage, polygamy and seclusion of women. Both Dayananda Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda stressed on women's education as the principal path to progress.

However, the emphasis was definitely on making religious and spiritual instruction the center of all female education. Reiterated in Vivekananda's literature are the ideals of Sita and Savitri as the perfect moulds for Indian women. Swami Vivekananda's influential educational philosophy included blueprints for training women in religious scriptures and traditional texts, but also stressed upon household arts of sewing, cooking and child-rearing, leading the path right back to the issue of the revivalist belief – of women's true position being firmly placed within the boundaries of the home.

In Search of the Ultimate Feminine

A review of the discourse of women leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant shows how these prominent feminists crafted their arguments in favor of the women's uplift issue by reconstructing India's glorious past and using elements from that to propose change in the light of issues of their times. Their appeal to the past was built on the wings of two themes: firstly, concept of the "Golden Age of Indian civilization" framed within a model society where women enjoyed high positions and played active roles in political, social and religious life was reiterated; and secondly, references to the outstanding female characters in Hindu sacred literature who were understood as "exemplifying the ideals of womanhood while playing their part in all these areas of life," were always kept in the center stage (Robinson, p. 25). Therefore, both Naidu and Besant

were arguing for the restitution of the modern Indian woman's position to the same high status and image that was enjoyed by women in ancient India. As a result, the arguments they mobilized for women's uplift were based on ancient Indian standards and beliefs.

This is the point of reference this paper wants to draw attention to in scrutinizing the erosion of the woman's position in twentieth century India. By drawing inspiration from figures of Hindu scriptures and drafting the role model for India's women based on ancient traditions, social reformers followed certain "gendered norms" (Basu, 2001) and created the original argument which would later be co-opted by India's patriarchal opinion-leaders.

Annie Besant, was born in Britain in 1847, but lived and worked in India and Sarojini Naidu was born in 1879 into one of India's elite political families. Both were concerned with India's socially oppressive practices against women. They were committed to changing the woman's position in society and devoted to the enfranchisement of women through improvement of her legal and political status. However, they looked to India's age-old native norms for inspiration in their work and defined the ideals of model womanhood in terms of qualities possessed by female characters in Hindu sacred literature, especially Sita from *Ramayana*. Despite their attempt to redefine the ancient norms in keeping with the modern age and western liberal influences, they also accommodated Hindu beliefs and values so that it appealed to India's subjugated masses which had been under British rule for over a century.

Though from slightly different positions, both Besant and Naidu showed a nostalgic and romantic attitude towards a past Golden Age where women were not limited to latter day restrictions within the household but were full participants in

religious, social, political life. Whereas Besant referred to Vedic practices in illuminating the woman's role and refuted the contemporary view that ancient Vedas prohibited women's access to Vedic scripts, Naidu reiterated the legitimate role of the woman in Indian traditional civic and spiritual life by referring to religion. Her 1918 address to a large audience (Robinson, p. 83) rejoices in the hope that India has returned "to that first ideal of the Devi" (as cited in Robinson, p. 19), thus reviving the "Devi" (female goddess) aspect of the Indian woman and celebrating her as the embodiment and amalgamation of two Hindu goddesses, Lakshmi and Saraswati. These leaders were among many others who shared this philosophy about the path to be taken for emancipation of the Indian woman.

This reference to Hindu goddesses and female characters in sacred literature was closely connected to the revivalist spirit because both Besant and Naidu "espoused change but represented it as a recovery of the pure practice of the past, not western-inspired innovation," (Robinson, p. 84). Characters were usually drawn from the great Indian epics: the *Ramayana* (Sita and Kausalya) and the *Mahabharata* (Kunti, Gandhari, Draupadi, Savitri) as well as Vedic texts like the *Upanishads* (Maitreyi and Gargi). Robinson (1999) claims, quite accurately, that in the process of this appropriation, the opinion leaders adopted a selective and critical approach in the portrayal of these female characters and made crucial changes to their overall aura by focusing on different aspects of their personalities and varying the emphasis and scope of their references as suited to the needs of their discourse. In my review, I noted much more mention of Sita and Savitri in Naidu's speeches. This could very well be an opinionated position adopted by Naidu as a political leader of the Indian Congress Party in order to align her discursive stance

with that of the Hindu majority. Robinson (1999) notes: "Among the heroines of the Epics were some dear to the heart of the Hindu and conventionally viewed as paragons of feminine virtue, notably Sita and Savitri," (p.93).

The choice in favor of popular figures like Sita and Savitri will, however, reveal a different dynamics once reviewed from the perspective of those figures which have been left out. In this context, the stories of Maitreyi and Gargi, women who occupied significant positions within the germinal Vedic texts, the *Upanishads*, were largely neglected except in academic discourses by feminists like Besant and even then, did not gain currency (Robinson, 1999). Maitreyi was the spiritually-inclined wife of one of India's greatest sages, Yajnavalkya, who refused her husband's bequeathal of material property and enriched herself with spiritual matters and therefore became an intellectual force. Gargi, who never married and lived the life of a single woman, was a great philosopher who participated in intellectual discourses and had been part of a panel of learned people testing Yajnavalkya's claim to be the most learned of sages.

The Woman in Modern India

Despite the multifarious dynamics resulting out of such discourse, there is no doubt that the early twentieth century set the stage for the ushering in of a liberal India and the new republic of 1947 responded by drafting numerous rules and regulations to ensure women's welfare. The post-Independence Indian government passed laws to uplift women's status in economic, educational and professional arenas and tried to create the framework of a new society for the empowered woman. As a result, India selected its first woman Prime Minister as early as 1966. Indira Gandhi, the daughter of independent India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was already a Cabinet member when she

was called upon to fill the gap created by the untimely demise of India's second Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri. She remained continuously in office till 1977, a survivor amidst several political battles and returned to political power again during the eighties. In addition to a woman premier, India also has hundreds of women sitting in local *panchayats*, state legislatures, as well as the national parliament consisting of the *Lok Sabha* and *Rajya Sabha*. In fact, the current President of India, a titular head of the nation, is also a woman, Pratibha Patil. India has millions of professional women and almost all national-level educational institutions have long opened up their doors to women scholars.

The condition of India's everywoman, however, cannot be quantified by statistics on legislative positions, female medical graduates or seats reserved in engineering colleges. It would be useful at this stage to cast a quick glance at the undulating course of the Indian woman's position by focusing on some broad historical junctures. Such a discussion will illuminate the immense complexity and inimitability of the contemporary Indian situation. Like the pioneers of India's women's movement, feminist historian Romila Thapar saw the Rig Vedic women enjoying a high status within the clans. They were at liberty to marry at a comparative later age, held important occupations and did not have to wear veils or live in seclusion (Bumiller, 1991). With time, and a society evolving under the dictates of laws like those in Manu's Dharmashastra and its rigid caste-system, the woman's position declined. The next big historical decline in the position of women was during the sixteenth century Mughal invasions of India when certain Islamic practices were incorporated into Indian society. However, according to

Thapar (cited in Bumiller, 1991) upper caste Hindu women were affected by repressive practices like *sati* and *purdah* even before the Muslim invasions.

The Indian woman's fortune saw an upward swing during the nineteenth century, with several indigenous reformers and westernized educators campaigning ceaselessly for women's welfare. Through the nineteenth century and well into the beginning of the twentieth, Indian society saw a revival of women's position even if only to fulfill certain roles desired by their men. Many atrocities like *sati* and child marriage were banned and as Bumiller (1991, p. 18) notes: "By the dawn of the twentieth century, a new woman had emerged." It is important to note the subtle distinction in the formation of this new feminine where "ideally, the 'new woman' (educated, middleclass, refined, modest) was to be nothing like a *memsahib* or Englishwoman but yet a vast improvement over other Indian women of previous generations and poorer classes," (Basu, 2001, p. 183).

The Indian women had literally emerged from the shadows of their *purdah* and were seen more often in public gatherings, as members of philanthropic organizations and later, as important stakeholders in India's nationalist, anti-British, *swadeshi* movement. But Basu's explication (2001) of this transformation of the Indian woman, shows a somewhat convoluted picture than a smooth transition from a life of seclusion to one of emancipation. The dynamics of the woman's movement into public life were firmly anchored within the ideological and philosophical underpinnings of the patriarchal argument. In this the woman's sanctity is identified with that of the nation and there is a clear demarcation of territory for progress through distinction between the public and private spheres. The essential inner core of the Indian Hindu identity, often personified

by the woman, was to be maintained in its "pure" form in the "inner" private, familial spheres while the "outer" world was opened up to Westernized material progress.

'Western' material resources and practices were seen as beneficial for the new nation, but 'Eastern' spirituality as superior, i.e. the 'outer' forms of the colonizer's world were to be embraced but the 'inner' Indian world was to be sacrosanct from external intervention. Reform for women, associated with the 'inner' world, was thus to come from within the community. (Basu, 2001)

The emancipated Indian woman's duty, then, was twofold. She had to embody all the Hindu spiritual virtues of selflessness, simplicity, sanctity and purity in the private sphere and also assume politically important positions in the public. The complexities of this double standard joined hands with the Indian woman's already divided existence to cloud the evolution of the ultimate feminine in India.

The nationalist agenda of India's freedom movement had included the liberation of women and with the establishment of the influential All India Women's Conference in 1927, women themselves assumed authoritative positions in discussing how to alleviate the oppression of their less fortunate counterparts. Gandhi "saw women as autonomous, independent people, and also as an important social base for the movement" (Bumiller, p.19). Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi's close follower and confidant, credited women with keeping the independence movement alive when most of the male freedom fighters were jailed by the British government (Bumiller, p.19). The magnitude of the work done by these charismatic and illustrious men bore fruits for India's women in more than one way:

In 1925, Gandhi had chosen Sarojini Naidu, one of the leading women freedom fighters, as president of the nationalist Congress party. In 1931, largely as a response to women's participation in the civil disobedience campaign, the Congress party passed a resolution endorsing political equality for all women, regardless of qualifications. This was at a time when women in some European countries had not yet won the right to vote. (Bumiller, 1991, p.19-20)

With women sitting in positions of political equality and social authority, India ushered in its free status as a secular, socialist republic on August 15, 1947. The Indian Constitution, drafted in 1950 by a progressive-minded constitutional body led by lawmaker B.R. Ambedkar, considered the Indian woman equal in all respects and specifically removed all disabilities or restrictions on women. This was not only the highest point for Indian women in recent history but probably one which was more idealistic than pragmatic.

Post-Independence Progress

After Independence in 1947, it was not until the 1970s that an evaluation of the woman's position made its way back to the official agenda of the government of India, at the behest of the United Nations. The complacency that set in after Independence (1947) totally overlooked the wide chasm between the constitutional provisions introduced for women's equality and the actual condition of India's everywoman. The agencies and programs set up by the new government were expected to work smoothly but no efforts were made to coordinate governmental provisions with grassroots-level mobilization of women so as to induct them into the newly emergent system. No evaluation was attempted on whether the age-old patriarchal customs, religious traditions and caste-system-based hierarchy still continued to dominate and determine the ordinary woman's

destiny. Did the women really enjoy the high degree of equality and opportunities which the Constitution had promised them? Did legislative reforms bring about real societal changes in the women's lives? Did India's progress on the economic front trickle down to benefit the bottom rungs?

A report commissioned by the Indian government in response to the United Nations' request for an assessment of the Indian woman's status – required for the International Women's Year to be celebrated in 1975 – was an eye-opener (Robinson, 1999). The Ministry of Education and Social Welfare constituted a special body, the Committee on the Status of Women in India in 1971 and this committee produced its report, titled "Towards Equality," in May 1975. What this report highlighted was that neither had the constitutional agenda of equality for women been achieved, nor had the political and social rights – theoretically promised to all women – been extended to anyone beyond a privileged few. The government organizations and agencies had had very little impact on the lives of a vast majority of the women. Most importantly, this report found that religion had a good deal of influence on the status of women in Indian society so that not only was there a remarkable lack of progress but women's position had actually deteriorated in some respects:

Religion provides ideological and moral bases for the accorded status and institutionalized roles of women in a society. The social restrictions on women and also the people's notions about their proper roles in the domestic and extra-domestic spheres, are largely derived from the religious conceptions of a woman's basic characteristics, her assumed 'virtues' and 'vices', her proverbial strengths

and weaknesses, and the stereotypes regarding her nature and capacities. (CSWI, 1974, p.38)

The report further examined Hindu traditions to show how they conveyed two dialectically situated positions on the image of the woman: on one side that of purity and power and on the other that of dependence and debility, (Robinson, 1991).

India's everywoman.

Writing her ethnographic study on India's women more than fifteen years after the publication of this report, Bumiller (1991) came upon the truth that in India, democracy or equal rights have different meanings for different people across the caste-system-infested, hierarchical, feudalistic and patriarchal society. Interviewing the poverty-stricken women of Khajuron in north-central India during a 1985 trip, Bumiller encountered child marriage, purdah, domestic violence, illiteracy and striking absence of basic human rights among the Khajuron women. She followed the daily routine of Phula, a forty-year-old mother of four, as the latter wound her way through days of excruciating labor sweeping and cleaning, feeding the livestock, cooking all the family meals and caring for her children:

A dozen times during the day she had to fetch water from the well outside her house; she also had to make cow-dung cakes for fuel. And this was a leisurely time of year. In a few weeks, when the wheat was ready for harvesting, she would have to spend most of her time in the fields, managing her household chores in between. She felt her husband treated her well, although he was, after all, entitled to certain rights as the head of the family. 'Sometimes he beats me if I make a mistake...', she said matter-of-factly. Phula had been married at seven and had

begun living with her husband at fourteen. She had never learnt to read and write because her parents had not sent her to school. 'If I had been educated,' she said, 'I would have done some work.' By 'work' she meant paid work; she did not take into account the hard physical labor that she did all day. (Bumiller, 1991, pp. 88-89)

Thus, around the same period of time that India had been governed by a woman Prime Minister for over a decade, Phula was leading the life of an indentured labor and being subjected to domestic violence on a regular basis. Among the thousands of Phulas in different parts of India, there had been hardly any dissemination of the news of their liberation, leave alone any growing awareness of its benefits for them. "Not surprisingly, the women knew almost nothing about the village council, or panchayat, although they generally voted in elections, following their husband's instructions," (Bumiller, 1991, pp. 90-91). They were little more than shadows of their husbands, very like Sita.

According to Kinsley (1987), Sita was the embodiment of feminine virtue but all her qualities, her self-effacing nature, her steadfast loyalty as well as her chastity all combined to make her the "ideal Hindu wife" beyond which she had "no independent existence, no independent destiny," (Kinsley, p.76). The dichotomy of the woman's position is inherent in this simple truth that in Indian society a woman's highest honor is to be considered an ideal wife and her existence is qualified by her usefulness to her husband and her family.

In the Hindu tradition a woman is taught to understand herself primarily in relation to others. She is taught to emphasize in the development of her character what others expect of her. It is society that puts demands on her, primarily

through the agents of relatives and in-laws, and not she who places demands on society that she be allowed to develop a unique, independent destiny. A central demand placed on women, particularly vis-à-vis males, is that they subordinate their welfare to the welfare of others. (Kinsley, p.77)

Parameswaran (2004) discusses how “historically specific ideologies of tradition and modernity” have defined the symbolic realm of the feminine in Indian public culture. Whereas the forces of colonialism, nationalism and capitalism as well as institutions of patriarchy and caste system have all left their impression on the conception of the Indian woman, the strongest influence possibly emerged from the nineteenth century social reformers who “harnessed the chaste Indian mother, wife, and daughter as the most potent signifiers of a resilient Hindu tradition that could survive the onslaught of British imperialists” (p. 352).

The reason that women’s issues show a persistent tendency towards sinking to the bottom of any agenda and defy repeated efforts to bring them to the surface is closely tied to the weight of religion hanging around their necks like the proverbial albatross. The immense sanctity attached to the figure of Sita, the embodiment of perfect womanhood, makes all pragmatic discussions difficult and dangerous. Despite her repeated appearances in popular culture and literature, despite the reiteration of her existence as a conduit between the flesh-and-blood woman and the sacred feminine, despite the repeated challenges thrown at the Indian woman to rise to her stature in their everyday lives, any deconstruction of Sita’s actual persona is definitely considered sacrilegious. Consequently, very few have attempted it.

One such rare occasion was in *Lajja*, a comparatively radical Bombay production by filmmaker Raj Kumar Santoshi, who used the theme of Sita's misfortune to reflect the abuse and torture perpetrated on women in India's patriarchal society. In the characterization of Janaki, an amateur actress in a small-town theater, the film questioned the values of chastity and sacrifice that Sita is repeatedly called upon to prove. In an emotionally charged enactment of a scene from the popular version of Ramayana, actress Janaki, a namesake of Sita, rejects the traditional dialogue and delivers her impromptu speech in which Sita refuses to volunteer for a test of her chastity and in turn raises questions about Rama's purity. Janaki's was a valiant effort to break the norms of a repressive patriarchal society where the woman is always constrained and forced into submission but the film shows how she pays a heavy price for it. The audience is enraged by her improvisation of what is widely regarded as a sacred text, and punishes her for daring to speak up and step out of her boundary. The furious mob attacks her, and pregnant Janaki loses her child and mental sanity in the mass molestation.

The punishments for transgressing one's assigned boundaries can be very harsh, may take many forms and is often fatal for the woman. One such punishment is "honor killing" (Menon 2006). The finely nuanced concept of the family's honor somehow residing in the chastity of the woman (even when that chastity is an immensely fragile patriarchal construction imposed on her) finds fruition in Indian society in the brutal concept of "honor killing," Menon (2006) where men of a family kill their own women – daughters, sisters or wives – for simple transgressions of societal rules:

They may take place because women have chosen to love within the faith but not within permissible norms... or because women choose to transgress community

and religious boundaries altogether by marrying across caste, community or ethnicity; or if they are audacious enough to commit adultery. Whatever the provocation, what they prove is that there is a patriarchal consensus around the violent 'resolution', so to speak, of the troublesome question of women's sexuality. Their sexual status – chaste, polluted or impure – is a matter of extreme and stringent control, and any attempt by women to resist it may be punished with death. (p.123)

According to Menon (2006) this strict supervision of women and their sexuality has deep roots in the hegemonic power structures which rest on continuity of lineage and maintenance of the political economy of indigenous communities. The woman's independent decision regarding marriage is seen as a threat to age-old patterns of property ownership, inheritance as well as progeny issues and the reprisal often has support from village elders and panchayats or village councils. Menon (2006) lists six predominant reasons which might lead to the harsh disciplining process of an honor killing that a study by Amnesty International enumerated:

Patriarchal gender relations that are predicated on controlling and regulating woman's sexuality; the role of women in policing and monitoring women's behavior; collective decisions regarding punishment for transgressing boundaries; the potential for women's participation in such killings; the ability to reclaim honour through enforced compliance or killings; and state and social sanction for such killings that recognize and acknowledge 'honour' as acceptable motivation, mitigation and justification. (p.125)

Other Indian feminist scholars like Menon (2000) outline the inherent weakness of the woman's position from another perspective. According to her, the rise in violence is connected to loopholes in the Indian law which falls short of providing ample protection to women:

In the last decade, in particular, the women's movement in India has reacted to every instance of violence against women by demanding legislative action. These efforts have been successful in that every campaign from 1980 to 1989 has resulted in legislative changes. However, as feminist activists have pointed out, not only has the implementation of laws remained partial and conservative, but since these changes have mainly involved the incorporation of more stringent punishments, there have been, in rape cases, fewer convictions than before. At the same time, each new law vests more power with the state enforcement machinery. This situation has led to some rethinking on the efficacy of the law and a growing awareness in the women's movement not only that laws should be framed more carefully, but that legal changes cannot transform patriarchal power structures in society. (Menon, 2000, pp. 66-67)

Chapter 3

"Eyes Wide, Lips Sealed": A Case Study

This thesis posits that the Indian patriarchal society's normalization of the subservience and oppression of women often leads to a neglect of significant discourse over human rights violations unusual in many other democratic societies. In scrutinizing the themes dominating the coverage of the Nandigram carnage by three major Indian newspapers published from Kolkata, I highlight the silence about sexual violence and explore Indian print media's performance of its duty to inform the public about significant issues like sexual violence committed against women. My position is that the media's commitment to "public service values" (McChesney, 1999) is one of the key components for keeping democracy alive and Indian media failed, at least in the current context, to rise to the standards required of them.

As discussed previously, Indian women have always considered themselves shadows of their husbands. Their identity is frequently framed by their husband's status and they consider themselves fortunate if they can help advance their husband's goals. Gandhi (1927) discussed several social, religious and personal aspects of his life in his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. In this, he expressed his faith in the superior moral and spiritual qualities possessed by Hindu women and the unique legacy they had inherited from ancient religious customs. In one of his reflections about his personal relationship with his wife, Kasturba, Gandhi (1927) mentions:

Kasturba herself does not perhaps know whether she has any ideals independently of me.... It is likely that many of my doings have not her approval even today.

We never discuss them, I see no good in discussing them for she was educated

neither by her parents nor by me at the time when I ought to have done it. But she is blessed with one great quality to a very considerable degree. A quality which most Hindu wives possess in some measure. And it is this: willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously, she has considered herself blessed in following in my footsteps, and has never stood in the way of my endeavour to lead a life of restraint. (p. 256)

This philosophy, about the excellence of a Hindu woman being determined by the degree to which she follows her husband unquestioningly, dedicates herself for the success of her husband's endeavors and subordinates her own goals for the sake of his agenda, sums up a significant aspect of the Indian woman's existence. Gandhi's (1927) statement is not merely a comment on the status of the Gandhi marriage but is representative of one of the strongest ideological stances on women's lives within Indian society.

The women of Nandigram, whose videotaped narratives are studied here, were no different in their matrimonial and familial commitment. Most of them were members of the Bhoomi Uchched Protirodh Committee (BUPC) or Land Save Committee and they did have a stake in the agricultural economy. However, many of them were in the movement because they considered it their sacred duty to protect the land which belonged to their family. In most cases, at least per Hindu law, it belonged to the man of the house. This selfless devotion for the greater good of the family is in no little measure due to the grip that Sita's image still has on Indian women. The contemporary Indian woman strives to rise to the challenge of this improbable role model and gets caught up in the violence and vicious vagaries of a man's world which has become increasingly politicized about the function and role of women.

In Nandigram, the women became pawns in a political game, were punished severely through sexual assault for their family's political agenda and often carried away as war trophies. The violence was meant to teach them a lesson because they ventured outside the sacred circle or *lakshman rekha* and dared to protest, agitate against oppression and politically engage. The way the Nandigram women are disciplined and debilitated through the use of sexual violence as a political weapon is representative of the hegemonic practices of a patriarchal society. What is significant in this situation is the effort of India's everywoman to speak up and redress the inhuman abuses piled on her. In this, they break age-old traditions of maintaining silence on sexual abuse and talk of their experiences. It exposes the heartbreaking condition of those who stray beyond that demarcated boundary: their fate is harsher than Sita's. What gives this study a distinctive edge is the resistance of the Nandigram women as they create their own discursive field when societal norms try to silence them. The newspapers fill up hundreds of columns, but are silent on the gruesome violation of women. Not so the Nandigram women. They step out, speak up and create dynamics of the disempowered which critical scholars like Hall have called "social rupture," (1996, p.294). Their valiant effort alone makes this study especially meaningful.

Battleground Nandigram

This section paints the historical, political and cultural scenario of the Nandigram massacre of November 2007. I begin by tracing the initiation of the land acquisition plans, the formation of the resistance movement and its evolution since the beginning of 2007. The information used for this part of the paper was gathered from online archival databases of the three newspapers, *The Telegraph*, *The Times of India* and *Ananda Bazar*

Patrika and details were also collected from a report by *Udaan* dated April 2007 as well as *An Independent Citizen's Report*.

The state of West Bengal is in eastern India and on the border with Bangladesh. The language extensively spoken in this part of multilingual and multiethnic India is Bengali and its many dialects even though English is the formal language in the cities of West Bengal like the rest of urban India. The state has been ruled by a Leftist government led by Communist Party of India (Marxist) since the 1970s. Most of the viable opposing political forces have been squashed in the past 30 years. Elections are held but are never free and fair. The political event currently under discussion is part of an exercise which was initiated by one of the opposition parties, Trinamool Congress (TMC), to provide support to farmers of a peasants' movement who were being subjected to continuous human rights violations as they opposed a government land acquisition plan. West Bengal farmers are very poor, many of them living below poverty level, their ancestral land is their only means of subsistence. Recent globalization and industrialization trends have pushed up the price of Indian real estate in a booming market and land has become gold. The poor farmers who own little pieces of land are not part of this industrialization. Most of them hold on to this land not only for a meager living but also in order to stay connected to their roots, and therefore have economic as well as psychological, familial and societal investments in them. Now they were under the threat of losing that security.

The Left Front government, led by the Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPIM or CPM) that has ruled here since 1977, has long championed farmers' interests and opposed industrialization. However, West Bengal's economy lagged behind much of the rest of India's for decades, and its communist rulers wanted to imitate their Chinese

counterparts. So the Government tried using an 1894 Land Acquisition Act introduced by the British – to justify buying 36,000 acres (14,600 hectares) of farmland, and displacing more than 50,000 people – in order to create two special economic zones, (Page, 2007). One such special economic zone (SEZ), in Singur, 30 miles north of Calcutta, is to house a vehicle factory in which Tata, the Indian conglomerate, will build the world's cheapest car. The other SEZ, in Midnapore district's Nandigram area, was to include a shipyard and petrochemical plant built by Salim, an Indonesian company.

For about two years, farmers of Nandigram area – 75 miles south of Calcutta or Kolkata, the state capital – had been involved in a non-political coalition under the banner of Bhoomi Uchched Protirodh Committee (BUPC) or Land Save Committee to agitate peacefully against land acquisition by the government. As a result of this, they faced intimidation and violence on an ongoing basis. Many had been killed, injured, abducted, maimed and raped over the past year especially since an escalation in activity from March 14, 2007 which left fourteen people dead (*An Independent Citizen's Report*, 2008). The media, traditionally independent in India, was under tremendous pressure to be very restrained in their coverage of Nandigram events (K. Ghosh Dastidar, personal communication, December 6, 2007) because the state administration did not want the news of this movement to be disseminated nationally or internationally (Gupta, 2007, November 12). Overall, the peasants' engagement was nationally considered fairly successful since the government announced in February 2007 that the SEZ location had been moved away from Nandigram area. However, this apparent victory came at a heavy price. Widespread violence had become the norm in this area and there were rumblings of an approaching catastrophe which only the locals could hear. Consequently, the BUPC

arranged frequent peace marches and rallies to retain members' commitment over a wide geographical area covering the district of West Midnapore, at the southern tip of the state, on the coast of Bay of Bengal.

In January 2007, the region saw a greater commitment towards the BUPC when local farmers, irrespective of their political affiliations, became closely involved in the movement. At the time, the press had covered the announcement by the chairman of Haldia Development Authority (a government body), that a land appropriation plan for a special economic zone (SEZ) was in progress. BUPC's main goal since then was to thwart the plan, prevent the petrochemical hub, prevent eviction of thousands from this farming community and bring back law and order. The agriculture-based economy was obviously at risk from the rapid industrialization and the majority of the population, mainly agricultural workers and farmers, opposed HDA's plan vehemently and joined BUPC *en masse*. This was the point of inception of a massive people's movement in Nandigram town and several nearby villages including Gokulnagar, Kalicharanpur, Adhikaripara, Simulkunda, Satengabari, Ranichak, Bhangabera and Sonachura.

A non-political platform was deliberately adopted by the resistance because there were people from all political parties who would be affected if the land acquisition was successful. Irrespective of their political affiliations, the farmers joined hands and cooperated with the resistance group, the BUPC. To signify that the association was overall a people's movement, the organization decided to fly a black flag and not adopt any political party's flag or colors. However, the land-appropriation project was a Left-Front government-backed one and soon the local CPM party was involved in coercions, intimidations and violence to force the people into submission. The Nandigram area and

adjoining villages, which had historically been the stronghold of CPM, now adopted a non-partisan attitude in trying to protect their home base.

On February 12, 2007, as if in response to popular demand, the Chief Minister, Buddhadev Bhattacharya, announced that land would not be acquired from those unwilling to give it up. This, however, was followed by a public meeting announcement by the area's Member of Parliament that HDA would acquire all the land which had been mentioned in a previous notification. When the people were bewildered by such conflicting political statements, reports of violence towards CPM supporters started filtering out. Whereas independent investigators were blocked out (Independent Citizen's Report, 2008) and all inquiries met with hostility from local CPM operatives, the situation was described by Leftist leaders as being dangerous for their supporters. The overall atmosphere was confusing and tense, with sporadic violence marring regular life.

At this juncture, on March 14, 2007, there was a vicious outbreak of violence when the state's paramilitary and armed police forces opened fire on a BUPC peace rally which had been organized around Hindu and Muslim prayer ceremonies. It was obvious that the government's CPM party desperately wanted to gain back lost ground and would not hesitate to resort to extreme measures. They wanted the area under their control. This excerpt from *An Independent Citizen's Report* (2008) sums it up:

On March 14, 2007 the state violated all democratic norms and unleashed armed violence on its own protectorate. In tandem with the CPI(M) militia called *Harmad Bahini*, the state's para military forces and armed police launched a massive attack on a large number of villagers who had joined the BUPC organised *shanti michhils* (peace processions) to go to *pujas* and

namaaz readings. The attack included indiscriminate and rampant firing, brutal attacks and widespread sexual abuse of women. It left 14 people dead and more than 200 injured. Of these, 85 were hospitalised with serious bullet and baton injuries. Gang rapes and sexual molestation of women were reported in large numbers. (pp. 2-3)

While the entire state condemned this militant stance of the government, and Governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi publicly denounced it, and even the Left-oriented intelligentsia protested vehemently, the government pushed forward.

The People vs. people

In the current chain of events, the BUPC leadership perceived that the resistance movement was being methodically destroyed and its moral strength sapped since the March 14 disturbance. Consequently, it initiated mass scale, religion-based peace rallies under the auspices of the TMC. The CPM forces retaliated promptly with another massive, armed attack. It was a turf war, no doubt, but it escalated to new heights because the farmers' movement had managed to pull together a cohesive alliance of members from several local political parties including the CPM, TMC, the Congress Party of India and also had alleged links with Maoist groups like CPI (ML). Even the women had organized themselves into "small women's groups of resistance" (Chakravorty, 2007) since their harsh experience of March 14.

As Nandigram became the scene of frequent violent confrontations between CPM supporters and BUPC members and peace and security disintegrated between March and November 2007, the state's main opposition party, Trinamool Congress or TMC became closely involved with the BUPC, providing support and political strategies. The latter's

non-partisan nature was somewhat compromised. This was widely publicized by the ruling party and used frequently in their political rhetoric. Nevertheless, individual testimonies of BUPC supporters point to a consistent effort by their organization to hold rallies, demonstrations and other political engagements in order to keep their resistance alive and away from partisan violence and interventions.

The ruling CPM party took the developments as a direct threat to its power. The government saw in the BUPC-TMC alliance's large-scale mobilization of common citizens a clear intent to hold on to its gains, and thereafter made plans to recapture lost ground violently (Siddiqui, 2007; Siddiqui & Phadikar, 2007). In this, the CPM mobilized its private army or militant wing called the "Red Brigade" (Siddiqui, 2007) and also used the "Harmad Bahini" comprised of mercenaries (An Independent Citizen's Report, 2008). The November assault started around November 6, 2007 and continued through the week. As the resistance group fought back with political demonstrations, participants were attacked, killed, raped, abducted, and their houses torched, dead bodies thrown in the river Haldi, and many bodies burned to obliterate identity (K. Ghosh Dastidar, personal telephone communication, December 6, 2007).

The entire process was a violently powerful, planned and motivated thrust to grab cheap land in the name of establishing industry even while the surface political rhetoric of the West Bengal government indicated to the world outside that the SEZ project had been relocated. It was also the desperate act of a government which had been in power too long and had no qualms about sacrificing democracy in order to gain back political ground. With the help of the police force and mercenaries armed with ammunition from the state armory, peaceful demonstrations led by women were brutally attacked, more

than 25,000 people were affected – their houses burnt and properties destroyed. Most of them fled the area to preserve their lives. Thirty five people were reported to have been killed from morning till 10 p.m. at night on November 6, 2007 alone, (K. Ghosh Dastidar, personal telephone communication, December 6, 2007). Around 100,000 unarmed citizens consisting of women and children had formed a human chain to prevent the armed people from getting into their villages. According to narratives of many women, the armed assailants – consisting of mercenaries, criminals and pirates from neighboring water areas – did not spare them.

Rituals of resistance.

Narratives recorded by *Udaan*, from several women who were part of a BUPC meeting on November 13, give vivid descriptions of the brutal massacre of women and children during this event. All of them talk about a peace rally on November 13 that the BUPC asked them to attend (Independent Citizens' Report, 2007; *Udaan* videotaped narratives). The emphasis was on higher attendance of women because the assumption was that the presence of women would prevent violence. The BUPC was combining a prayer service with a dam-building exercise. Therefore, this was definitely a political show of strength by the peasants' movement but it was done under the guise of a religious event. Interestingly, the BUPC used its resistance efforts by using the women as pawns and putting them in the frontlines of battle: not a position marked by chivalry, but one which definitely assumes and uses the ideology of the haloed sanctity of women's presence.

Stuart Hall (1996) discusses the concept of "social rupture" (p. 294) and the use of rituals in resistance struggles as they were examined in a book, "Resistance in Rituals"

published by the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1975. Hall's examination of the term "resistance" in this context has a close resemblance to the activities that the BUPC members were engaged in. He discusses the use of the word "resistance" to refer to all those forms of "disaffiliation" which were in a sense "challenges to and negotiations of the dominant order but which could not be assimilated to the traditional categories of revolutionary class struggle," (Hall, 1996, p. 294). The rituals are symbolic performances by the dominated:

'Rituals' pointed to the symbolic dimension of these movements – the stylization of social actions, the 'play' of signs and symbols, the 'playing out' of resistance and repetition in the theatres of everyday life, the 'bricoleur effect', as fragments and emblems were dissociated from one cultural discourse and reassembled in another. (Hall, 1996, p. 294)

Considering the religious foundation of India's ideological structure, it is no surprise that the Nandigram peasants organized religious events to perform their special brand of resistance. Their resistance, like the ones discussed by Hall, could not be categorized within simple binaries of revolutionary class struggle since BUPC supporters were a wider conglomeration of publics consisting of landowners as well as agricultural laborers, cadres of communist groups as well as members from anti-communist political parties. Their movement was unique, and it had all the reverberations of the Gramscian notion of "repertoires of resistance" which were always historically specific and conjuncturally defined and were grounded not in traditional "either/ors of classical class conflict but in an analysis of the 'balance in the relations of forces'" (Hall, p. 294). The Nandigram peasants' movement is peculiarly representative of Hall's discussion on hegemonic

struggle and of the emergence of a “variety of forms of resistance” which replace the primacy of the class struggle in contemporary times.

In discussing the treatment of rituals as tools of resistance, Hall emphasizes the symbolic significance of ritualistic emblems within various forms of resistance. The Nandigram women were told they would be participating in the rituals of a *puja* or Hindu prayer service, as part of a peace rally and many women assert that it was their commitment to the religious dimension of the event that had ensured a high attendance. They narrate how they had assembled near the river Haldi around mid-morning, where a spot had been sanctified, gathered all religious paraphernalia from various families and initiated prayers in a public ceremony using very specific sacred emblems hardly seen in political demonstrations.

As the prayers started, they noticed an approaching army of men dressed in police uniforms. The women started pleading for these men to stay away since they were involved in a religious function and were not armed or politically engaged. Almost without warning, this army of assailants started firing tear gas, rubber pellets and bullets at this crowd. Most of the narratives, whether recorded in the videotapes of *Udaan* or in the pages of *An Independent Citizens' Report* speak of the women pleading and begging the approaching marauders to leave them alone. They also mention how women were specially targeted for sexual molestations and younger women forced on to vehicles to be carried away. An unidentified woman narrated the day's events on the *Udaan* video. She functioned as a leader among a group of over thirty women residing in a relief camp in a Nandigram school:

Nandigram woman 1: We were told, 'do not fear, go and listen to religious prayers.' Suddenly 'they' came and as soon as they came we begged with folded hands. They did not stop and we women kept begging with folded hands, please leave, please leave....we are not giving up our agricultural land rights. We are praying now, please don't disturb, leave. But they attacked us indiscriminately, started lobbing tear gas shells, fired at us and physically assaulted us. And if someone fell down, they would pounce on them. The non-stop violence went unabated, bullets were fired, they pulled the women to the bushes by their legs... do you understand?

Many were injured and in the stampede that followed, unarmed people jumped into the river, into the hay stacks, into granaries, and basically took refuge wherever they could. But the assault continued. Men were killed, women were pulled out from their hiding places and dragged behind bushes to be raped; even children were killed, and most people were beaten up mercilessly. In this catastrophe, mothers saw their children being torn apart by their legs, husbands saw wives raped and parents mourned as they saw their young daughters being carried away by mercenaries, never to be seen again. Obviously, the BUPC's ploy about the presence of women and the often-touted respect for them acting as a guard against violence did not work.

Lata Rai (*An Independent Citizens' Report*, 2007), one of the participants of the BUPC rally, was mercilessly beaten up, and "subjected to severe verbal abuse with sexual intonations" (p.18). She recounts seeing blood stains all over the grounds as she made her way to the relief camp and has a hard time forgetting the plight of young girls who had become prey to the mercenaries:

On the way to both the school, and to Tekhali Bazaar, I noticed that the sides of the roads were bloody.... I have heard of women, especially young girls, being taken in groups on van-rickshaws with their faces covered and blood dripping from their feet, which suggested that they had met with severe sexual assault. (pp. 18-19)

Methodology

At its inception, this study was structured around videotaped narratives of women who were victims of societal oppression. The geographical focus was the state of West Bengal because it was the place of my origin and I was of the opinion that my familiarity with the social customs, norms of the area and access to information through family members would increase the verity and comprehensiveness of my work. The videotaped narratives were recorded from victims of violence and their families as they participated in street corner meetings and political demonstrations organized by political activists agitating for better rights for women (Appendix A). Most of the narratives were part of victims' stories recounted during Trinamool Congress Party (TMC) demonstrations in Kolkata during the months of August and September, 2007. The videos were recorded by professional crew employed by the party during street meetings held by Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar. She was a TMC leader, a doctor and a human rights activist. Kakoli forwarded the videotapes to me when she heard that I was interested in analyzing the violence against women in India. Kakoli is also the founder of *Udaan*, meaning "A Flight to the Sun," the human rights organization which recorded the narratives of sexual violence from the Nandigram women.

During this stage of data collection and transcription, there was an outbreak of violence in Nandigram area of Midnapore district around the first week of November 2007. The peasants'

movement had been fomenting there over a year. Reports from human rights groups had talked of massive sexual violence against women and children. Kakoli informed me around the first week of November that she was in the Midnapore area, trying to record the violence and large-scale sexual assault on women. Consequently, the focus of this project was redirected so as to accommodate this new development. The previous set of narratives was used to understand the nature of violence against women and young girls but the Nandigram carnage became the focal point of this case study.

This new stage in data collection involved artifacts of three kinds. The first set of artifacts consists of videotaped narratives of women victims of the November violence in Nandigram as they spoke to visiting activists, journalists and women community leaders like Kakoli. This group is loosely referred to as the “Nandigram women” but the narrators came from the surrounding villages on the outskirts of Nandigram as well as the town itself. Recorded by *Udaan*, these interviews were mainly in the category of face-to-face, group conversations of women talking to other women – the latter presumed to be individuals with decision-making authority who could be of assistance – and all of them were stories of violence, sexual abuse and intimidation. There were no individual interviews and all discussions took place in the public space near a relief camp in a Nandigram high school.

The second set of artifacts consists of newspaper articles from local publications of Kolkata, West Bengal, India. A sample of newspaper articles covering the events in Nandigram were collected at this initial stage and the clips were mailed to me by Kakoli. *Udaan* was already involved in community work in the Nandigram region and in a document dated April 2007 (Appendix B), it had reported the excruciating violence inflicted on women during the agitation on March 14 when fourteen people were killed and numerous women assaulted. In enabling

access to research material, Kakoli may be called the “gatekeeper” for this project in an informal sense of the term (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 101).

The sample of newspaper articles provided by Kakoli was from a variety of newspapers both English and Bengali. She was working in the area as a TMC party activist and was involved in community rebuilding when the renewed violence broke out in Nandigram. During her fieldwork in the middle of the political unrest, she did not have access to many newspapers, so she sent me clippings from whichever newspapers she could find during her trips between the site of strife in Midnapore and her home in Kolkata. Thus the collection was more representative of convenience sampling. The newspapers included at this pilot stage were all published from Kolkata, their circulation limited to mainly eastern India. They included *The Telegraph* (English), *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (Bengali), *Bartaman* (Bengali), *Sangbad Pratidin* (Bengali), *The Times of India* (English) and *Indian Express* (English). There were forty six news articles from the Bengali newspapers (8 mentioned rape) and six from English newspapers (1 mentioned rape) reporting on the November violence in Nandigram. There were also several photo features in which photographers had managed to capture some heart-rending shots which spoke volumes. This preliminary scrutiny became the basis for a thematic scheme, developed mainly in order to organize and review the data from the several articles within a loose structure.

The media texts seemed to tell a comparatively different story from what had become evident from the Nandigram women’s stories on the videotapes. Notwithstanding all issues usually connected with studying group communication, which language and social interaction research generally involves, the message emanating from these women’s stories was clearly indicative of large scale sexual violence against them, their family members, their neighbors and comrades. The newspapers, on the other hand, devoted very little attention to the gross violation

of human rights involved in the innumerable rapes, abductions and sexual molestations of the members of BUPC. They were focused on the overall conflict, frequently using war imagery, homelessness of the affected villagers and injuries. There were also several columns devoted to the political tussle between the ruling CPM party, the Governor, and the opposition parties.

In keeping with the qualitative methodological structure of my project, and my goal of reflecting the colors of some vividly lived experiences of women in India, this project focuses “on the social practices and meanings of people in a specific historical or cultural context,” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 122). In this case, the historical context was the peasants’ movement in Nandigram and the cultural context was a peace rally organized within the framework of a religious gathering. The participants of this movement were members of the farming community of Nandigram who were agitating against the government land acquisition plan.

The historical conjuncture that I try to identify is the point at which a peaceful, democratic, civic engagement framed within a religious event was transformed into a battleground through a violent intervention in which gender-based assault became a deadly weapon. My interest was in finding out how victims of such infractions communicated about the violation of their basic human rights as citizens of a democratic society. I also examine the extent to which the practice of sexual violence as a disciplining strategy was covered by the press.

Three major newspapers were selected from the first sampling and data was collected from them for a continuous period of approximately two weeks in November 2007 (November 7 - 21). The media texts analyzed at this stage include news reports, editorials, human interest stories, media interviews and opinion columns from *The Telegraph* (English), *The Times of India* (English) and *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (Bengali). Issues of *The Telegraph* were selected by me from a family subscription on a visit to Kolkata during January 2008, and articles from the two

other publications were located through online archives of the media organizations. This sample included text units published in these newspapers between 7th to 21st November, 2007, yielded through search of the keyword "Nandigram." Most of the search was done manually.

Following a close manual screening, a total of 282 print media text units were identified which dealt directly with the Nandigram violence of November 2007. Out of the 282 units examined, only 32 contained any mention of the sexual violence against women and children. *The Telegraph* had 126 articles out of which only 9 mentioned rape or sexual atrocities; *The Times of India* had 75 articles out of which only 4 dealt with the inhuman sexual violence against women and the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* had 81 articles out of which 19 had references to rape, sexual violence and torture of women and children. (See Appendix C for Excel spreadsheet on the breakdown of statistics). When collated with the previous group, the total articles numbered 319 and those mentioning sexual assault were 37.

The third artifact examined here is a document called *An Independent Citizen's Report* emailed to me by a non-governmental organization, *Sahayog*, working on women's issues in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. *Sahayog* is coordinated by human rights activist and McArthur scholar, Jashodhara Dasgupta, my childhood friend. She is a highly dedicated women's rights activist who has organized, coordinated, researched and negotiated for better rights for Indian women over the past twenty years. She is also part of a listserv of women's organizations in India and received this report from common friends working in Bengal and immediately forwarded it to me in March, 2008, upon the permission of Kavita Panjabi, one of the authors. This artifact gives a ringside view of the Nandigram carnage, but more importantly, it is a validation of the victims' stories recorded by a human rights group consisting of intellectually

qualified, committed and articulate women from many different professions and backgrounds. The group consists of college professors, school teachers, researchers and students.

The Nandigram women tell their stories over and again and they do it with an unerring precision, whether it is to a political activist like Kakoli or to regular citizens like Kavita and her group. This leaves little doubt about the verity of their narratives and the horror behind their stories. However, the print media all but ignores it, the opinion leaders largely gloss over the disgraceful treatment of women and only a minuscule percentage of the Nandigram reportage is devoted to sexual violence. Almost no effort is made in any of these newspapers to examine how it is used as a political weapon against women. It is hard to ignore the purposeful silence that the Indian print media maintained on the sexual abuse of women in Nandigram.

Admittedly, the relatively small sampling frame, the manual analytic procedures (due to the lack of academic databases for the Indian newspaper articles) and the limited access to artifacts (due to the exigent nature of the collection process) might have an effect on the exactitude of conclusions drawn from the study. I do not claim that I have a randomly-selected sample population which draws a comprehensive picture about violence in the contemporary Indian woman's life. The entire qualitatively-oriented process was geared to give an impression of the nature of the disciplining process imposed on twenty first century Indian women and it discovered a veil of silence that covers up such heinous oppression.

Videotaped narratives of the Nandigram victims of rape and violence are juxtaposed with a textual analysis of print media articles on one hand and the citizens' report on the other to highlight the biases inherent in the media coverage of violence against women in India. The stark paucity or absence of mention of sexual violence against women in the newspaper articles covering the political agitation substantiates my

claim that the domination and disciplining of women is so normalized in Indian society by religion-based discriminatory practices and years of oppression, that heinous and gruesome sexual abuses are accepted as part of the politically vocal woman's destiny. Consequently, it seldom enters the discursive field as a predominant societal problem, an issue which needs to be debated, discussed and solved urgently.

Analysis: Deafening Silence

Soon after the carnage, which was termed "Operation Nandigram" by newspaper reports, an uproar rose across West Bengal and later the entire nation. It started with the intelligentsia's protest against the government's unconstitutional use of force in the name of law and order and its "fascist" attitude. This protest gained momentum as the common masses followed their ideological leaders. The intellectual base of Bengal, traditionally left-minded, would not be silenced after the repeated, blatant, violations of human rights in their backyard. Despite losing public support, the ruling CPM party did not back track and all protests, whether rising from illustrious academicians and artistes or the state's Governor, were ignored, scoffed at and violently squashed by the government.

The newspapers carried minute details of this unfolding drama. However, there was a significant dimension to such coverage. There was a remarkable paucity in reportage of the rampant sexual violence against women. Only 37 out of over 319 articles had some mention of rape, sexual molestation and abuse, and the majority of these (24 articles) were from Bengali newspapers, many of them smaller, local publications.

This finding on the media's relative silence – about the gruesome fate meted out to many courageous, politically active women who dared to step out of the boundary of their homes and engage in political and civic community life – was an unexpected

outcome of this project. In the following section, I scrutinize this new dimension and try to comprehend the length to which opinion-makers may go, to coalesce with dominant patriarchal forces in perpetrating an environment of terror for women who step out of line. The silence with which sexual violence is covered up, perpetuated and normalized in Indian society operates at multiple levels, through various agents and, especially in the case of print media, for various power groups. A thematic analysis of the newspaper articles is undertaken for the purpose of understanding the extent of this silence.

Themes, Issues, Editorial Choices

The thematic structure was developed based on issues being discussed in the newspaper articles for the purpose of organizing the massive volume of information emerging from the reportage. This was done with the help of a matrix based on four meta-dimensions: political rhetoric, war, human interest and sexual violence. Articles were color-coded and the Excel spreadsheet was used to record the breakdown of articles into these categories. Most of the stories had several other smaller themes woven into their structure but the articles were graded or rated according to the nature of the main topic. Since it was the goal of this paper to identify all mentions of women's rights, issues or sexual assault within the framework of the Nandigram massacre, articles containing any information on sexual violence on women were counted in the last category. The rating was on the basis of existence, not frequency.

One of the salient themes was the distinct "us" versus "them" paradigm emerging from the rhetoric of the political parties: both the ruling Leftist administration and the opposition party, TMC. Initially, this referred to the two parties but as events in Nandigram became more violent and the CPM lost public support, this "us versus them" dynamics pitted the common people of West Bengal, the intelligentsia, the central government as well as several other

political parties in the state against the CPM party and the state administration. Interestingly, many articles linked the TMC to the BUPC and referred to them interchangeably. However, there was a distinct difference in tone between the rhetoric of the political party and the BUPC members or ordinary villagers who had become prey to the violence. Whereas the TMC and its leader, Mamata Banerjee, were spewing fiery political rhetoric in newspaper reports, very few of the discussions touched on the sexual violence perpetrated on the women of Nandigram. On the other hand, the villagers' accounts, laced with undertones of fear, often contained references to rape, molestation and sexual violence against women. These were mainly expressed in the Bengali newspapers.

Another prominent theme rising from the coverage was based on the metaphor of war and Nandigram was repeatedly described as a battleground with several articles resorting to graphic presentations through maps, flow charts and diagrams to show how the CPI (M)-backed mercenary "army" had advanced and captured vast areas. The predominant mood of conflict and war, with Nandigram being referred to as a "war zone" and a "battlefield," created a sense of distancing from the ongoing discourse in political and intellectual circles regarding democratic processes, unconstitutional behavior and fundamental rights in civil society. Many of the articles gave detailed descriptions of arms and ammunitions in much the same way army officials give press briefing during a war. Articles gave information and data about arms movements, army advances, human hostages, human shields or strategic assault positions. Evidently, this was a masculine style of reporting based more on formal description of a war in progress rather than a focus on human interest stories of suffering of ordinary people. Most of the coverage which focused on the plight of the victims mainly described the damage to their property, homes,

businesses and land. Homelessness, missing family members and refugee status were different dimensions of this theme used by the media to emphasize the victims' predicament.

The third theme was derived from human interest stories mainly focusing on medical treatment, injuries and medical condition of the victims of violence as gathered from area health centers and hospitals. Despite the fact that there were vivid descriptions of bullet wounds, skull fractures, burn injuries, and mangled bodies, almost no article in the English dailies provided any description of sexual violence-related injuries, which constituted the last theme. The Bengali newspapers contained human interest stories of gang rapes, sexual molestations and mass rapes but such human rights violations never entered the political rhetoric going on at the state or national level. The fourth theme, covering the issue of sexual violence, was not even brought up by opinion leaders or human rights activists in their interviews and the few references to the women's plight mostly showed up in the personal accounts of victims and family members.

The newspapers covered how Kolkata's intellectuals and common masses came out in vast numbers, protesting against the Nandigram massacre. Feminists like Aparna Sen and Medha Patkar took public stands and participated in mass-rallies which were held in the city. Aparna Sen – an acclaimed actress, filmmaker, editor of a feminist journal and writer – withdrew her films from the state-sponsored Kolkata Film Festival going on in the city at the time. She was part of a silent march in which thousands participated on November 14, 2007. According to a report in *The Telegraph* of November 15, she carried a placard which read: "We want punishment for the criminals and cops who are responsible for the mass murder and rape in Nandigram." This is clear indication of the fact that Aparna Sen was fully aware of the sexual violence inflicted on women.

However, none of the newspaper articles (which post her pictures at every chance) cover any statement by Aparna Sen condemning the rapes and molestations.

Medha Patkar, a famous ecological and social activist of the National Alliance of People's Movement, traveled to West Bengal from western India to be with the Nandigram peasants. When she was stopped from going to Nandigram and assaulted on the way, she spoke of the violent behavior meted out to her:

There were CPM men carrying red flags who blocked my car and some other vehicles going to Nandigram. I was hit in the face and they tried to pull my hair and was about to drag me out of the car. (*The Telegraph*, November 9)

Whereas Medha spoke out against this siege of Nandigram in a news report (*The Times of India*, November 12), and protested against the criminalization of politics, against the indiscriminate killings, about CPM cadres assaulting unarmed people, about Nandigram being turned into a killing field, a "cremation ground," about the CPM's plan to attack villagers, as well as the urgent need to restore peace in the area, there is very little in her rhetoric which addresses the violence against women. One can only guess what might have happened to her had they succeeded in dragging her out of her car. This silence, despite the close brush with the possibility of being molested herself, is not only unusual for an otherwise vocal human rights activist but it casts a shadow on her image as one of India's prominent feminists.

The women negotiate in the narrow public space they are assigned within the overall hegemonic power structure and make their choices about which issues to speak out against and which to be silent about. Within the patriarchal dynamic of Indian society, even women in leadership roles are confined within strictly demarcated

boundaries and sensitive issues like rape or molestation ironically lie outside their jurisdiction. In this, they are often guided by their perception of the direction of the flow of public opinion within current contexts. They engage in public discourse only on issues which they think have full public support and do not risk losing their political goodwill by speaking on subjects that are controversial and volatile. Clair (1998) discusses how women are often complicit in the practices of silence which might actually be working against them and emphasizes that all marginalized groups should be aware, not only of oppressive practices but also of their own participation in that oppression.

Noelle-Neumann's (1974) theory of spiral of silence talks about how people's perception of the distribution of public opinion on an issue motivates their willingness to express their own political stand or opinion. This happens when "the individual is witness to a struggle between conflicting positions and has to consider where he stands" (p. 44). In this scenario, individuals gain a picture of the distribution of opinions in the social environment around them and if their stance is echoed by others, it boosts their self-confidence and they speak out freely. On the other hand, if their stand is not substantiated by other members and opinion leaders, then they become less inclined to express their opinion. The dominant opinion is heard more and more, individuals adapt themselves to it, and the one losing ground is heard less and less. In this way, a spiraling dynamics affects expression of public opinion. According to Noelle-Neumann (1974):

Based on this interaction concept of a 'spiral' of silence, public opinion is the opinion which can be voiced in public without fear of sanctions and upon which action in public can be based. Voicing the opposite opinion, or acting in public accordingly, incurs the danger of isolation. (p. 44)

Consequently, feminists like Aparna Sen and Medha Parkar realized that the women's rape issue had not entered the mainstream of the political discursive field, and would not be a popular topic even if it did. Therefore, despite being aware of the sexual violations, they decided not to step out of the main flow of public opinion and risk losing support from their base and be isolated. They limited themselves to protesting about more widely-discussed issues like loss of life, property, freedom, and human rights.

Splichal (2006) talks about "structural censorship" (p.103) and how it affects the individual's response to a public event. It is more effective than authoritative intervention, and is often guided by personal fear about "being disapproved, criticized, ridiculed, belittled, discriminated or simply unnoticed when speaking in public" (Splichal, 104). It is an inherent restraint underlying social dynamics, not visible, but pervading many democratic societies – even those that offer constitutional guarantees regarding freedom of expression and press freedom. In the Indian context, this operates with all the force that the "woman question" has gathered over past few centuries and involves the subliminal control that paternalistically-oriented hegemonic discursive patterns exert on all issues related to disciplining of women.

Splichal (2006) argues that this form of "self-censorship" is misleading because it seems to imply that the speakers willingly refrain from speaking their minds for fear of external censorship or negative sanctions. Instead, Splichal (2006) contends:

Even if the fear of sanctions were the main mechanism regulating individual opinion expression, it cannot be an idiosyncratic trait of the individual without being at the same time also characteristic of the social structure and social will (e.g., the definition of 'normality' and 'tolerable'). Every single act of (non-)

communication, including the so-called self-censorship, is a social act if communication is conceived of as a socio-cultural process -/conditioned by social 'externalities' such as specificities of languages, traditions, experiences, and interests.... (p.105)

The "social structure" or "will" that Splichal mentions is like a rubric within which people develop their ideological positions. I believe that the reason why the feminists like Aparna Sen and Medha Patkar did not speak up on the rapes, sexual abuses and abductions is because they were aware of the ideological positions of the majority of Indian people. According to Grossberg (1996): "Ideology is the naturalization of a particular historical cultural articulation," (p.159). In this case, a dominant Indian articulation is of the image of the chaste Indian woman, in the model of Sita. This image would be soiled by the counter-articulation of the excruciatingly humiliating image of a mother of six being raped in turns by several men. As such, these women probably decided to maintain a silence and their decisions killed the sexual violence issue from gaining a foothold within the media's agenda, even if the print media was inclined to give it a few inches.

Silence and Censorship

It is often left to the motivated political activists like TMC president, Mamata Banerjee, to speak up about issues which Indian society wants to keep in the dark. Which she does, but very little of it gets into the English newspapers. The English media gives her fair amount of attention but mainly quotes her on issues which are permissible within the hegemonic structures of Bengali society.

Banerjee, whose convoy was obstructed by CPM cadres at Kelomal, between Panskura and Tamluk, rode pillion on the motorbike of a party supporter to the Tamluk hospital. Banerjee said 'I want to go to Nandigram, I have communicated this to Governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi and the Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil.' Addressing her supporters she expressed surprise that the Centre still chose to remain silent over the happenings in Nandigram. 'Nandigram is bleeding. CPM cadres are targeting innocent villagers and brutally killing them. There is total lawlessness in Nandigram for the past six days. Is the central government sleeping?' she said. (*The Times of India*, November 11, electronic version)

On the same day, the Bengali newspaper, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, quotes Mamata Banerjee condemning the sexual abuse of women by CPM's criminal cadres (November 11, 2007). Banerjee explains how the militant CPM operatives had blocked all roads to Nandigram so that neither activists nor human rights groups, neither the Central Reserve Police Force nor the media, could enter the area and then had gone on a rampage, inflicting gruesome torture on women there. Another article, in the same November 11 issue, quoted Banerjee criticizing the central government because of its politically motivated inaction in the Nandigram situation, the price for which was the "honor" of many innocent women.

A scrutiny of *The Times of India* articles covering the Nandigram massacre reveals that Mamata Banerjee was closely involved with the situation in Nandigram, and she spoke out freely against a number of issues: CPM blockades on roads leading to Nandigram, on how the villages had all been emptied in bloody takeovers by the CPM party's militant wing, of the "state-sponsored terrorism" and the surprising silence of the

central government. The coverage shows her agitating relentlessly between Midnapore and Kolkata – holding “dharnas” or sit-ins, organizing short road-blocks, calling for state-wide strikes, and announcing 24-hour business shut-downs in protest. She is also quoted while tendering her resignation as a Member of Parliament and requesting the Governor to initiate central intervention in the governance of Bengal and an invocation of Article 355 of the Indian Constitution. However, in all the coverage in the English newspapers, Mamata Banerjee is never credited with any comment on the plight of the Nandigram women or the rampant sexual violence that they were being subjected to.

The omission of these comments from the English newspapers and the deafening silence on sexual violence is representative of a significant pattern noticed in this analysis. The scarce information on the sexual violations which does seep into the print media’s texts is mainly found in the Bengali newspapers. *The Times of India* devotes over 75 articles to Nandigram during the period covered in this analysis. Only four mention violence against women. The language is generic, and “physically assaulted” – which could be interpreted as any violence – was a common phrase used to signify sexual violence. In all other articles where the victims were not quoted directly, the text on sexual violence was edited as “allegedly raped” – “rape” always qualified by “allegedly” in an effort to signify that there might be a possibility that a woman was fabricating the story of her rape. Even when victims spoke out clearly, their fate was not much better.

Especially noteworthy is the account of a 40-year old woman from Satengabari village (name undisclosed in the report) who narrates from her hospital bed in the surgical ward of a hospital in Tamluk (near Nandigram) how she had been raped and her two minor daughters gang-raped in front of her and then abducted:

It was around 8 p.m. on Tuesday (a day after the final onslaught on Satengabari from Khejuri was launched). My husband wasn't at home. I was in bed with my daughters, aged 14 and 16. There was a knock on the door. Five men barged into the house, pulled me out by the hair, hit me with rifle butts and one of them raped me. My daughters were then dragged out and raped by four people. (Banerjee, 2007, p.1)

This account represents one of the few instances when rape is handled in *The Times of India*. However, this story appears only in the paper publication and not in the online version. This narrative by the victim is juxtaposed in the article with a statement by a gynecologist, Sudip Gole, who had examined her. He dismisses her claim, and his response points towards the enforcement of an oppressive hegemonic structure on the dominated and also the complex problematic of speaking up against rape and the issue of public redress. "There is no visible sign of rape, but she is a mother of a number of children. In such cases rape is difficult to confirm by physical verification." (Banerjee, 2007, p.1)

For this victim, to the excruciating trauma of being sexually violated and seeing her daughters raped and carried away is added the burden of having to go through the ignominy of being doubted and questioned on the sexual violence and finally dismissed on the basis of lacking physical evidence for verification. Her physical condition of being a mother disqualifies her from receiving the dubious distinction of a raped woman. Besides, the absurdity of putting the onus of proof on a person who has already undergone enough torture to turn any person insane is clearly overlooked by those in authority. This incident shows how social norms effectively limit the woman's right to

address her grievances and thereby put up obstacles for many others to come forward with their accounts. The result, eventually, is to create a barrier of silence.

A report in the Bengali newspaper, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, shows how the rape complainant is discredited through overt and covert implications about the verity of the crime. Reporting on the same incident in Satengabari, and using a pseudonym, "Ansura," for the raped victim, the article (Bandopadhyay, 2007) quoted a National Women's Commission member dismissing Ansura's claims of rape. She said:

The medical report of the woman in the Tamluk hospital has no documentation on rape. The woman has had six or seven children. This is the reason why it is technically difficult to prove rape. Moreover, the incident took place on November 6 and she reported it on November 10. She washed all her clothes from that day. There is no scope to prove anything this way. (p.7)

To the credit of this newspaper goes the effort to present the story from the perspectives of all the parties concerned. Editing efforts geared to discount the victim's story are absent. The article quotes the hospital superintendent, the victim herself, members of the National Women's Commission as well as those of the State Commission who participated in an inquiry into the traumatized state of Nandigram women. Juxtaposed with the words of the commission member is the victim's narrative recounting the events and also describing how the rapists had confined her for three days, so it is easy to understand why she could not report the crime until three days later. The article also includes the physician's rebuttal about being repeatedly questioned on the rape case. His words spell out the difficult position he has been placed in as a government employee where he is forced to withhold information which he knows is true. It even mentions how

the representatives of the Women's Commission who visited the Tamluk hospital conducted their inquiry surreptitiously as if they were aware that this report would neither reflect the reality of the situation nor its verity. The dismissive words of the commission members, erudite, professional women, fall as blows across the face of the story with a force which is symbolic of the violence it reports on.

I noticed in shock as Malini Bhattacharya, a prominent member of the National Women's Commission, tried to discredit Anura in her polished language. Her reasoning was that Anura's delay in coming to the authorities casts doubt on her story of being raped. The commission, she said, was more concerned with the disappearance of her daughters. It is impossible to ignore the note of suspicion that creeps into her message and the insinuation that the woman herself had a hand in her daughters' disappearance.

In this case, Malini Bhattacharya's position on Anura's fabrication of her rape is heartbreakingly illustrative of how hegemonic structures are constructed not only by members of dominant groups but by those of the dominated as well. A staunch member of the Bengali intelligentsia and one of my professors in college, Malini Bhattacharya is unable to break out of her personal, social, political and cultural boundary and consequently denies the

legitimacy of Ansura's claim and the obvious sexual violence perpetrated on her. She also becomes an instrument in the silencing process.

Clair (1998) mentions the importance of exploring how marginalized groups act in ways so as to support the dominant system through a scrutiny of how they place themselves within the power structure and also in relation to other marginalized groups. Malini Bhattacharya obviously did not identify herself with Ansura but placed herself in a different, possibly higher, position. Her stance on the Ansura rape case reflects Clair's (1998) perspective on people occupying "a plurality of subject positions" (p. 54). Highly-educated, financially secure, politically established women like Bhattacharya definitely occupy different subject positions from the disempowered, uneducated, poverty-stricken Ansura and her Nandigram comrades, and this places the former in a position of power and authority. Consequently, Bhattacharya's dismissal of the other's claim might be an expression of a sense of that superiority. According to Clair (1998): "In order to understand oppression, we must question how certain marginalized groups establish their supposed superiority over other marginalized groups" (p.54), and instead of expressing solidarity they often enact a sense of privilege and abandon them as "others".

Chapter 4

Discussion

I would like to illuminate my analysis of the distancing between members of marginalized groups with help from critical cultural scholars like Stuart Hall and his use of the process of articulation. Inherent in this complex concept are elements of “other possibilities” (Slack, 1996, p.117) which are extremely useful because they provide alternative ways for comprehending the nascent social formations which evolve out of an environment of struggle. According to Slack (1996) articulation provides:

...other ways of theorizing the elements of a social formation, and the relations that constitute it not simply as relations of correspondence (that is, as reductionist and essentialist) but also as relations of non-correspondence and contradiction, and how these relations constitute unities that instantiate relations of dominance and subordination. (p.117)

In the current context, the power relations between Malini Bhattacharya and Ansura could have been one of correspondence since both of them occupy the position of an Indian, Bengali woman with all its social connotations and linkages. However, Slack (1996) talks about Althusser’s concept of a “complex totality structured in dominance” (p.117) which is made up of a relationship among “levels” structured out of relations of correspondence as well as contradiction, rather than in relations “reducible to a single essential one-to-one correspondence” (p.117). Therefore, the essentialist woman-to-woman correspondence between Malini Bhattacharya and Ansura is reconfigured here through the difference in their “levels” which are often articulated through several influences in society. One such level which provides a stronger platform for Malini

Bhattacharya's stance is the ideological level, in which and through which the relations between them are produced and reproduced. This process, which Hall called the process of articulation and re-articulation (Slack, p.117) is useful in understanding the new formations and unusual patterns in situations of resistance and struggle.

Critical scholars like Hall drew from marxist theorists like Althusser, Gramsci and also Marx himself, in trying to understand the issues of dominance and subordination but veered away from Marx's class reductionism (Slack, 1996). Hall's position is particularly useful in the Nandigram context and in this interview between the two women because it throws a new light on notions of hegemony, articulation and ideology being formulated outside a sphere of gender reductionism. Also helpful is Gramsci's articulation of hegemony

Hegemony is...a process by which a hegemonic class articulates (or co-ordinates) the interests of social groups such that those groups actively 'consent' to their subordinated status. The vehicle of this subordination, its 'cement', so to speak, is ideology, which is conceived of as an articulation of disparate elements, that is common sense, and the more coherent notion of 'higher philosophy'. (Slack, 117)

It is reasonable to see, in Malini Bhattacharya's position, an instance of such active consent in which her ideological nurturing prompts her to become a conduit in the disempowerment of another woman. Whereas a scrutiny of Malini Bhattacharya's ideological position is beyond the scope of this paper, it is logical to posit that her membership of the National Commission of Women makes her a part of the dominant hegemonic structure of Indian society and her position is articulated away from being a woman and toward being a member of the dominant power structure and she perpetuates

the ideology of that hegemony. This re-articulation of relations within social structures, in my opinion, re-configures prevalent linkages and constitutes significant historical conjunctures within which the Nandigram women structure their resistance-oriented narratives.

Loopholes in law

Rape creates a crisis in a woman's life which is unparalleled in its complexity. This is true of the experience of all women in all societies. For the Indian woman, the premium placed on her "chastity" and "purity" creates a dilemma because by speaking up about the torture, she also erodes her image of the chaste woman – a fall from grace which very few dare attempt. Indian feminists have struggled with the legal aspect of sexual violence ever since the late 1970s when the Supreme Court acquitted police rapists of a young tribal girl, Mathura. However, the reason that rape and sexual violence are yet to be addressed efficaciously, Menon (2000) contends, is because the simplistic binary logic of law – truth/untruth, guilt/innocence, consent/non-consent – are too limited to cover the immense complexity and ambiguity of crimes based on sexual violence.

According to Menon (2000, p. 69) "rape and sexual violence against women have been among the most visible and strongly articulated issues in the women's movement," since the Mathura case. At the time of agitation on the Mathura case, the Sections 375 and 376 of the Indian Penal Code, which dealt with laws regarding rape, were found to be fettered within the antiquated codes of 1860 statutes. The campaign that resulted, was geared towards changing codes of the criminal law dealing with rape with the main thrust being on redefining "consent," because it was seen through past experience that it was very difficult for the woman to prove in a court of law that she did not consent to the sex

“beyond all reasonable doubt” as was required by criminal law. A Law Commission instituted by the government (Menon, 2000) included among its recommendations the demand of the campaign that “in rape cases the onus of proving consent should shift to the accused,” (p.70). But the Criminal Law Amendment Act which was passed in 1983 did not incorporate this recommendation fully. It made provisions regarding the “consent” clause only in cases of custodial rapes.

Menon (2000) lists various other efforts to amend rape laws in India. In 1993, women activists’ suggestions to bodies like National Commission for Women included the rewriting of the definition of sexual assault to cover a wide range of atrocities against women and children. It sought to expand the existing legal definition of rape in which “only vaginal penetration by the penis [was considered] as rape” (Menon, p.72), to a number of other sexual assaults. Consequently, the amended Sections 375 (1) and (2) expanded sexual assault to include “the penetration of any orifice by a penis or any other object, as well as, ‘for a sexual purpose’ touching, gesturing or exhibiting any part of the body, if any of these activities are carried out against the will or without the consent of the other person” (Menon p.73). In grappling with a fuller understanding of the nature of rape, Indian feminists have emphasized on the ““unique character of sexual attack”” (Menon, p. 74) and established the understanding that rape is a form of violence but it is a unique type of violence because of its sexual nature.

Agnes (1992), one of India’s leading women’s rights activists, touches on an interesting point the framing of issues in dealing with rape laws:

In fact the same old notions of chastity, virginity, premium on marriage and fear of female sexuality are reflected in the judgements of the post-amendment period.

Penis penetration continues to be the governing ingredient in the offence of rape. The concept of 'penis penetration' is based on the control men exercise over 'their' women. Rape violates these property rights and may lead to pregnancies by other men and threaten the patriarchal power structure. (Agnes, 1992 as cited in Menon, 2000, p. 70)

Agnes' position is that "sexual assault" replace legal usage of rape since rape is a violent act and all punishment be determined by not the intricacies of "consent" or "penetration" but by the injuries caused to the woman. Agnes' misgivings about the use of the law by feminists and the failure of amendment enforcement are very justified because they constitute real threats to progressive societal positions on sexual violence.

Menon (2000) mentions that the ancient normative standards like seclusion of women to safeguard them from the dangers of society and fear of the woman's autonomous sexuality guided many discussions at the time of passing the 1983 Bill on rape laws in the Indian Parliament. Menon (2000) explores the idea that underlying efforts of rape legislation was the notion that if rape is to be punished, it is largely because it violates the chastity of the woman, which is the cornerstone of Indian patriarchal society. The fact that this chastity is often a hegemonic imposition does not enter the discursive field. Menon (2000) states: "It is clear that the law's comprehension of sexual violence can only be through misogynist and paternalist categories, even as it condemns and attempts to punish sexual violence" (p. 95).

A critical evaluation of the feminine figure as framed within the constructions of the dichotomous configuration of the inner-outer world and the modestly garbed metaphor of Sita yield certain insights into the male-dominated discursive environment.

The over-emphasis on the simplicity and modesty of the feminine attire, proposed by *swadeshi*, may be seen as an obsession of India's male dominated society to harness female sexuality and enforce standards which are hard to follow. It was almost as if the woman had to prove, through a dress code, that she was eligible to move out into the public sphere by following the "prescriptions for modesty and purity," (Basu, 2001, p. 183).

The reverberations of such hegemonic positions in the early twentieth century had long-term effects on social formations and could not be counteracted by the incorporation of women into the nationalist *satyagraha* movement even though the latter did go a long way towards women's advancement into public life. The inner-outer world distinction became the problematic center of a working woman's existence in many different ways. Fernandes (1997) speaks of the "creation of a gendered public sphere" (p.9) and the marginalization of female workers in a jute mill work environment accentuated by the "construction of the urban arena as foreign, dangerous, and male" (p.19) This was especially inhibiting for a woman who had to venture out of the house for a living, a position she was expected to negotiate through a difficult terrain fraught with sexual politics, male domination and gendered discourse on morality (Fernandes, 1997).

Female authors like Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati (1858-1922) had long ago written about the age-old Hindu attitudes towards women in her magnum opus, "The High-Caste Hindu Woman." Clearly condemning the anti-woman core of ancient Sanskrit texts like Manu's Dharmashastra, Sarasvati (1890) had pointed towards distinctions between the attitudes of the opinion leaders and the grassroots-level population: "a handful of Hindus entertaining progressive ideas...doing all they can to reform the religious and social

customs of Hindustan,” (Sarasvati, 1890, p. 32 as cited in Robinson, p.66). Sarasvati’s conclusion was that it was not possible to reinvent Hindu tradition in favor of women. Only posterity would prove the prescience of her observation but her conversion to Christianity eroded the effectiveness of her arguments and her later work no longer resonated with the Hindu population.

There is no doubt about the exigent nature of an environment pervaded by sexual violence. However, it is because of such exigencies that nascent forms of energy evolve from resistance efforts of the disempowered Nandigram women. Their response emanates in a particular, novel pattern, representative of the discourses of the repressed because they are aware that they do not have access to means of communication like the traditional media.

Trends and Traditions in Media Coverage

The Indian popular press does focus on women’s issues but very frequently the bias is towards glamorous events or sensationalism and the media routinely ignores the voices and experiences of the marginalized Indian woman and her struggle for emancipation. According to Parekh (2001), who discusses the Women’s Feature Service, a non-profit organization working in New Delhi, India, towards creating space for women’s stories in the press, there is dissatisfaction over how news organizations treat news coverage about women and a felt need for greater gender balance in media coverage:

Often, the media either ignore important stories altogether, relegate reporting to obscure places in the newspaper, or sensationalize incidents without examining the underlying context or causes.... Certain news stories rarely do well. When the

subject is domestic violence, rape, dowry deaths, laws on inheritance, divorce and maintenance, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, lack of access to education and health services, police cruelty, and reproductive rights, its is only sensational “bad news” stories that generate interest. Despite the presence of women journalists on the crime beat, incidents of rape and dowry deaths (shockingly regular occurrences in the Indian subcontinent) are usually reported in a routine manner with the police being the sole source of information. (p. 92)

This analysis is aligned with Parekh’s position (2001) that the media is seriously lacking in its duty to inform, educate and stimulate debate about serious women’s issues and coverage is always event-based rather than sustained. Parekh throws a new light on the situation by showing how there is the absence of women in senior journalistic positions in Indian mainstream press. In a country which is inundated with print publications: 49,145 newspapers and periodicals at the last count, (Narasimhan, 2001), a survey by Women’s Feature Service failed to locate a single mainline Indian newspaper which has a woman chief editor. Parekh (2001) also mentions the pressures on mainstream female journalists to conform to masculine attitudes and values through social pressures and competitiveness within the profession.

According to Narasimhan (2001), more than 250 million women remain uneducated in India. It is no surprise that issues like journalistic representation and portrayal of women in the media hold hardly any immediate relevance for many such disempowered, illiterate women who are in the grips of fighting vicious battles just to preserve basic human rights to life and physical safety. On the other hand, Narasimhan underlines the importance of editorial screening and framing when she notes a salient

trend towards ignoring women's empowerment issues in media in favor of financially lucrative decisions. She quotes a prominent editor's comment on why his publication featured classified matrimonial advertisements reading: "Wanted fair, tall, slim bride," (Narasimhan, 2001). According to the editor, in an industry which is controlled by big businesses the dominating features in the selection of content are market forces and profit motives, not social ethics or gender equity. The absence of such classified advertisements in search of the perfect groom highlights the position of the woman as a commodity - often presented in the market as the best product. While accepting the fact that visibility of women in the media has increased manifold over the past few decades, Narasimhan (2001) pointed out that this does not necessarily mean the image presented is that of the empowered, emancipated woman. Instead, the focus is frequently on "feminine" interests and sexual appeals with subjects like beauty, hairstyles, childcare and apparel occupying maximum ground.

Liberation and empowerment have become equated – even in a women's magazine professing to be substantive – with sauciness or 'becoming more like the west' rather than addressing some of the harsh realities that affect the lives of millions of disadvantaged women. (Narasimhan, 2001, p.89)

John Nerone (2004) in his critique of "Four Theories of Press" mentions that "Media law tends to remain grounded in the traditions of its host countries. It doesn't travel well." (Nerone, p.26) It is important to note the prescience of that evaluation with reference to the current situation. The unified Vedic scriptural tenets promoted by early feminists for their own gains have been co-opted by the traditional patriarchal society to frame the Indian woman's identity and the seclusion of her issues over the past two

centuries. Around the mid-nineteenth century, the elite Hindu culture “emphasized the feminine roles of wife, mother and mistress of the household and the feminine virtues of chastity, selflessness, piety and faithfulness.... [and] connected these feminine roles and virtues with the seclusion of women within the home.... (Robinson, 1999, p. 15). This seclusion of the woman within the home has cultivated an ideology of suppressing all issues related to women and her identity within the home. This paper traces the origin of the print media’s silence about the sexual abuse of Nandigram women to the normative, hegemonic practices of the Indian patriarchal society where women are used as property, as laborers, as child-bearers, but very seldom accorded rights to their own determination, representation or vocalization. Consequently, a culture of silence permeates an abusive society.

Srimati Mukherjee’s (2005) review of a comparatively recent cinematic portrayal of a family crisis by internationally acclaimed filmmaker, Rituporno Ghosh, highlights an indigenized form of this suppression of knowledge and imposition of silence regarding sexual violence against women in Calcutta (or Kolkata), Bengal. In his film, “Dahan,” Ghosh shows the complex dynamics which evolves out of a gang molestation of a newly married woman, Romita, when she is saved, not by her husband Polash, but by passerby Srobona, a school teacher and a young woman of innate physical and moral courage. The pressures that Calcutta’s patriarchal society and their own families put on these two young women in an effort to keep them from speaking to the press, testifying in court or even verbalizing it among themselves, is representative of the prevalent worldview in that society. Inside a Bengali household and its “masculinist matrimonial structure,” the dominant sentiment is against publicizing of “private injuries.... Within such a structure

in general, the sexual violation of the housewife, if it is perceived as inflicting shame on the household, must remain private and not be vocalized” (Mukherjee, p. 206). The dynamics within Romita’s matrimonial family does not flow in her favor and its “movement towards silence illustrates that they prioritize their own ‘honor’ over her fractured sense of self,” (Mukherjee, p. 206).

This oppressive silence is a remarkable dimension of the print media articles in the coverage of the Nandigram violations. Had it not been for the women victims stepping out of their boundaries and speaking up about the inhuman sexual violence meted out to them, the print media would be amazingly successful in obliterating all traces of the rampage against women and in highlighting an ongoing drama between the Chief Minister and the Governor, themes of military strategies, civil war conditions and formal politicized bantering amongst government and political parties.

In his appraisal of “India’s elite press,” Deb (2005) mentions how editorial decisions in Indian English-language newspapers like *The Times of India*, are geared towards a “market-friendly approach” and how “the market, increasingly, determined the content,” (p.40) of many English language dailies. Such a market was definitely a product of the recent globalization process which researchers like Owen (2006) predict will make India one of the world’s dominant economies in this century. The resulting consumerist culture which globalization has bred is “a culture of material aspiration” (Deb, 2005, p.40) which is especially geared towards the tastes of an English-speaking public, the top tier of India’s society. This public, mainly comprised of the upper caste Hindu elite constitutes only top 4 or 5 percent of India’s more than billion-strong population, but has a huge role in determining the content of these English newspapers.

Their success and rising circulation also affects materials on the pages of vernacular newspapers like the Bengali ones studied in this paper, who often try to imitate the content structure of these English dailies but they are still not as driven by competitive market-oriented strategies. This could be the reason for the difference in coverage pattern of the Bengali newspapers in the case of the Nandigram massacre, which devote more space to actual stories of women who have been raped, violated, abducted compared to the English publications.

The English dailies would much rather not spoil the Hindu upper-caste reader's sense of well-being by presenting him with horror stories about rapes and abductions with his morning cup of tea. Deb (2005) talks about the "feelgood" (p.41) phenomenon – a sense of confidence and well-being – which is often the topmost consideration guiding many editorial decisions in the English newspapers. In their efforts to make business decisions, newspaper editors focus on the "feelgood" factor and make choices against stories that "diverge from a broad narrative such as 'feelgood'" (Deb, p.41). Beautiful film stars and models in skimpy clothes are all over the pages of these newspapers, portraying the full life of newly-rich, rising and shining India which upper and middle-class Indian's are so intent upon.

Neglecting public service and social value stories is not uncommon decisions because choices are often made by business strategists, not newsroom staff. According to Deb (2005), who talked to two senior journalists who used to work for *The Telegraph* and *The Times of India*, serious social and political issues are often nudged out of the prominent pages because they might spoil the reader's "feelgood." "Farmers, village girls, and boatmen – people who represent the two-thirds of the population living in rural

areas, and the one-third surviving below the poverty line – rarely appear in the pages of the English-language newspapers,” (Deb, 2005, p. 40). According to the trends noted by Deb (2005), this leads to a neglect of real issues and a disconnection with ground reality in India where pesticides are found in bottled water and communal riots flare up quite frequently, often killing thousands like the one in the western state of Gujarat in 2002. Even for publications which had a long history of serious political stories, the recent globalization dynamics has created pressures to fill columns with market-oriented material and ignore controversial stories.

The country’s English-language dailies are often plastered with pictures of Hollywood and Bollywood (Bombay film industry) stars and for newspapers like *The Telegraph*, that meets its goals of ever-rising circulation. There is no doubt such decisions were playing their parts in the coverage of the Nadigram women’s issues. Sexual violence against women cannot be a favorite topic with readers of Kolkata’s intellectual elite which prides itself as being at the leading edge of India’s progressive liberal enclave. They would be in deep denial about the stench in their backyard. On the other hand the Bengali Hindu majority, entrenched in its dominant ideology of deification of the sacred figure of Sita, would promptly dissociate itself from the regressive social practices of rural punishment through gross sexual violations, denouncing them as indicative of some indigenous practices which they found no identification with. The Nandigram women could never compete with the beauty queens like the Sushmita Sens, Aishwariya Rais and Yukta Mukhis (Parameswaran, 2004; Deb, 2005) for media space even on their best days, let alone when they have been marauded by rapists over days and weeks.

Stepping Out, Speaking Up: Nandigram Narratives

The videotaped *Udaan* narratives of the Nandigram women, delivered in the Bengali dialect of Midnapore, stand as strong reminders of the various tactics which the disempowered may adopt to negotiate in a hegemonic environment (de Certeau, 1988). The women break different levels of suppression and step out of family boundaries, assemble in a village square to narrate their experiences. These valiant acts of resistance are performed with the full knowledge that they may face further punitive actions for daring to speak up. Two articles in the Bengali newspaper, *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (November 20, 2007) describe how people who spoke up were being silenced and disciplined by the CPM cadres. Moreover, in this analysis, I did not notice any pattern of Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence among the Nandigram women. Perhaps they have nothing to lose, perhaps they are strong within the bounds of their resistance movement and do not fear isolation, perhaps they purposely violate the established norms like those explained in the theory of spiral of silence as part of resistance rituals (Hall, 1996). But they are vocal, determined and they definitely create a rupture in the historical conjuncture. They would not be contained within their boundaries: so they ventured outside their *lukshman rekha* in defiance of the hegemonic norms.

Within their narratives, the dynamics is complex and multi-dimensional. Very often age-old customs of silence about sexual abuse create impediments to their act of speaking out – which itself is an act of resistance against dominant powers. The dialectics of individual goal (of being silent about sexual abuse) as opposed to social goal (of speaking out against a socially reprehensible behavior) is apparent in many of the narratives. Also evident in their broken-syntax discourse are different shades of hesitation

about using words related to sex and sexual organs. However, older women are less hesitant and from their stories emerge the horror of the verbal and physical sexual violence thrown at them during the November carnage:

Nandigram woman 2: The policemen opened their chains, took out their penis and shoved it at the women... and barked at the women....come here...put it in your mouth. This will go up your.... (She ended with how several invectives with obscene sexual innuendos were used). (Nandigram Narratives videotaped by Udaan, 2007)

Their humiliation and excruciating agony was so intense that the emotion bridged the gap of the twelve thousand miles between Nandigram in India and Danville in Illinois. Their words jumped up from the celluloid screen to affect me with a deep sense of shame, outrage and sorrow. I often had no words to transmit their pain and the violence to the pages of my thesis. I felt inept – somehow failing them, betraying them in trying to tell their story. The Nandigram women were a different breed in their courage and commitment and I felt I had no right to assume the mantle of their storyteller. I also felt I did not have the language skills to express the vicious, obscene invectives which the assailants from CPM's militant groups had hurled at the women.

My telephone communication with my sister in November 2007 kept me going. I could not forget her trembling voice when she had called me late one night. "Why are you crying?" I had asked her. "I am scared," she had whispered. "I am here in Midnapore, it is so late and dark everywhere. I am lying on a mattress on the floor of a room in the back of a guesthouse near Tamruk. I can hear gunshots very close by. I have been trying to talk to women and people who have been hurt badly in Tuesday's violence, but I am afraid that if they catch up with me, they might rape me or kill me," she had sobbed. It was a stunning experience for me because I had almost never seen my sister cry or lose her poise and confidence. However, I did realize that courage had as much to do with acknowledging your fears, facing your fears, communicating your fears as with overcoming them. So, every time I lost heart about being able to communicate the urgency of the Nandigram women to my readers, I thought of my sister's immense courage in walking into the Nandigram area where CPM's militant squads patrolled the streets. I thank her silently now for bringing back the remarkable stories of the Nandigram women. I know I have overcome my squeamishness over the violence of the

sexual invectives, to find the right words from my repertoire of scholastic English and translate their broken, Midnapore dialect into English: turn it into text which other courageous women in other parts of the world could read and understand. It would help them to take a stand against such inhuman violations.

As this group narrated their shared experiences, they negotiated their own identity within the larger framing of a group identity, justified their shifting of loyalties and socio-political commitment and claimed authority as first hand observers. Their meaning construction often took novel turns, produced nascent energy from “the dialectic between individual and collective interests experienced by group members,” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 22) and contained frequent references to conventional patterns prevalent in that society.

Very few of the women use the actual Bengali term for rape or molestation and fewer women speak directly about being raped. But almost all of them talk of being eyewitnesses to mass-scale sexual violence against women. From the excerpts of their conversation, it is evident that they often grapple with the problematic of finding suitable words for their excruciating experiences as well as the violence of the language which had been thrown at them by their assailants. However, in being able to rise above this challenge, the women create significant inroads into the ongoing political discourse about the issue. The narrative of Kabita Das is significant in this sense:

Then they took me to where the stable is and stripped me, threw me to the ground, and started running their hands all over me, squeezing my breasts. At this, my husband came running to save me. When he came, they attacked him and told him if you come back near your wife one more time, we will kill your children. They held the sickle to my child's throat. At this my husband stood stunned with the two children in his arms. Then they attacked me, grasped me everywhere (gestures), and then they...[raped] me. (Kabita Das, Nandigram Narratives, videotaped by *Udaan*, 2007)

The narratives are representative of Stuart Hall's (1996) concept of resistance discourse in which the dominated and disempowered often create social ruptures in certain historical conjunctures as they engage in their discursive efforts (p. 294). To Hall (Fiske, 1996), ordinary people are never a silent, passive mass. Fiske (1996) discusses Hall's respect for the cultural resistance of the disempowered and subordinated and explores the distinctive way in which Hall framed the discourse of resistance through the concept of an "organic ideology" (p.219). In his recognition that access to discursive resources are just as restricted and inequitably distributed as access to economic resources, Hall explains how the subordinate never speak in films, literature or television, and are limited to devalued, disempowered discursive formations: "But they do speak, they do make their own meanings, for their own identities...", (Fiske, p.219). An organic ideology is one which rises from the shared material conditions of various formations of the people and in turn unifies them. It constructs for them a shared experience closely resembling a class consciousness or identity. It helps them understand the "collective situation of different social groups" (p.219) and consequently empowers the subordinate.

The Nandigram women speak up against male domination, against the ruling CPM party and against the current administration in Bengal. Many of them openly mention the Chief Minister's name clearly identifying the source of authority. They identify their shared experiences within the wider narrative, and their discursive practices vibrate with their shared experiences of oppression, resistance and empowerment even while they recognize their status as subordinated. They constantly battle with their social instincts which compel them to abide by the prevalent norms of silence, but they persist in communicating the many horrors they have encountered, often without clear understanding of why they are doing it except that they have to get the word out.

Citizen's report

An independent group of women, consisting of academics, non-governmental organization representatives and human rights activists visited the area after a Central Reserve Police Force restored some order and summed up the violence on women in the following words:

On November 12, when the CRPF finally entered Nandigram, the CRPF director S.I.S. Ahmed said, 'The private armies, comprised CPI(M) cadres, have already captured the area. It was only after that the CRPF personnel were allowed in. Now there is not much that the CRPF can do, except the maintain status quo and protect the private armies.' Finally, 'peace' reigned in Nandigram, hooded, bloodied and mauled, witness to the terror writ large on people's faces.

The CPI(M) *has resorted to rampant sexual violence*, using it as a weapon of power and intimidation to browbeat all the women of Nandigram who participated in large numbers in the movement against land acquisition. The

women were courageous, spirited, articulate, and sharply analytical about their reasons for resisting the state policy. Violence against women ranged from verbal abuse and sexual threats to sexual harassment under the pretext of conducting physical searches for concealed weapons, to gruesome acts of rape, gang rape and the shoving of rods/batons down women's vaginas. Women testified that their homes continued to be unsafe, as CPI(M) cadres were ordering women to send their men away, and keep their lamps lit at night to "welcome" the cadres. As a result, many women who had gone back to their homes promptly returned to the relief camp within a day, while others who had not left had stayed on in continued terror of more sexual violence. (An Independent Citizens' Report, Kolkata, 2008, p.4)

This paper finds striking similarity between information emerging from this citizens' report and the narratives of women victims from Nandigram which were videotaped within a few days of the massacre in November 2007. It is obvious that the authors of this report are conscious of the media silence over the issue of violence towards women. Unlike Malini Bhattacharya, they choose to place themselves closer to the Nandigram women and join in their resistance efforts to spread the word of the sexual violence. Their focus on bringing the narratives out and disseminating the *Independent Citizens' Report* may be seen as the courageous acts of modern-day Sitas who break out of their *lakhshman rekhas* and refuse to be silenced.

Silence on issues of sexuality and sexual violation is clearly the norm in current Indian society. However, ancient Indian art, architecture and literature all point towards a tradition of free and open discourse. The cave paintings in Khajuraho in central India or stone figurines in Konarak Temple in the eastern state of Orissa are a few among many erotic sculptures which are part of the Indian cultural heritage. Similarly, India's well-known magnum opus on sexual practices, *Kama Sutra*, has received wide recognition as an open discussion on many issues related to sexuality, eroticism and the religious and philosophical symbolism of sex as a sanctified path connecting man to the sacred act of procreation. Whereas a discussion on sexual violation travels somewhat on a different path from dialogues on sex and sexuality, it is nevertheless a multidimensional exploration of related issues, connected to the evolution of legal and social systems, political discourse, and ideological dimensions of civil life.

The absence of such discourse can partly be traced to the imposition of a Victorian morality on modern Indian society due to the influence of its British colonizers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Michel Foucault (1978) noted in *The History of Sexuality* that many eastern societies like India had "endowed themselves with an *ars erotica*," (p. 57) According to Foucault, in western societies on the other hand, "sex was constituted as a problem of truth" (p. 56) and he evaluates the prevalent discourses on human sexuality in the following way:

Their feeble content from the standpoint of elementary rationality, not to mention scientificity, earns them a place apart in the history of knowledge. They form a strangely muddled zone. Throughout the nineteenth century, sex seems to have been incorporated into two very distinct orders of knowledge: a biology of

reproduction, which developed continuously according to a general scientific normativity, and a medicine of sex conforming to quite different rules of formation. From one to the other, there was no real exchange, no reciprocal structuration; the role of the first with respect to the second was scarcely more than as a distant and quite fictitious guarantee: a blanket guarantee under cover of which moral obstacles, economic or political options, and traditional fears could be recast in a scientific-sounding vocabulary. It is as if a fundamental resistance blocked the development of a rationally formed discourse concerning human sex, its correlations, and its effects. A disparity of this sort would indicate that the aim of such a discourse was not to state the truth but to prevent its very emergence. (Foucault, 1978, p. 54-55)

This inclination toward barring of the truth about sex and related matters that Foucault calls a “stubborn will to nonknowledge” describes the Indian society’s position on sex or sexual violence with amazing accuracy.

However, Foucault (1978) also says that “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” (p. 95) Foucault argues that there is no existence outside power, there is no escaping it because the law provides an ultimate overarching umbrella of power, and consequently, all resistance is always formed inside power relationships. These resistance points, according to Foucault (1978), are everywhere in the power network and they are never concentrated in one great point of revolt, revolution or “Refusal”:

Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (pp. 95-96)

In the fractured, improvised unity of the Nandigram women, as they vie with each other to present their own stories, as they debate the precariousness of their positions - members of a defeated peasants' struggle, as they confront the possibility of giving up their principles of resistance in the face of the shattering sexual violence, one is reminded of Foucault's discussion of "mobile and transitory points of resistance" (p.96), which move around, produce cleavages in society, create regroupings, twist and reshape the individual herself.

As Foucault (1978) mentions, these resistances move with the many different points of a dense network of fluid power, and configure and re-configure themselves. Similarly, the Nandigram narratives find these women inventing and re-inventing themselves, adjusting their positions within the dominant structures and moving towards newer, more potent forms of discourse to resist oppression. They are often illiterate, and the high-brow political discourses of the English publications never enter their sphere of experience and vice versa. However, with the instinctive resilience of the dominated, they figure out that they are probably the last frontiers of the resistance movement and if they did not transmit the stories of oppression and violence, their struggle would be in vain. So they speak. They speak volubly, articulately, with heartrending details to whoever would give them an ear.

The near-absence of coverage on sexual violence in the English dailies compared to the relatively greater coverage of the vicious incidents in the Bengali newspapers indicates such minor points of resistance even within the news media hierarchy. The English newspapers cater not only to India's "feelgood" public but also an outside world. The vernacular publications cater to a local public, fall a little outside the fringes of the power hierarchy and often have less to lose in terms of business interests and therefore enjoy a greater freedom to express ground reality. This slight distinction between the positions of the vernacular newspapers and the English ones may be further examined in the light of the argument presented by Sosale (2005) in which she proposes that often "the media themselves constitute a stake in identity struggles....One of the noteworthy characteristics of these critical moments is their creation of distinct identities for news media marking global divisions with a territorially grounded national flavour or a more floating, regional or diasporic, ethnic flavour" (p.310). In the case of the Nandigram massacre, the English dailies were obviously adopting national positions and catering to a national and even global readership whereas the Bengali newspapers had the freedom to be more open because they were catering to a regionally secluded, ethnic public.

It is as if none of the English-language journalists wanted to put words to sexual violence in the language which could be accessed and assessed by rest of the country and the world. Even though they covered prominent political figures (prolific in their rhetoric) and opinion leaders and intellectuals flaunting stylized, symbolic protests through meetings, picketing, street corners and processions, the paucity of reports on sexual violence speaks poorly of the verity of the print media coverage. The media's silence on this issue forms an important dimension of this paper's thesis. It might be

useful to examine this pattern in greater detail in future studies. At this juncture, the study shows clearly that sexual violence is used against Indian women but information about this human rights abuse is frequently ignored by the media and the heinous crimes perpetrated against women are lost in a black veil of silence. It is left up to the novel discursive practices of the disempowered to lift that veil.

Conclusion

Hegemony has been defined by critical cultural studies scholars like Stuart Hall (1996) as the process by which the domination of the powerful elite is perpetuated over the powerless; the process of creating and maintaining consensus; of coordinating interests. Grossberg (1996) outlines Hall's position on hegemony in terms of his views on mass media and cultural production where it is tied to assimilation of a maximum number of people into broadly-structured relations of cultural consumption. Hall's position emphasizes the presence of hegemony in areas of conjunctural struggle created by conditions of capitalism, mass communication and culture. In this, the hegemonic agendas are not necessarily aimed at consensus or compulsion but rather at containment (p. 162). This examination of society's and the print media's response to rampant sexual violence against the Indian women from Nandigram is an excellent example of such containment. Since the dominant Indian ideology normalizes the containment of the Indian woman within the boundaries of the home, her pains, travails and public humiliations also get trapped within those boundaries away from the gleam of truth.

However, the Nandigram women break this indigenous spiral of silence with their narratives. The narratives and storytelling they participate in initiate a culture of resistance and their speaking up creates a social rupture (Hall, 1996) which might soon be

able to do what decades of legal procedures could not – counterbalance the patriarchal standards which perpetuate media silence and set the wheels of an open public discourse in motion.

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Appendix A

Narratives of Violence and Abuse (Women from all over the state of West Bengal)

KAKOLI GHOSH DASTIDAR: POLITICAL ACTIVIST (TRINAMOOL CONGRESS)

With a complete disregard to the human rights of women in the state of West Bengal, which is actually under Marxist regime for the last 30 years, women are being raped, molested, accosted, killed in the cities and rural areas - by the active political members of the Communist Party of India, owing their allegiance to the Marxist sector. Women cannot live peacefully within their houses: they have to face domestic violence. And in such instances, this domestic violence against women is being supported by the leaders of the communist party ruling here. The latest example being a young girl aged 22 who was throttled to death by her mother-in-law and brother-in-law, both members of the communist party in Agarpara. After that, a lady police inspector, who was 7 months pregnant, was kicked on the stomach by her brother-in-law who is an active leader in the area of Kasba. Such instances are rampant in Bengal. You don't-have-to-go far away looking for them, they come looking for you, for help to any woman who cares to listen to them in the state of West Bengal. Here is such a girl, a young girl who has been raped in broad daylight. She and her mother will relate how the incident took place.

RENUBALA PAL (Minor daughter of Montu Pal and Rekha Pal, raped by neighbor while
parents were away at work)

Rekha: We went to work.....We came to know at night.

RENU: My parents were not at home. I was alone. My little brother had gone out to play. He forced me and closed the door and did this stuff to me. SILENCE. Moloy Pal, Moloy Pal. His father's name is Suadarshan Pal. They took me to the police station but nobody helped us.

MOTHER: There is no-one to help us. Her father is not very smart. This is our only daughter and he has lost his mind in this. We have a small child and we do not have anyone else to help in the housework, this is our eldest daughter. We have one son, and one daughter. There is no-one to help us.

FIROZA BEGUM (Three minor daughters missing, possibly trafficked)

Firoza Begum: My name is Firoza Begum. From Kolaghat. I have three daughters. On November 24, they left home. After that I kept waiting but they did not return.

Sabina Yasmin 17, Moushum Begum 15, Meher Jaan 13. We made police diary for missing people but the police did not pay any attention. Then we looked around at home and found a notebook and in it we found a few phone numbers. Four phone numbers. The numbers belonged to the drivers of some local confectioners. We went to the cops with the numbers but they paid no heed to us. Then, the culprit himself went and surrendered to the police. The driver, Montu Das went to the police and said that their daughter, Sabina Yasmin, called me on the phone and I picked them up and left them near Hotel Bharati. After that, I do not know anything.

The police told us: Go, go where the women sell their bodies, you will find your daughters there. Saying that, they neglected the case, and we still have not found our daughters.

SHYAM SUNDAR MAITI

(Father of Surabhi Maiti from west Medinipore District, Pingla police station, area 3 in West Bengal. He talks about how his daughter, 14-year old Surabhi Maiti, was kidnapped from home, raped and killed by two men.)

On 31 August at around 7 p.m. he was working in the fields when they enticed his wife out of the house and two men, Barun Maiti and Tapash Garai, both CPM supporters, kidnapped his 14-

year old daughter. When he came to know that Surabhi was missing around 7.30 in the evening, he looked everywhere but could not find her.

He describes how they took Surabhi to the swamp area and severely tortured her, molested her and finally killed her and threw her body in the water. He looked all night, and finally found her with the help of his neighbors at 5 a.m. in the morning. The police came took the body.

Shyam Sundar says here: "I am here to protest. I cannot dream of how these men from CPM could do something like this. She was just a small girl, I cannot imagine how they could rape her, torture and kill her. I know they are in police custody but I have not heard from the police.

However, I am hearing from CPM party organizations that they are collecting funds so that they could get the bail money together for the two culprits.

They have also appealed to different local and national politicians so that they get bail.

I want them punished severely, they should not be set free, I want them punished, I am appealing so that they do not escape penalty, and they never get to destroy other young girls from other families.

Political activist: My name is Gour Hari Garai. I am a political activist, president of the local Trinamool Congress unit fro Pingla and I am here to protest about the rape and death of this minor school girl. Surabhi, a student of ninth grade. She was raped and killed by CPM men. We, from the Trinamool Congress have petitioned with the protest and we demand that the culprits must be given the death penalty so that an example is created and people are deterred from raping, killing and destroying other young lives .

APPENDIX B

Report on present condition of the people of Nandigram

By Dr. Kakali Ghosh Dastidar from Udaan Medical Team

Visit by Mahila Medical Team on 5th - 7th April, 2007

Areas covered - Soudkhali
Garchakraberia
Kalicharanpur
Gokulnagar
Sonachura Jalpai
7 No. Jalpai
Adhikari Para
Tekhali Bazar

As per discursion with the people 97% of the population is with TMC and are mentally strong and willing to prevent CPIM. Some women are scared.

From survey it appears hundreds of women were molested on 14.3.2007 by people wearing police uniform with red band on head and right wrist. They were wearing chappals. These people came with the police and caught hold of young school girls, young women specially good looking and carried them on their shoulders and put them in trucks. They caught women by their breasts and pulled, gouged out areas of breasts and also publicly removed their saris and blouses. They pushed lathis or the nozzle of gun into vagina and caused Grievous hurt. Many of the women have not reported it to anybody due to shame.

Nearly 300 women were raped.

Names of women who agreed to having being raped.

Kajal Majhi	Gokulnagar
Gouri Pradhan	do
Archana Das Adhikari	do
Sabitri Das Adhikari	do
Sumitra Das Adhikari	do
Srabanti Das Adhikari	do
Arati Rani Das	do
Sima Bizli	do
Chhabi Pramanik	do
Anjali Mondal	do
Pushpa Mondal	do
Angurbala Das	do
Kabita Das	do
Radharani Ari	do

... by some of the injured :-

1) SANDHA RANI SINGHA (now admitted in Tamluk Hospital) – “I myself was beaten by lathi but more than thousand women were picked up in van and taken away among whom wife of Panchanan Das was recognized by me. More than one thousand five hundred people were thrown into the sea.”

2) SANDHA DHYAPUR (now admitted in Tamluk Hospital) – “I have seen more than thousand people have died”.

3) CHHABI MONDAL, now admitted in Tamluk Hospital – She is in a psychologically disturb mental state. “I am witness to a small child whose head was chopped off. The child came running to me in school uniform and took shelter under my sari pallu. I don't know whose child it was but they caught by this hair and cut his throat.”

4) SHOVA RANI SINGH from Soudkhali (now admitted in Tamluk Hospital) – “I can't sleep at night, I shout and wake up remembering all the beautiful girls of Sonachura High School and young women carried away on shoulders. **I know dead bodies are in the house of Dijen Roy, the CPIM leader of Bhangaberia. Very bad stench of rotting human flesh is coming out from that house.** A child ran to me for protection shouting “ঠাকুমা বাঁচাও” but I am a weak old women. I could not save the child. I pulled but the men like police also pulled and took him away and before my eyes chopped off his head.”

5) SALEMA BIBI – “I can't tell you what they have done but vaginal bleeding has not stopped.”

6) ANUVA KHARA – “Three people died on bullet injury in front of my eyes. More than hundred fifty children had their throat cut and thrown into pond. They were later picked up in a trolley.”

7) ABINASH MONDAL, Sonachura – “I have seen people's throat being cut”

Total list of people admitted in Tamluk Hospital on 14th and 15th of March.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Relative</u>	<u>Address</u>	<u>Injury</u>
1) Rathikanta Das	s/o Surendra	7 no Jalpai	Bullet injury
2) Subrangshu Patra	s/o Subhash	Sonachura	
3) Sheik Mojahar	s/o sheik Rahaman	7no Jalpai	
4) Gopal Das	s/o late Mitrunjay	Sonachura	Bullet injury
5) Niranjan Das	s/o Radha Krishna	Sonachura	
6) Bolai Ari	s/o Benimadhav	Soudkhali	
7) Lakshmikanta Gyan	s/o Ramhari	Sonachura	
8) Subodh Das	s/o Gangadhar	Gangra	Bullet injury
9) Parikkhit Dhara	s/o Bhupati	Soudkhali	
10) Sahadev Jana	s/o Paresh	7 no. Jalpai	

11) Sheik Mosaraf	s/o Sheik Kaser	7no. Jalpai	
12) Ashok Mondal	s/o Jagadish	Sonachura	Head injury and bullet
13) Prajapati Hazra	s/o Haripada	Soudkhali	
14) Nirmal Mondal	s/o Bankim	Sonachura	Scalpel
15) Srimanta Mondal	s/o Jaydev	Gokul Nagar	Bullet injury
16) Gopal Giri	s/o Banamali	Sonachura	
17) Bimalendu Kajli	s/o Bhagyadhar	Sonachura	
18) Kalipada Garu	s/o Ajit	Soudkhali	
19) Gobinda Paik	s/o Jagadish	Sonachura	
20) Niranjana Kar	s/o Manmotha	do	
21) Tapan Jana	s/o Anukul	7no Jalpai	
22) Sheik Fosi Alam	s/o Sheik Abdul	do	Bullet injury
23) Monoranjan Giri	s/o Shrinivas	Sonachura	Broken hand
24) Abinash Mondal	s/o Gorachand	Gangra	
25) Modan Mondal	s/o Iswar Ramhari	Soudkhali	
26) Ramkrishna Maity	s/o Chintamani	7 no Jalpai	rubber bullet head injury
27) Raghunath Dolui	s/o Kanailal	Soudkhali	Eye injury
28) Golam Hussain	s/o Sheik Jabbar	Soudkhali Jalpai	Head injury
29) Shyamali Mohata	w/o Gabinda	Sonachura	
30) Radha Rani Ari	w/o Pratam	Gokul Nagar	raped
31) Gouri Pradhan	w/o Jaydev	Gokul Nagar	raped
32) Kajal Majhi	w/o Bikas	Kalicharan pur	raped
33) Gitanjali Bijli	w/o Alanga	Gokul nagar	
34) Anuva Khara	w/o Rashbehari	Sonachura -	bullet injury serious condition
35) Kalpana Jana	w/o Nandalal	Kalicharan pur	eye injury
36) Kabita Jana	w/o Rashbehari	Kalicharan pur	hand injury
37) Renuka Kar	w/o Syamapada	do Hand injury	discharged now in nursing home
38) Arati Maity	w/o Tapan	do	
39) Shyamali Manna	w/o Sushanta	7 no Jalpai	
40) Gouri Mondol	w/o Tarun	Sonachura	
41) Tapashi Manna	w/o gurupada	7 no jalpai	
42) Sankari Gol	w/o Monoranjan	Sonachura	leg injury bullet
43) Kanak lata Das	w/o Rabin	Soudkhali	
44) Sita Maity	w/o Prabhat	Sonachura	
45) Lila bala Das	w/o Chittaranjan	7no Jalpai	
46) Rahiman Bibi	w/o Sheik Jamsed	Gar chakrabela	
47) Satyabala Mondal	w/o Anadi	Soudkhali	
48) Lata Mondal	w/o Swapan	Gokul Nagar	leg injury
49) Pranati Maity	w/o Praneswar	Kesab pur	collar bone
50) Kajal Ghoroi	w/o Ratan	7 no Jalpai	
51) Shankari Majhi	w/o Bhanupada	Gokul nagar	
52) Kabita Das Adhikary	w/o Subal	do	leg injury operation steel pat
53) Laxmi rani Roy	w/o Debu	Sonachura	bullet injury

54) Kusum Mondal	w/o Sarbeswar	Gangra	
55) Lakshmi rani Barman	w/o Anil	7 no Jalpai	
56) Bidyut Basanta	w/o Mahadev	Sonachura	
57) Gouri Udhyasi	w/o Mantu	Gangra	
58) Radharani Pakhira	w/o Kishan	7 no. Jalpai	
59) Namita Das	w/o Paresh	Bar kesabpur	
60) Jamuna Das	w/o lakhikanta	Gokulnagar	
61) Kabita Das Adhikary	w/o Salil	do	
62) Rahima Bibi	w/o Golam Hossain	Soudkhali	
63) Salma Bibi	w/o Fobrul	Gorchakraber	
64) Anima Jana	w/o Prasanta	Soudkhali	
65) Sovarani Singha	w/o Gorachand	Grangra	
66) Paribala Thapar	w/o Ranjit	Soudkhali	
67) Sandhya rani Singha	w/o Ramkrishna	do	
68) Chhabi rani Mondal	w/o Badal	do	
69) Sandhya rani Thapar	w/o Paresh	do	
70) Angur bala Doloi	w/o late Makhan	do	
71) Sailabala Das	w/o Nandalal	Gokulnagar	
72) Sarisha Bibi	w/o Sheik Monirul	7 no. Jalpai	
73) Chandan Kr. Das	s/o Prafulla	Kalicharan pur	hand injury
74) Ajit Jana	s/o late Jagadish	do	tear gas eye injury
75) Mantu Mondal			Bullet injury
76) Sukumar Das			Bullet injury

Admitted on 5.4.2007 – kidnapped and beaten severely by CPIM in the Khejuri camp by **Jhantu Giri, Rabin Giri, Pratap Show, Gour Das, Rabiul of CPIM**

- 1) Baleswar Das, from Tekhali
- 2) Sahadev Hazra, from Khejuri
- 3) Kanailal Maity
- 4) Goberdhan Das – Left ear torn away - treated at Kamardah Hospital
- 5) Pashupati Das – treated at Kamardah Hospital

14 men and 9 women were taken to Janca Hospital on 14.3.2007 for treatment after firing. From there they were loaded in a van and referred to Tamluk Hospital. As Ashoke Mondol (12) stated that on their way some people turned the van and told them that they will be butchered after taking back to the sector camp. He gives statement that many such injured people were thus butchered in the CPIM camps. However, this group with him he says were saved when one police officer intervened and sent them to Tamluk Hospital.

Nandigram Hospital –

Sheik Sultan ankle (loss of job as tailor)	s/o Sheik Nousad	Bhangabera	Bullet injury – right
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SSKM Hospital

Rashbehari Khara	s/o		Bullet injury – trunk
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22 others admitted

List of dead on 6.1.2007 – Bhangaberia

- 1) Bharat Mondal
- 2) Biswajit Maity
- 3) Sheik Salim

Incomplete list of dead on 14.3.2007

Anchal 6 – Kesabpur

- 1) Uttam Kr. Pal (Sambhu)
 - 2) Panchanan Das
- 9 males – not identified
2 females – not identified

Anchal 9

- 1) Sheik Indadul Islam – Jadubarichak
- 2) Basanti Kar – Kalicharanpur
- 3) Badal Mondal – 7 No. Jalpai
- 4) Gobinda Das – 7 No. Jalpai
- 5) Imadul Khan – 7 No. Jalpai
- 6) Supriya Jana – Sonachura

Anchal 10

- 1) Subrata Samanta – Body not found, but eye witnesses have seen him dead being carried away by the murderer
- 2) Badal Mondal - s/o Goberdhan Mondal
- 3) Joydev Das – Sonachura
- 4) Rakhali Giri – Sonachura
- 5) Ratan Das – Gangra
- 6) Pranab Mondal
- 7) Proloy Giri – Soudkhali

others dead were not identified or were carried away in trucks which were brought by the police loaded with sand and stone chips.

Out of the approximately 700 patients seen 98 patients had bullet scratch injury now infected with loss of function of the area. These wounds as per their witness were fired from one shorter.

39 have got permanent eye damage.

Admitted in Tamruk as on 8.4.2007

- 1) Satyabala Mondal
- 2) Sandharani Singha
- 3) Angoorbala Dolui
- 4) Kabita Das Adhikary
- 5) Chhabi Mondal
- 6) Sandha dyapar
- 7) Anuva Khara
- 8) Sovarani Singha
- 9) Anima Jana
- 10) Salema Bibi
- 11) Sailabala Das
- 12) Sheik Fosi Alam
- 13) Abinash Mondal
- 14) Srimanta Mondal
- 15) Ashok Mondal
- 16) Subodh Das
- 17) Radhunath Doloi
- 18) Sheik Gulam Hossain
- 19) Rathikanta Gyan
- 20) Sheik M Alam

The others admitted on 14.3.2007 have some been transferred to SSKM but mostly discharged under instruction of Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharjee to avoid legal action under IPC 320 causing Grievous Hurt.

None of the hospitals of the district around Nandigram including Maheshpur, Tomruk ect. are equipped with blood, antibiotic, radiology operation theater and proper ophthalmology deterrent to take care of these patients. No ambulances are available on demand.

