

MANALI DESAI

GENDERED VIOLENCE AND INDIA'S BODY POLITIC

THE PARADOX OF RAPE is that it has a long history and occurs across all countries, yet its meaning can best be grasped through an analysis of specific social, cultural and political environments. Feminist writing on citizenship and the state has long noted the relevance of women's bodies as reproducers of the nation; it is equally important to think about the uses of the sexed body in a political context. A consideration of gendered violence as part of a continuum of embodied assertions of power can not only tell us how masculine supremacy is perpetuated through tolerated repertoires of behaviour, but also help us to understand how forms of class, kinship and ethnic domination are secured—and what happens when they are disrupted. Rape, Joanna Bourke has observed, is a form of social performance, the ritualized violation of another sexed body.¹ This is no less true for such apparently depoliticized though grievous forms of violence as the now infamous gang rape of Jyoti Singh, a young woman returning from a night out in New Delhi in December 2012.

In a country where complacency about sexual assault has been the norm, the uproar that followed suggested that an unspoken limit had been crossed. Mass protests across India expressed a very political and public anger with the institutional apathy and impunity of the establishment. The mobilization of feminist groups and youth during this episode succeeded in generating a momentum for change, not least by challenging the stigma associated with reporting rape. After 2012, reported rape increased, although that appears to have reached a plateau. A raft of laws, drafted in consultation with feminist lawyers and women's groups, has expanded the definition of rape to include other

forms of violence and harassment, such as stalking and acid-throwing. Yet the best law in the world cannot solve the problem without adequate institutional and cultural reform. In a country where, it is said, many women experience a ‘continuum of violence . . . from the womb to the tomb’, evidence of the systemic character of assaults ‘widely tolerated by the state and community’ suggests we need an understanding of the institutional conditions that normalize this violence.² What locations do women’s bodies occupy within India’s systems of caste, kinship and state domination? How have neoliberalization and consumerism transformed older practices of sexual coercion and patriarchal norms? Given the highly ideological nature of Western representations of sexual violence in the Global South, what might we learn by placing India in a comparative frame?

A long history

Reflection on gendered violence in India reveals a constant pattern of impunity and silence, forged within the broader political economy of hierarchy and devaluation. Gang rape is but one of many forms of assault routinely committed against women in India, including domestic and dowry-related violence, sex-selective abortion, stalking and street harassment—euphemistically known as ‘Eve teasing’—and military or custodial rape. These public and private mechanisms of control largely operate with impunity, relying on notions of honour and shame to conceal the actual extent of the harm. In all too many cases, rape victims go on to commit suicide. The birth of the modern Republic of India, through Partition and Independence in 1947, was itself accompanied by widespread gang rape and the abduction of women, later cloaked in secrecy. It has taken painstaking work by feminist historians to excavate and expose the extent to which sexual violence was involved in the very formation of the two nations, India and Pakistan.³ It is mainly through oral history and literature, notably the compelling stories of Saadat Hasan Manto, that we can see how national honour in the new-born states was tied to the desecration of women’s bodies and the ensuing

¹ Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, London 2007, p. 6.

² Rashida Manjoo, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences*, United Nations 2015.

³ Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices From the Partition of India*, Durham, NC 2000.

narratives of rescue from the enemy. Rape myths in India still pitch the lascivious Muslim male against the hapless Hindus, who must defend their women by rooting out the aggressor.

Since 1947, sexual violence against minority and lower-caste women has increasingly been used to consolidate cross-caste Hindu alliances. In the pogrom led by the ruling Hindutva right in Gujarat in 2002, large numbers of Muslim women were gang-raped, as were many hundreds in the Mumbai pogroms fomented by the nativist Shiv Sena in 1992–93.⁴ In neither case has a single perpetrator been charged with sexual crimes. Paul Brass has argued that violence in South Asian communal conflict is a type of performance, a routinized repertoire of politics in which all parties are complicit, and that this is prepared, rehearsed and perpetrated by well-organized agents constituting an ‘institutionalized riot machine’.⁵ While his account fails to consider the increasing use of gendered assault in communal conflict, it is clear that rapes formed part of this repertoire of violence in Gujarat and Mumbai, designed to terrify and humiliate Muslims at a time when the BJP’s electoral victory hung in the balance. In this sense, Muslim women’s bodies were the material and symbolic terrain on which a hegemonic cross-caste Hindutva identity was affirmed.

Gang rape has also been used as an intermittent but powerful tactic of social control in a changing political landscape where lower castes have mobilized against historic caste discrimination. The subordination of mainly Dalit (former Untouchable) cultivators and landless labourers has historically been achieved through everyday forms of intimidation and control. The 1980s were characterized by intense armed struggle between upper castes and Dalits, then organized in the radical Naxalite movement; gang rape was often a punishment for Dalit resistance. Since then, the agrarian structure in northern and western India has changed, partly as a result of the Green Revolution, which saw the system of landlordism that had long underpinned wheat cultivation partially replaced by a new agrarian elite that emerged from the historically subordinate

⁴ Human Rights Watch, *We Have No Orders to Save You: State Participation and Complicity in Communal Violence in Gujarat*, 2002; Human Rights Watch, *India: Communal Violence and the Denial of Justice*, 1996.

⁵ Paul Brass, *The Production of Hindu–Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, Seattle 2004.

(but not Untouchable) ‘Other Backward Classes’. In recent reports of sexual violence, it is OBC men who have been charged with raping Dalit women. In March 2014, for example, four Dalit girls were abducted and gang-raped by Jat men in the state of Haryana (Jats are considered upper-caste but have been agitating for inclusion in the list of OBCs to gain access to quotas in government jobs and education).⁶ This was one of several cases of gang rape reported from Haryana in 2014, each revealing a degree of collusion between caste groups, village headmen and the police. In an earlier case in the state of Maharashtra, a Dalit family in the village of Khairlanji was subjected to a long campaign of intimidation and harassment by OBC families intent on seizing control of their land. In September 2001, a large OBC group that included both men and women, armed with sticks, axes, chains and iron rods, attacked the household. The men were beaten to death, while the women were gang-raped and then killed. This is one of many examples of the almost ritualistic gendered violence that characterizes land grabs and reactions to the perceived hubris of Dalit families when they resist.

This continuum of violence is indeed reproduced, even as women potentially win new freedoms in the context of India’s ongoing development. The Delhi gang rape in 2012 and other similar assaults since then testify to the levels of sexual violence in India’s cities, where the contradictions of unbridled masculinity and class polarization come under explosive pressure. Yet such evidence can quickly become the stuff of political myth-making. ‘Rapes occur in India, not Bharat’, proclaimed Mohan Bhagwat, leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the BJP’s militant wing.⁷ Bharat, the Hindi name for the country, evokes an idealized village India. Yet the data, however unreliable, shows one unambiguous pattern: violence against women is still primarily rural. This in part reflects the fact that India’s rate of urbanization has been slower than, for example, China’s or Brazil’s: 68 per cent of India’s population still live in rural areas, compared with 49 per cent in China and only 15 per cent in Brazil. Myths about dangerous cities, which may to some extent represent anxieties about Westernization, also enable the surveillance of women and curtailment of their freedoms—and help to place the burden of responsibility on women themselves. The material accoutrements of the modern self in neoliberalizing India—jeans and

⁶ Aradhna Wal, ‘Reliving a nightmare’, *The Hindu*, 17 May 2014.

⁷ ‘Rapes Occur in India, not Bharat: RSS Supremo Bhagat’, *Times of India*, 4 January 2013.

mobile phones—have been cited as the cause of crimes against women.⁸ These views are most frequently proclaimed by the Hindu Right and patriarchal caste elders in village *panchayats*, who pit the authenticity of rural India against a corrupt, urban India in moral decline.⁹ The evidence in fact suggests that much violence against Indian women is rooted in rural caste dynamics, especially the age-old struggle for land and control of lower-caste labour. Once normalized, however, the cultural representations arising from such stark and coercive inequality can reproduce themselves freely, with the circulation of images and people—the last two decades have seen unprecedented, largely male migration within India—making it increasingly difficult to think of sexual violence in territorially bounded ways.

Dynamics of son preference

All four attackers in the Delhi gang rape came from the northern states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, or Rajasthan in the west, which have the worst record for rape and sexual assault among Indian states. Historically, gendered violence has been most prevalent in these regions, with their starkly unequal caste and landholding structures, low rates of female labour-force participation and correspondingly low valuation of girls and women. Forming part of the ‘Bermuda Triangle’ of low female-to-male sex ratios and high levels of gender disparity, these states have exemplified the adverse gender norms in the wheat-producing north, compared with the rice-growing south. Research through the decades has shown a sharp distinction between the northern ‘patriarchal zones’—characterized by rigid caste hierarchies, unequal landholding and a history of state–landlord collusion—and the southern states, where women play an important role in rice cultivation, meaning that a higher value is set on their labour and gender norms are less misogynistic.

The comparison between kinship structures and gender relations north and south has been much discussed since the 1980s.¹⁰ Son preference

⁸ A caste council recently banned mobile phones for girls under the age of eighteen, citing their use in forming relationships with boys and ‘inviting’ crimes against them: *Times of India*, 19 February 2016.

⁹ International Human Rights Clinic, UC Berkeley, School of Law, *Access to Justice for Women: India’s Response to Sexual Violence and Conflict in Upheaval*, October 2015.

¹⁰ This divide was much discussed after Barbara Miller’s *The Endangered Sex: Neglect of Female Children in Rural North India*, Oxford 1981.

is at the core of kinship systems in the north. This has traditionally been explained by the underlying political economy which values men's work while devaluing women's productive labour. Rural female labour-force participation in India has been declining since the 1990s, partly because mechanization and the growth of manufacturing have replaced the type of labour that women used to perform.¹¹ In this context the availability of ultrasound technology at family-planning clinics, making it possible to determine the gender of a foetus before opting for abortion, has had dire effects on the sex ratio. Since Amartya Sen's ground-breaking study of India's 'missing women' appeared in 1990, there is evidence that sex ratios have been falling at an even faster rate.¹² In 2011, India's sex ratio at birth was the second lowest among Asian countries, at 944 women per 1,000 men, with China the lowest at 926.¹³ Many studies have related this to norms prevailing across the 'classic belt of patriarchy', including North Africa and the Middle East, where gender relations are broadly characterized by patrilineal descent and inheritance, control of mobility for women in the public realm and low levels of female labour-force participation. However, sex ratios are actually more favourable—and fertility levels higher—in the Middle East and North Africa; nor does this approach explain why Indian sex ratios have been *declining* over time, or why they seem to be worsening in specific districts. These cases seem to call for a combination of structural and regionally specific explanations. The common factors emerging from localized studies suggest that the changing socio-economic circumstances of specific castes—caused by shifts in agriculture, land-tenure patterns and the value of female labour, combined with escalating dowry demands—have been primarily to blame for sex selection.¹⁴

¹¹ N. V. Varghese, 'Women and Work: An Examination of the Female Marginalization Thesis in the Indian Context', *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1991. There is, of course, variation in this pattern. In some areas of Haryana, for example, women continue to do wage labour while men tend their own land. But women are paid less than men for their labour, which reinforces their subordinate position even when they are working outside the home.

¹² Amartya Sen, 'More than 100 Million Women Are Missing', *New York Review of Books*, 20 December 1990.

¹³ Census of India, Provisional Results 'Gender Composition', 2011, censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results. In China, female labour force participation (FLFP) has been consistently higher than in India at around 64 per cent. This anomaly between high FLFP and low sex ratio can be partly explained by the one-child policy, which has led to a much stricter application of son preference.

¹⁴ UN Women, *Sex Ratios and Gender Biased Sex Selection: History, Debates and Future Directions*, New Delhi 2014.

'Girl aversion' is rooted in the calculus of the market: young brides are now expected to be more educated than before, requiring the expense of school fees; yet the falling demand for female labour, especially in white-collar and public-sector jobs, provides few opportunities for them to make good on this investment. Dowry demands have also increased with the cross-class rise in consumerism. For parents, a girl is a burden and a poor investment.¹⁵ It is from this 'son preference' that other consequences for gender hierarchies flow, from female infanticide to poor nutrition for girls, worse healthcare and less schooling. Again, some indicators show a sharp north–south distinction, which may reflect historical, long-term differences—for instance, the female literacy rate in Kerala is 92 per cent, compared to 51 per cent for women in Bihar. There are far more 'missing women' in the north: according to the 2011 Census of India, in Uttar Pradesh there are 858 women to every 1,000 men, a figure that has worsened over the past two decades, while Kerala has a sex ratio of 1,058 women to every 1,000 men.

However, the historically established north–south contrast may be shifting, as emerging economic inequalities no longer conform to state boundaries; urban areas have in general become significantly richer, while huge disparities have emerged in rural India, and there are consequently sharp intra-state disparities in growth and inequality levels. This means that gender hierarchies are now following patterns of class and caste stratification, with growing consumerism and aspiration fuelling dowry-related violence and possibly the reinforcement of intra-household gender power. Feminist scholars and activists in India have documented the diffusion of son preference to communities, classes and castes elsewhere in the country, including southern India, so girl aversion is no longer merely a 'northern problem'.¹⁶ Indeed, reports suggest that sex selection began in urban India—some of the worst child sex ratios are in cities—though the practice has now spread to many rural districts, where it tends to be more closely studied. If this is true, some of the earlier explanations of the patriarchal practices centred on north–south distinctions and types of agriculture may need to be modified in light of the circulation of technologies, and the complex transformations in local economies under neoliberalization that are giving rise to new caste and class hierarchies.

¹⁵ UN Women, *Sex Ratios*, p. 26.

¹⁶ UN Women, *Sex Ratios*, p. 30.

The surplus of men generated through practices of girl aversion is a demographic trend in India, as it is in China, both of which are estimated to see about 30 million surplus men in twenty years' time.¹⁷ Some researchers have argued that males in these 'bare-branch' societies will 'seek satisfaction through vice and violence'; increased aggression to capture resources in a competitive environment will become the norm.¹⁸ 'An entire class of potentially angry, frustrated, relatively poor and uneducated single men can mean serious threats to societal stability, if this group builds a class identity that feels antagonized by society as a whole', as one recent writer put it.¹⁹ The rise of 'bachelor nations' is portrayed as a new security threat: the CIA's World Factbook collects sex-ratio data by country, on the assumption that disproportions 'may cause unrest among young adult males who are unable to find partners'.²⁰ In the futuristic film *Matrubhoomi: A Nation Without Women*, the dire effects of female infanticide are represented in all-male villages.

There is a streak of catastrophism in many bare-branch predictions. But the case of Bangladesh—a Muslim country—shows that concerted action and commitment can change what appears to be an irreversible trend. Bangladesh used to share kinship patterns with the north-Indian patriarchal belt, but since the 1990s the statistics show a steady decline in the discrimination against girls in health and nutrition, with consequently better implications for under-five mortality. Indeed, there is now little evidence of sex-selective abortion or daughter aversion there. Scholars have suggested that this surprising pattern springs from the steady rise in economic growth in the country during the 1990s, which together with the lowering of fertility and rising women's education, has increased the value placed on daughters.²¹ But the key factor seems to be the rise in female labour-force participation, which by 2014 was around 58 per cent, above the world average of around 50 per cent and double that of India, with only 27 per cent.²² The participation of women in

¹⁷ Andrea Den Boer and Valerie Hudson, 'A Surplus of Men, A Deficit of Peace', *International Security*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2002.

¹⁸ Den Boer and Hudson, 'A Surplus of Men, A Deficit of Peace'.

¹⁹ Kevin Lee, 'China's Problem of Too Many Single Men', *Forbes*, 13 May 2011.

²⁰ CIA World Factbook 2016.

²¹ Naila Kabeer, Lopita Huq and Mahmud Simeen, 'Diverging Stories of "Missing Women" in South Asia: Is Son Preference Weakening in Bangladesh?', *Feminist Economics*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2014.

²² See 'Labour force participation rate, female (% of female population aged 15+) (modeled ILO estimate)', World Bank website.

state employment, NGO micro-credit programmes and labour-intensive, export-oriented industries in Bangladesh offers a stark contrast to India, where women's participation in formal work has failed to increase as predicted by economists, and there are no clear strategies aimed at reversing this trend.

One of the murkier aspects of gendered violence in India is the combined problem of under-reporting and institutional collusion that suppresses the extent of such crimes. As elsewhere, when data show a spike in violence, it is usually unclear whether this has been caused by increased reporting or whether there has been an actual rise. Official statistics are unreliable, not just because of under-reporting but also due to unreliable recording practices and, worse, collusion. A good indicator of the prevalence of gender-based power is domestic violence, which remains relatively unexplored in the literature. Studies on family and intimate-partner assault in India, collected through independent scholarship and NGO surveys, show it to be widespread. A survey in 2013 found that 27 per cent of women in a nationally representative sample had experienced intimate partner violence.²³ Another survey of young women in a Bangalore slum revealed that 56 per cent of study participants had experienced domestic violence.²⁴ Feminist researchers have shown that two major factors—son preference and dowry demand—are the most important determinants of gender power in the household and consequently of the probability of violence. It is not the size of the dowry that puts women at risk—it may provide some financial resources for women—but the dissatisfaction and demands for more by the husband's family. Indeed, there is in the South Asian context a long-standing and relatively under-analysed inversion of gender power, whereby mothers-in-law, once victimized by such exactions, become key players in the perpetuation of abuse and violence centred on dowry demands. The Bangalore study found, somewhat counterintuitively, that assault was more prevalent in 'love' marriages: women who chose to marry outside their caste and community, often in violation of their parents' wishes, were generally more vulnerable to domestic violence,

²³ Priya Nanda et al., 'Masculinity, Intimate Partner Violence and Son Preference in India', International Centre for Research on Women, New Delhi, 2014.

²⁴ Corinne Rocca et al., 'Challenging Assumptions About Women's Empowerment: Social and Economic Resources and Domestic Violence Among Young Married Women in Urban South India', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2009.

committed not just by their partners, but by members of their own family—over 56 per cent of women who had made independent choices in marriage partners had been beaten, kicked or disowned by family members.²⁵ Gendered violence may, in recent times, reflect a backlash against women's increasing desire to choose marriage partners and resist some of the older forms of community and parental domination imposed on them.

Conflict zones

Since independence in 1947, the Indian state has been engaged in almost perpetual armed conflict with insurgent groups along its borders, ranging from Kashmir to self-determination movements in the north-east, as well as battling rural Maoists in the eastern states. The proliferation of security forces in these areas has brought about increased insecurity for women. Sexual violence in all these cases is rife, but rarely prosecuted. Kashmir and Punjab, both sites of Partition violence in 1947, and of the state repression of insurgent movements in the 1980s and 90s, have seen sexual assault used to 'punish' women accused of harbouring terrorists. Investigations into these incidents are hampered by the police, who fail to collect evidence, physicians who refuse to treat raped women, and a judicial system that often delays proceedings for five years or more, creating a dangerous and traumatizing waiting period for victims and their families.²⁶

In 1989 a woman accused of protecting terrorists in her home in Punjab was arrested and raped in her cell. When she reported the crime, physicians refused to examine her, and the criminal procedure took almost eight years and eighty court hearings, during which time she was forced to live in hiding, as police officers torched her home and harassed her family.²⁷ When Kashmir was declared a 'disturbed area' in 1990, the Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act gave military officers unprecedented rights to enter, search, arrest and seize without warrant, with force 'even to the causing of death'. In 1991, armed forces cordoned off two villages in the north-west of Kashmir and removed the men while soldiers, reportedly reeking of alcohol, gang-raped the

²⁵ Rocca et al., 'Challenging Assumptions'.

²⁶ *Access to Justice for Women*, p. 31.

²⁷ *Access to Justice for Women*, p. 21.

women. Despite ‘an entire village of eye-witness reports’—plus torn clothes, discarded bottles, and so on—the case was closed by the police, citing ‘insufficient evidence’.

The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (1958), originally designed to legitimate repression of ‘disturbances’ in Nagaland, has since provided the legal framework for counterinsurgency operations in the north-eastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. The Act also offers impunity for the armed forces’ rape of women across the region. In July 2004 a young woman, Thangjam Manorama, was abducted, raped and killed by Indian security forces, who claimed she was a member of the banned People’s Liberation Army. It was this incident that gave rise to the remarkable act of protest by several Manipuri women who stood naked in front of the Indian Army’s base in Manipur, holding a banner that read ‘Indian Army, Rape Us’. By comparison with Kashmir, where human-rights violations by the Indian Army are widespread but relatively well-documented, military operations in the north-east are protected by a thicker shroud of secrecy. The resulting culture of impunity has allowed sexual assault to proliferate, deepening the silence around gendered violence within the generally clannish tribal communities. In 2014 a young tribal girl from the East Garo hills of Meghalaya was found decapitated, burned and naked, having apparently been sexually violated by her stepfather for over a year; no prosecution followed. The region has also seen a rise in gang rape, but conviction rates remain dismally low. The mechanisms are similar: shame and community sanctions for the families of raped women boost the impunity enjoyed by men in the region. The combined effect of a brutal counterinsurgency, which is now part of the fabric of everyday life, with militant resistance and few economic opportunities, has created an environment where sexual violence, trafficking and systematic abuse are endemic. The secondary-school drop-out rate in Meghalaya is 59 per cent, as young boys are forcibly recruited into the resistance, while girls are pressured into prostitution to service the troops. The violence in the region has created an echo chamber, giving rise to perverse notions of justice and righteousness: last year, twelve teenage girls were kidnapped and tortured by ‘activists’ for their involvement in the sex trade.²⁸

²⁸ Meera Vijayann, ‘A Dangerous Silence in the Northeast’, *Open Democracy*, 10 April 2015.

The red threads running through these different episodes, whether in the context of caste wars, urban mobility or military occupation, are the impunity of India's security forces and a legal system that consistently fails female victims. The largely upper-middle caste capture of local bureaucracies and police forces has long had punitive effects on women from marginalized communities, such as Dalit or tribal women. But the problem runs deeper. Pratiksha Baxi's comprehensive indictment of India's legal system reveals the profound complicity of the authorities with the perpetrators of gendered violence.²⁹ Her ethnographic studies of rape trials show how the language of the courtroom obscures the actual violence, because of the scripts and conventions that victims are expected to follow, and the manner in which violence is expunged from the written record. Cases that make it through the legal system are subject to additional editing, raising the bar for what kinds of evidence can be admitted and taken into account. False medical reports or certificates are regularly admitted, defendants' claims are rarely queried with any degree of rigour, and past sexual history is regularly admitted as a mitigating factor in the courtroom.

Masculinity and aspiration

The growing surplus of unemployable young Indian men stands in ironic contrast to the cultural valuations of masculinity—celebrating the birth of a male child, the glorification of men's sports and the persistence of male privilege in the public sphere. Indian ideals of masculinity have shifted, as the Gandhian asceticism originally appropriated by Hindu nationalism was decisively rejected by the new India. Studies of the 'ideal' male body in the era of the independence struggle suggest that sexual emissions—and thus sex itself—were seen as depleting the energies of the Hindu male, leaving him powerless in the face of colonial invasion.³⁰ Succumbing to desire weakened the body—and the body politic; lust was 'dirty', 'chaotic' and dangerous. In their association of the sexual body with national power and glory, Hindu idealists were no different from political leaders elsewhere, who defined manliness as a precondition of political potency and command; here,

²⁹ Pratiksha Baxi, *Public Secrets of Law: Rape Trials in India*, Oxford 2013.

³⁰ Joseph Alter, 'Celibacy, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 1, 1994.

however—in theory at least—it was not sexual prowess but abstinence that was the key to power.

Since the 1980s, the BJP's ascendancy and its shifting ideologies have embodied the contradictions of the ideal Hindu male in an era of Western consumerism and hedonism. While the old guard of the BJP, primarily those affiliated with the militant RSS, still claim to uphold the ascetic tradition, the masses appear to have rejected the supposed Gandhian ideal of self-sufficiency, celibacy and semen retention. For the new, urban, middle-class India, hedonism, voyeurism and sexual prowess are eternally emblazoned on the cities' and highways' larger-than-life billboards, in films and, not least, in a vast amount of pornography. India is the world's fifth largest consumer of online porn—not such a surprise, given the size of its population, yet the relatively poor e-connectivity of rural India compared with China, for example, also needs to be taken into account.³¹ All this points to a release of libidinal energy after decades of prudery, leavened only by the occasional glimpse of Bollywood flesh. But this sexual 'freedom' is not only circumscribed by sharp gender inequalities, reinforced by caste and ethnic domination; it has also produced a fierce reaction, which is directly threatening to women. The aspirational, gym-toned male body, with distinctly Western consumer tastes—whisky, cigarettes, fast cars—looms large on city billboards, enjoining men to participate in the image, if only vicariously. For India's surplus men, fantasies fuelled by bootleg liquor are compounded by frustrated mobility and other forms of class desire. Notably, one of the four gang rapists in Delhi was a gym instructor; an aspirational but low-paid occupation in India's growing service industry, catering to the new body obsession. Drunk on cheap liquor, the four men drove round the city in one of the small, unregulated private buses that ply the streets. Their sadistic orgy, during which the young woman was assaulted with a rusty iron bar, seemed to encapsulate the madness of the new dispensation; the funnelling of historically honed aggression into a new capacity to wreak violence in the anomic, uncaring city. When Jyoti Singh was flung out of the bus, partially disembowelled and half-naked, passers-by balked at helping her, as though they might be tainted by the sexual nature of the crime.

³¹ Nor is this just for male consumers: Sunny Leone, a former porn star and now writer of adult novels for women, is the most googled name in India; her novella was released by a dedicated press via mobile phones—a first for the Subcontinent.

The Lancet reports that one in five women across the world experience some form of sexual violence, but we cannot know how much this figure reveals or conceals.³² Countries have different definitions of rape, which affects how data are aggregated. For example, in India marital rape is not an offence; Section 375 of the Indian penal code explicitly states that ‘sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under fifteen years of age, is not rape.’ As we have seen, one paradox of the statistics is that they may serve as a barometer of women’s confidence and determination, so that the rise in reports of rape may reflect shifting gender norms. In South Africa, for example, while sexual violence is considered to be at epidemic levels, perpetuated by ‘gangster’ youth culture and rural bride-capture alike, the statistical rise in reported rape may in part be attributed to the post-apartheid regime, under which black women feel safer reporting sexual crimes. Evidence suggests that assault was endemic during the apartheid era, with Johannesburg’s most popular daily, *The Star*, reporting twenty or thirty rapes every weekend in Soweto. The distrust of police during that period prevented the actual extent from emerging, so that most figures from that time are merely estimates. However, feminist activists in both India and South Africa have argued that sexual violence is still often internalized as normal by its victims, and is therefore less likely to be reported; this conclusion is backed by local research. While a 1999 survey in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban found that 71 per cent of women had experienced ‘forced sexual intercourse’, another in southern Johannesburg showed that 59 per cent of women thought that a sexually violent man was more powerful, and 27 per cent of young women thought that forced sex is not sexual violence.³³

South African feminists have questioned the extent to which working-class men, in particular, have been further disenfranchised with the redefinition of gender roles and patriarchal ideologies following the end of apartheid. Emergent masculinities there have clearly been shaped by new forms of street and gang violence, following the daily coercions of

³² Sarah Venis and Richard Horton, ‘Violence Against Women: A Global Burden’, *The Lancet*, 6 April 2002.

³³ Sandra Bollen et al., *Violence Against Women in Metropolitan South Africa: A Study on Impact and Service Delivery*, Monograph no. 41, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria 1999; Romi Sigsworth, ‘Anyone Can Be a Rapist: An Overview of Sexual Violence in Africa’, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2009.

apartheid, and superimposed on the celebration of young male resistance and radicalization after the Soweto uprising. As with caste and ethno-religious violence in India, the South African research highlights the ‘peacetime’ manifestation of group rape dynamics in moments of contested social and political transition. The brutal environment of racism and the experience of violence among young men in Soweto became associated with a style of masculinity embodied in the *tsotsi*, a figure at once anti-establishment and scornful of manual labour, who established power through sexual control. Kidnapping and abduction of women in Soweto during the 1980s was common practice. In contemporary urban townships, ‘streamlining’ is a form of rape seemingly oriented to conveying a message to ‘uptight’ or snobbish women, or even as a way of breaking up with a former girlfriend. If rape is performative, in these instances its symbolic function is aimed at conveying meaning not simply to the victim but to friends and enemies. But such rituals of masculinity are not restricted to working-class men or gang members; they are also prevalent among white, middle-class young men in American college fraternities. Recent protests in Brazil against urban gang rape suggest a similar dimension.

Politics of representation

Western media coverage of the Delhi gang rape—commentators rushed to condemn women’s suffering in this ‘vast and misogynistic country’³⁴—drew a defensive reaction from the self-conscious Indian middle class; global reactions to the atrocity threatened to tarnish India’s carefully cultivated image as a BRIC country on the rise. Certainly the politics of the story’s representation were highly selective about which nations were to be put in the spotlight, with most of the coverage choosing to ignore the global prevalence of rape.³⁵ Leslee Udwin’s exposure of the Subcontinent’s rape-tolerant culture in the film *India’s Daughter* was also dismissed by some Indian feminists as an attempt by ‘white women to save brown women’; they criticized the colonial mentality that characterizes brown men as predators and brown women as victims. However, this gaze can be reversed: we need only look at the predatory activities

³⁴ Claire Cohen, ‘Delhi Gang-Rape Film: The Haunting Faces of India’s Hidden Women Were Revealed at Last’, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 March 2015.

³⁵ World Health Organization, *Global and Regional Estimates of Sexual Violence Against Women*, Geneva 2013.

of former IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has suggested a more pointed critique of the 'Western saviour' perspective, showing that it creates a unitary Third World female subject who is above all a victim of patriarchy; this in turn serves to construct a Western feminist subject who is liberated, free of constraint, an agent of her own destiny. Instead, Mohanty has proposed a materialist understanding of gender subordination and violence, in the context of the global political economy and gender division of labour.³⁶

There is evidence of a much wider feminist resistance in India, often far away from the urban middle-class movements that demonstrated after the Delhi gang rape. The naked protests outside the 17th Assam Rifles headquarters after Thangjam Manorama's murder are part of a wider women's movement. Rural Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar organize a local-language weekly, *Khabar Lahariya*, which has publicized rapes and domestic violence in the area. As Mohanty's perspective suggests, gendered violence is intimately linked to the structural and cultural transformations of India over the past two decades, with their perceived threats to established forms of masculine power and their intensification of rivalries and frustrations. The issue then is not whether gendered violence is worse in this or that part of the world, but whether we can adequately grasp the forms in which the global political economy of sexual violence manifests itself in particular places in particular ways.

Whether in the transition from Nehruvian developmentalism to neoliberal economics, or from apartheid to the (equally neoliberal) ANC regime, masculine domination persists in new forms. Women's bodies are still the terrain on which battles for power may be waged, whether to punish them by the stigma of violence, or to claim them as plunder from the enemy. This is part of what Veena Das calls the 'sexualized contract'.³⁷ The violence of these transitions, and of the material inequalities they involve, is closely related to that of sexual assault. Discussing the relative stasis of the sexual order in *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu posed the question of what historical mechanisms were responsible for

³⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *boundary 2*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1984.

³⁷ Veena Das, 'Violence, Gender and Subjectivity', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 37, 2008.

the apparent dehistoricization of the sexual division—and pointed to the ‘labour of eternalization’ carried out by institutions such as the family, organized religion, media and the state. To restore the relationship between the sexes ‘to historical action’ would involve, as an immediate objective, ‘neutralizing the mechanisms of the neutralization of history’, which eternalize sexed bodies and the social and political order in which they are placed. This meant undertaking a struggle for wholesale reform through collective action—in contrast both to the resignation encouraged by essentialist notions of difference, and to a resistance reduced to individual discursive acts.³⁸ If the persistence of gendered violence is to be challenged, that path may be the best one to take.

³⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Cambridge 2001, pp. vii–viii.