

(This text is a copy from the version that appeared online:)

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Imagine. A filmmaker travels to Belgium because she has heard about the pedophilia scandals in the country. She directs a documentary film, which includes an interview with an infamous pedophile. This man says that the girls he raped had actually seduced him and that they really enjoyed it. The filmmaker then comments that Belgian society is responsible for creating such pedophiles by teaching them what to think. Most men in this country are programmed in this way, she insists. In fact, this is all part of a larger disease and culture, which is also reflected in Belgian cinema. How would we Belgians react? We would find this shocking and infuriating. It is as though pedophilia is an expression of the core of our culture, as though we are programmed for child abuse.

This story is not all that imaginary, even though it does concern another country. Over the past week, the international hue and cry about rape in India has gone through another round. This time the cause is a documentary where one of the accused in a brutal rape case makes atrocious statements. Significantly, the English filmmaker, Leslee Udwin, does not see this man as a pathological individual. In an interview, she characterises him as representative of "most men in this country," who are "programmed in a certain way." It is this society that creates and encourages such rapists, she says, and the objectifying of women in Bollywood films reveals how this is part of a larger disease and culture.

Many Indians reacted with shock. Many are also infuriated. Some even see this as an international conspiracy to defame India and call for banning the film. It is easy to dismiss all of this as expressions of a hurt national pride unable to cope with the reality of rape and misogyny in India. Or to ridicule it as a form of cultural paranoia. But the many Indians who feel this way are neither paranoid nor stupid. In fact, there is a need to make sense of the widespread impression that such an international conspiracy is going on.

To understand what is at stake, let us turn back to the heart of Europe. Here, the media agrees with the filmmaker. One headline says "A girl should just let herself be raped quietly" -insinuating that this is a widespread opinion in India. The journalist writes: "Especially in North India women are considered outlaws when it comes to sex." In other words, any man can have a go at them without threat of punishment. But how could

Indian men in general - who are also fathers, brothers and sons of women - see these women as objects freely available for rape? This can be the case only if the culture is itself morally perverse: mothers and fathers must raise their sons to become rapists. This is the implicit message of the discourse about rape in India.

India used to be the land of gurus, snake charmers, and fakirs. It was the country of caste, cows and curry. Nowadays, it has become the rape nation in the Western imagination. Time and again, women travelling to India are warned: "Be careful with all those rapists there." People from all walks of life express their disgust at a culture where rape seems to be part of everyday life. Recently, a German university professor refused an Indian intern because of "the rape problem in India" and the threat he would pose to her female students. The media join in: "How India became a country of gang rapes." "The terrible truth about rape in India." "In rural India, rapes are common, but justice for victims is not." "Why rapes are 'normal' in India." These are only a few representative headlines. What is so striking about these claims is the following: they transform the immoral acts of certain individuals into expressions of an entire culture and its values.

What are the factual grounds for this move? In Belgium, four to five gang rapes take place every week. Eight women are raped every single day. In a study of the EU's Agency for Fundamental Rights one third of all European women reveal that they have been the victims of physical and sexual violence. As many report that they went through such violence at the hands of adults during their youth. 55% of all women has experienced sexual intimidation. But how many newspaper stories do we see about "how Belgium became a country of gang rapes"? How many journalists try to explain "why sexual violence is 'normal' in Europe" or "how women in the EU are outlawed when it comes to sex"? Right. None.

"Three women raped per hour in India," the European press cried out recently. But they forget to mention that this is out of a population of 1.25 billion. In Belgium, one rape is reported every three hours - out of a population of 11 million. In England and Wales alone, where the population is less than 56 million, about 78,000 rapes are estimated to occur every year. That amounts to more than 9 rapes every hour. You can do the math yourself. Or you could leave that to a 2010 United Nations report. In India, 1.8 rapes per 100,000 inhabitants were reported that year. In Belgium, the number was almost 30. It was 27.3 for the US and about 28 for the UK.

The predictable response is that only a fraction of rapes is reported in India. Well, in countries like Belgium, experts estimate that only 1 in 10 cases of sexual violence is reported by the victims. Even if the number

in India is only 1 in 100, there are still many more cases of sexual violence in Belgium, the US or the UK. One could add that the Indian police is notoriously corrupt in its condoning of rape and that even these projections underestimate the real number. But this only shows that one can deny any empirical data in order to embrace the image of India as a rape nation.

The reporting about India excels in ignorance. It blindly buys into the stories told by a particular class of journalists and intellectuals. Thus, when two girls were found hanging from a tree in an Indian village in May 2014, the European media jumped on this. Obviously, these girls had been raped and murdered because of caste, the evil social system of India. "You can rape and kill a Dalit girl," said one headline. Another article reported that these girls were from "the Dalit community, a group of people at the bottom of the social ladder who were excluded from the caste system." The higher castes, both journalists revealed with much fanfare, use sexual violence to oppress the lower castes.

When more facts emerged, these same media kept quiet. They offered no evidence for the claim that men from 'higher castes' systematically rape women from 'lower castes'. They also failed to admit that the alleged perpetrators did not belong to an upper caste and the girls were not Dalits, but that both belonged to OBC groups. It would be even more painful to recognise that the CBI came to the conclusion that there was no evidence of rape or murder, that one of the girls had been having an affair with the main accused, and that the family members had made inconsistent statements and appeared to have bribed the witnesses. Instead they insinuated that the police was trying to cover up the crimes. This fit beautifully into the hackneyed story about India; the facts did not.

In Europe (and among certain intellectuals in India) clichés about India replace reasonable reflection. Hatred towards women is deeply rooted in this society, journalists say. Evidently, the implicit comparison is always with European society and its emancipation of women. Well, let us compare the role of women in the Indian political landscape with that of a country like Belgium. The last ten years, arguably the most powerful person in India was a woman. Similarly, several women could be found among the most popular and powerful leaders of state-level governments. The same goes for mayors and university vice-chancellors. India had its first female prime minister in 1966. Fifty years later, we are still waiting. As of yet, no woman has become prime minister of the federal government of Belgium. As of yet, no woman has become minister-president of the regional government of Flanders. As of yet, my city has seen no woman as its mayor. Oh yes, recently my university did appoint its first female rector in almost

200 years.

It is not that all of the European reporting about India is fictitious. The country has its share of problems when it comes to the relationship between men and women. Only a fool would deny that. There is tremendous injustice towards women, as is the case elsewhere. In cities like Delhi, sexual violence and harassment are a major concern. The hobnobbing between politicians and goondas in certain parts of India rightly shocks observers. But our dominant stories do not allow us to understand any of these dimensions of Indian society. They only create delusions about the country.

Indeed, in a population of 1.25 billion, one will find more psychopaths and pathological individuals than in a population of 11 million. But to infer from this that most Indian men are programmed to think of women as objects of rape is an instance of the fallacy of hasty generalisation. "Not all Indian men think and act in this way," commentators often admit. But this just confirms how twisted this approach is. Pathological men are now presented as the norm of Indian society and others as the exception, while it is surely the other way round.

To show how defective this discourse is, we can just select another set of facts, which allow us to draw opposite conclusions. The numerous female politicians, the deities so commonly revered, gurus like Amma followed by so many, the importance of the mother in Indian society. All of these facts could be used to suggest that women occupy an extraordinary position in Indian culture. Without serious research, such a conclusion would be as empty as the stories about "the deeply rooted hatred of women." But this exercise reveals just how irrational the discourse about rape culture in India is.

The fallacy of hasty generalisation is commonly used in propaganda and the politics of fear. Now, it is part and parcel of the discourse about rape in India. No wonder then that many Indians have the sense of an international conspiracy against their country. However misguided the calls for banning films and books may be, they are expressions of feeling powerless in the face of a centuries-old discourse about Indian culture that continues to dominate international public opinion. In insidious ways, this discourse misrepresents India as the very embodiment of immorality: a culture that programs its people to follow immoral rules as though these are moral.

India and the West could together look for solutions to the problems that we share. Instead, Western commentators reproduce old colonial stories about India as an immoral culture. This gives them a twisted relationship to the Indian people. On the one hand, they keep turning towards the same class of Indian journalists, activists, and

intellectuals for 'local knowledge'. But these native informants merely talk the talk of the West to the West. On the other hand, more and more Indians are disgusted by the West's condescending attitude towards their country. And this is then dismissed as hurt pride. If we want to bring our two peoples and cultures closer together in this new age, reason and empathy are our only hope. The madness of the current discourse about India must end.

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