

On the documentary film “India’s Daughter”: : Face the truth

Monday 16 March 2015, by [KARAT Brinda](#) (Date first published: 6 March 2015).

India must be one of the few countries in the world where its government bans the television broadcast of a documentary film without even seeing it. India’s Daughter, a documentary film made by Leslee Udwin about the horrific rape and murder of a young woman in December 2012, was to be simultaneously broadcast on International Women’s Day in India and on BBC. The BBC preponed the showing and, therefore, citizens of Britain and other countries, who had access to the channel, had the choice to see the film, a choice denied by the government of India to its own citizens. Of course, with the film now on YouTube (though the government has asked for it to be taken down), it will be seen by many people in India, who can form their own opinions.

Having seen the film, I can say without hesitation that the ban is quite unwarranted. Although there may be moments when you think a particular scene could have been done differently, it is on the whole a powerful and moving depiction, without frills, without sermons, without sensationalisation, of the events that shook India and awakened the spirit of resistance and anger of thousands of young people against sexual assault and violence against women. It is a mirror that reflects some of the structural reasons behind the proliferation of rape cultures.

Members of Parliament who expressed several reasons for their outrage, some women members even storming the well of the House on the demand for a ban, fuelled the government’s penchant for authoritarian steps. A reason cited was that the film includes an interview of one of the convicted rapists, which is an insult to women. This is an entirely misplaced concern. It is one thing to protest and condemn a depiction that glorifies a crime or the criminal or which promotes it, but it is quite wrong to object to an interview of a convicted criminal in principle on supposedly ethical grounds. Sometimes, as in this film, the words of a criminal bring home the cruel reality of the familiarity of the words, the language, the thinking he represents. The very ordinariness of the person mocks at facile assumptions that rape and rapists are individual aberrations, exceptions, specific to this or that person. Descriptions of the “monster”, the “evil one”, for the rapist tend to ignore the truth that we as a society are creating, replicating, encouraging misogyny and its violent expression. The film brings this home.

The defence lawyers, A.P. Singh and M.L. Sharma, whose interviews in the film have been widely telecast and reported, speak a language more violent than the rapist himself. It is difficult to imagine such people representing justice in any form. Don’t their statements amount to misconduct for disqualification as members of the Bar? Did they give the right advice to their client to give such an interview? If the home minister is concerned about derogatory and demeaning remarks about women in the interview by the rapist, who is on death row, why has no FIR been filed against the lawyers for hate speech and incitement to violence? It needs to be recorded that it was the All India Democratic Women’s Association that met authorities at police headquarters and demanded immediate prosecution of the lawyers concerned. MPs, who are justly outraged by the statements of the convict, would do well to examine these statements with those made by some of their own colleagues, leaders or gurus or top police officials, whom many respect and defend.

Before we heard that the criminal believed the rapists could get away with it because they were

confident that girls would be too ashamed to speak about what happened, we have heard the language from police officials in police stations who warn parents bringing a child victim of rape to file a complaint to “think twice before you do it because your girl will be defamed and she will never get married. Better to keep silent”. Before we heard the rapist speak about “good” and “bad” girls, we heard MPs in the post-Delhi gangrape debate speak about teaching girls to dress responsibly so as to avoid being sexually harassed. Before we heard his chilling statement about “teaching a lesson” to those “bad girls”, we heard an MP speak of getting women of an opposing political party raped to teach them a lesson. Before we heard the criminal say remorselessly that she should not have fought back, we heard a so-called godman say it would have been better if she had held the rapist’s hand and pleaded with him that she was his sister.

The film does not go deeper into these issues but, of course, it is known that rape cultures are created precisely by such statements from influential men in powerful positions, by structural, systemic discriminations against women aggravated by poverty, caste, religious hatred. Even today, the books we use to teach our children depict stereotypical roles for girls and boys, which then get converted into cultural lakshmanrekhas to depict who is good and bad. The history we teach destroys or ignores the role that women played in its creation. We live in a society that every day creates the conditions which make women vulnerable to sexual assault.

Some people have called it presumptuous for a “foreigner”, a white woman, to speak about “our issues”. I think that insults global solidarity of women fighting sexual assault. There is nothing patronising about the film. It ends with UN statistics on rapes of women in different countries. The US, the film states, has 16 million such victims. There are few places in the world safe for women today. There are many global campaigns against violence against women, including One Billion Rising, to which many women’s organisations in India had lent their voice. If there is a specific campaign around India’s Daughter, the government need not be oversensitive about it.

The government repeated a charge made by a woman MP from the ruling party that this would “affect tourism”. This is rather like saying, save India’s reputation, not its women. It is sickening that the government should be concerned more about the loss of revenue and image rather than taking the right steps to make India safe for its women and children.

Of course, women are not looking for saviours, the Krishna who would save Draupadi from being stripped. The Verma Commission recommendations were fairly comprehensive, and went beyond better policing and use of technologies to suggesting redress of issues that women face every day, such as the lack of a safe public transport system, proper street lighting, setting up help centres, provision of well-lit public toilets, ensuring conditions for safety at worksites and so on. Few have been implemented. Parliament would do well if it had a special session to discuss some of these issues and show its commitment to really making India safe for its women.

Brinda Karat

P.S.

* ““Face the truth”. The Indian Express. Published on March 6, 2015 12:00 am.”:
<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/face-the-truth/99/>

* Brinda Karat is a CPM leader and an MP in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Parliament of

India.