

# Capitalism, Sexual Violence, and Sexism

Wednesday 2 October 2013, by [KRISHNAN Kavita](#) (Date first published: 23 May 2013).

Sexual violence cannot be attributed simply to some men behaving in 'anti-social' or 'inhuman' ways: it has everything to do with the way society is structured: i.e., the way in which our society organizes production and accordingly structures social relationships. Once we understand this, we can also recognize that society can be structured differently, in ways that do not require – or benefit from – the subordination of women or of any section of society.

What are the material structures that underpin sexual violence? As I address this question I will also engage with some of the arguments made in two recent articles which offer a professedly Marxist analysis of sexual violence and women's subordination in India; one is 'On the Empowerment of Women' by Prabhat Patnaik, *People's Democracy*, January 27, 2013 [[1](#)], and the other is 'Class Societies and Sexual Violence: Towards a Marxist Understanding of Rape', by Maya John, *Radical Notes*, May 8, 2013 [[2](#)].

Prabhat Patnaik analyses the differences between gender oppression in advanced capitalist countries and countries like India. He notes, rightly, that the development of capitalism in the advanced capitalist countries was accompanied by a destruction of their pre-capitalist structures, facilitated by colonialism and the resulting large-scale emigration into the so-called 'new world'. Whereas in India, "the "old community" associated with our pre-capitalist structure...continues to remain with us." The persistence of pre-capitalist structures and extremely stubborn feudal survivals in India is undoubtedly significant in producing the specifically Indian variant of patriarchal oppression. A glaring instance of this is the phenomenon of khap panchayats that pass diktats and death sentences on couples who marry by choice, especially those that do so in defiance of caste norms.

However, some of Prabhat Patnaik's arguments and conclusions are questionable. Among them is his assumption that it is only *pre-capitalist* structures that provide a base for patriarchy; and consequently that in the advanced capitalist countries, gender oppression remained only in the form of "patriarchal attitudes", "essentially as a part of the superstructure." This goes against the grain of Marxist analysis, and an entire body of work which has painstakingly mapped out the structural basis of gender oppression in capitalism. Central to this understanding is the role of the gendered division of labour, whereby the burden of reproductive labour has been privatized and assigned to women.

Production (involving wage labour that produces surplus value) and reproduction (of life in a literal sense as well as of the necessities of life, involving women's unpaid household labour) are both equally central to capitalism. The gendering and privatization of reproductive labour, whereby the socially necessary labour of child-care, cooking, cleaning, etc became 'women's work' to be done inside the household, took place in class societies pre-dating capitalism. Capitalism itself displays contradictory impulses. On the one hand it seeks to draw everyone – men, women, children – into production. On the other, it has an interest in retaining reproductive labour as 'women's work' so as to ensure that the cost of such labour is minimized – both for the wage-paying capitalist as well as for the capitalist State.

Patriarchy is therefore one of the axes of the capitalist system; part and parcel of the structural

edifice of capitalism. Patriarchal ideology does not hang unsupported in the air; it is not a matter of 'mindset' or 'attitude' alone: notions of feminine 'nature', 'duties', 'good and bad women', and sexual propriety for women, are produced, nourished, and deployed to mask, mystify, and justify women's unpaid reproductive labour and the patriarchal family where such labour takes place.

The tension between women entering the workforce and continuing to bear the burden of 'housework', has been a factor in forcing the State, in some countries, to concede State-funded child-care, healthcare, education, and so on. But in neoliberal times, with the State adopting 'austerity measures' to bail out capitalism in crisis, we are witnessing a global cut-back in such social spending. Any State that pursues such policies, needs to persuade women to accept the burden of housework as 'women's work', and to dissuade women from rejecting traditional roles. It is notable that some of the worst rape culture remarks by US Republican Senators (who could compete with India's patriarchal lawmakers in misogyny) have been made recently to promote arguments against the right to abortion.

The enormous resistance to, and organized reaction against conceding the right to abortion or same-sex marriage in the US is an instance of how much the capitalist class still invests in the family institution and the control of women's sexuality and reproduction within it.

One should also be wary of locating the structural basis for gender oppression in India, solely in pre-capitalist structures. Capitalism in India, and the Indian State also have a stake in the gender division of labour and the patriarchal ideology that supports it. The character of capitalist development in India, too, is such that it promotes caste and gender oppression, including several of the regressive elements associated with the pre-capitalist structures.

Moreover, global capital too is implicated in the project of Indian patriarchy. International media coverage of the Indian anti-rape protests tended to discuss the issue as unique to 'Indian/Asian culture.' They chose to overlook the fact that gender violence, sexism and rape culture are thriving in the West, and moreover that neoliberal policies pursued by global capital are complicit in perpetuating women's oppression and redeploying patriarchal structures and attitudes in order to exploit women's labour in, say, Bangladesh or India! The case of Bangladeshi women producing for Walmart in exploitative and unsafe sweatshops, that prey on and promote their insecurity and subordination, has come to light time and again, especially in the recent tragedies of factory fire and building collapse that killed hundreds of young working women. The Indian reality is equally grim. In Tirupur and Coimbatore districts of Tamil Nadu, under the 'Sumangali' scheme (Sumangali means auspicious married woman in Tamil), MNC garments manufacturers including those who produce for prominent European and US garment companies like C&A, GAP, Diesel, Marks & Spencer, Tommy Hilfiger and others, would get young minor girls, many of them Dalits, to work in virtual bondage and highly exploitative conditions, to be paid a 'lump-sum amount' that, as the Scheme's name indicates, is meant to be a thinly veiled dowry!

Caste oppression and patriarchal anxieties about marriage and dowry are thus mediating the entry of women into the global labour market. Their insecure working conditions create greater hurdles and challenges for these women in their struggle against patriarchy. And, of course, primitive accumulation by multi-national corporations that grab land, minerals and other resources in India, is not only, as Prabhat Patnaik correctly notes, a source of corruption, it also unleashes state repression and sexual violence against women who are the forefronts of movements against corporate land grab.

The global upswing in gender violence (including sexual violence and domestic violence) and misogynistic rape culture, ought then to be traced at least in part to the imperatives of global capitalism and imperialism and their local agents, to justify an increased burden of social

reproduction for women, the availability of women from the former colonies as pliant labour, and rape as a weapon against people's movements resisting primitive accumulation. The fear of violence contributes to disciplining women into suitable labourers, both for global production as well as reproduction. That is why the abusive husband and the rapist cannot be understood as isolated perpetrators who are 'anti-social' aberrations that pose a threat to the system. It is no coincidence that perpetrators of gender violence find powerful advocates (not just in India but across the world) in the misogynistic and rape culture statements by the custodians of the political, religious, and law-and-order institutions.

Locating the problem (and solution) of gender violence in moral values is more suited to a liberal analysis than a Marxist one. The struggle for women's emancipation, as understood by Marxists, has to be for a revolutionary transformation of the structure of production and reproduction. Socializing reproduction and getting rid of the gender division of labour must be key to such a transformation. As Ellen Meiksins Wood notes, socialism "may not by itself guarantee the destruction of historical and cultural patterns of women's oppression and racism", but "Socialism will be the first social form since the advent of class society whose reproduction as a social system is endangered rather than enhanced by relations and ideologies of domination and oppression." ('Capitalism and Human Emancipation: Race, Gender, and Democracy', *The Socialist Feminist Project*, Monthly Review Press 2002, ed. Nancy Holmstrom) And if, as Engels showed in *The Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State*, the origin of women's subordination and oppression coincided with the advent of private property and class divisions, then surely their complete emancipation, too, lies even beyond socialism in a post-class society.

Prabhat Patnaik's other contention is that neoliberal capitalist development in India, "instead of creating conditions for the coming into being of a new "community" through the process of "combination" of workers, engenders a substantial lumpen-proletariat, incapable of "combining" together for united actions, and hence incapable of developing an alternative morality in the place of that which characterised the old "community" which it has left behind." He concludes that "the development of a vast lumpen-proletariat that breeds criminal behaviour generally in society and especially towards women," and the "assault in the urban spaces by elements of this lumpen-proletariat on the rights and dignity of those women who have broken out of the straitjacket of patriarchy and chosen independent careers of their own, is used to decry their breaking out of the patriarchal mould, to force them back into patriarchy, to curb their freedom and choices."

Based on the Delhi gang-rape case, followed by the case of brutal rape of a little girl, (in both cases the perpetrators were migrants from rural Bihar/UP), the ruling class, police, and corporate media has made a deliberate attempt to profile the poor and migrant labour as the fountainhead of crime. Must the Left accept and amplify this contention? Is there really any evidence to support the assertion that sexual violence (and other crimes) in urban spaces is being perpetrated mainly by the working class, especially the class of migrant workers? The Delhi CM and former Home Minister P Chidambaram have voiced such ideas often, blaming rape and crime on 'rootless' and 'backward' migrant workers. Have there not been a large number of cases of rapes of women abducted in private cars by relatively affluent men? And rapes of domestic workers in affluent colonies where they work? In the specific case of Delhi, the dominant and politically powerful rentier class, erstwhile landowners in the villages which have given way to 'Delhi' as we know it, and therefore a bastion of the 'khap panchayat' culture, is certainly more prone to aggressive reaction against women's freedom and assertion than migrant workers.

It is also a mistake to assume that the classical 19<sup>th</sup> century working class and its trade union "combinations" automatically embraced anti-patriarchal struggles and ideology.

Johanna Brenner writes, "The passionate feelings that leak through the minutes of both nineteenth

and twentieth century union meetings where the employment of women was discussed demonstrate that craftsmen experienced lower-waged women's entry into their workplaces as an attack on their masculinity, their sexual and social selves. The economic threat that lower-paid women workers represented was certainly real. But much more than wage levels was at stake. Women's presence also threatened the practices, feelings, and relationships through which men had constructed a culture of solidarity within their organizations." ('On Gender and Class in U.S. Labor History', *Monthly Review*, 1998, Vol 50, Issue 6) Unions of the time often espoused the 'male breadwinner/female caregiver' model. Henry Broadhurst, secretary of the TUC in Britain, gave a speech in 1875 describing the aim of trade unionism: "...to bring about a condition...where wives and daughters would be in their proper sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition for livelihood against the great and strong men of the world."

Undeniably, the unorganized character of the vast majority of India's working class, employed in precarious and casualised work, poses challenges for revolutionary organizing and trade unionising. But can we term this entire class as 'lumpen' and devoid of significant revolutionary potential? Granted, large masses of workers are no longer commonly available on the factory floor, organized by capital. This is not just on account of the decline of the public sector and manufacturing sector. Even manufacturing has a changed character in neoliberal times, where workers are being dispersed and decentralized, and manufacturing and public sector alike display a massive increase in contractualised, casualised labour. But can the revolutionary party afford to assume the vast majority of India's working class, unorganized by capital, *cannot* be organized in trade unions and by revolutionary politics, and can only be a vehicle for reactionary political and social ideas, never revolutionary ones? If these workers are not found on the factory floor, must we not take up the challenge of organizing them in the areas where they live?

Even when it comes to the class that can, conceivably, be termed the 'lumpen proletariat,' can the revolutionary party abandon them as a lost cause, and condemn them to be footsoldiers of organized crime and fascist brigades? Mao spoke of "the fairly large lumpen-proletariat, made up of peasants who have lost their land and handicraftsmen who cannot get work", noting that they "lead the most precarious existence of all. Brave fighters but apt to be destructive, they can become a revolutionary force if given proper guidance." (Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society) Marx, too, noted this dual potential of the lumpen proletariat, describing it as "thoroughly malleable, as capable of the most heroic deeds and the most exalted sacrifices as of the basest banditry and the foulest corruption." (The Class Struggles in France) Similarly, Frantz Fanon wrote of the lumpen proletariat, "If this available reserve of human effort is not immediately organized by the forces of rebellion, it will find itself fighting as hired soldiers side by side with the colonial troops." (*Wretched of the Earth*)

Prabhat Patnaik seems to see the movement against rape in Delhi also as predominantly lumpen in character, based on the slogan of death penalty for rape raised within it. This is a superficial and inaccurate assessment. The 'death penalty for rape' demand has a history of being a popular demand in India, and even many Left and progressive women's organisations including AIPWA have adopted positions against it fairly late. As late as July 2004, the AIDWA for instance opposed the move for clemency for Dhananjay Chatterjee, sentenced to death for the rape and murder of a schoolgirl in Kolkata. So the support for the death penalty for rape is not *in itself* proof positive of lumpenised ideology.

The demand for death penalty - in cases of rape as well as for political murders - is a fairly commonplace one. What was most significant in this particular movement against rape was the presence of a large number of men, and the fact that even in its initial, most spontaneous expression, quite apart from the intervention of JNU students or Left organizations, it did not stop at demands for death penalty and 'protection' for women - it articulated a ringing, spirited challenge to

rape culture. This was apparent in women's placards saying '*teri nazar buri to parda main karun?*' (If your gaze is evil why should I cover my face?), '*meri skirt se oonchi meri awaaz*' (My voice is higher than my skirt), and 'Don't tell us how to dress, tell men not to rape', and men's placards saying 'When we expose our bodies women don't rape us.' Eventually, a very large section of the movement enthusiastically embraced the slogan of women's '*azaadi*' (freedom), and took a stand against the demand for death penalty. What was the material basis for these ideas, and for the fact that not only women, but men too were mobilizing around these ideas and slogans? Who, in fact, were the men and women who joined these protests?

It must be noted that the protestors were not only JNU or DU students. They included men and women who worked in BPOs and similar exploitative jobs; who studied in coaching institutes; who empathized with 'Nirbhaya' because she, like many of them, came from a migrant worker family and was headed for a job as a paramedic that would almost inevitably have been insecure, ill-paid, and contractualised. For the men, insecure education and jobs do lead to cracks in the secure foundations of masculinity. One response to this crisis of masculinity is of course in the display of masculine protectionism, aggression, the 'Save Family' type of patriarchal backlash, and outright sexual violence. But, as was so evident in this movement, those cracks in masculinity can have a positive and radical outcome as well. Many (though of course not all) men and women who started out with 'protectionist' and death penalty type slogans alongside ones that challenged rape culture, responded with empathy and introspection to the critique of misogyny and of the death penalty demands, discussed marital rape and supported the demand for it to be recognized in the rape law, and supported the '*azaadi*' of LGBT people and even marched on Republic Day alongside Kashmiri and Manipuri students, raising slogans against rape by the Army in those regions. Male protestors introspected about their own discomfort with their sisters' freedom and sexuality and with weakening of caste hierarchies, and overcame that ambivalence at least temporarily to raise their voice in support of women's enthusiastic slogans of '*baap se bhi, bhai se bhi, khap se bhi azaadi*' (freedom from fathers, brothers and the khaps).

Anti-patriarchal struggles are not waged in circumstances of our own making - and in India, they must inevitably confront the many challenges and contradictions of Indian society today, many of which Prabhat Patnaik correctly identifies. The fact remains, however, that one of the largest and most significant of such struggles in recent times has taken place *in India*; one that struggles in the advanced capitalist countries of the world are inspired by and learning lessons from.

Maya John's article is, as she herself puts it, an attempted 'rescue' by the Left of right-wing rape culture arguments, in which she sees more than a grain of truth. Maya John repeats an argument that one first heard in the *EPW* editorial dated 29 December 2012, that the Delhi gang-rape was not a 'power' rape but a rape by powerless men. According to Maya John, power rapes happen in rural India, while rape by the 'powerless' is a phenomenon peculiar to urban India. This awkward formula is partly an attempt to 'rescue' the argument made by the RSS leader Mohan Bhagwat, that rapes happen in (urban) India not rural Bharat, by acknowledging the rapes that are happening in rural India, which Bhagwat had not done, and by rephrasing Bhagwat's contention in 'class-based' terms. She does not attempt to acknowledge or explain why, even in rural India, *all* rapes are not committed by feudal upper castes against women from dalit or other oppressed castes; many rapes are committed by poor and disempowered men. And in urban India, as stated earlier in this article, there is simply no evidence that it is workers who are more prone to rape. What conclusions would Maya John draw about the large number of instances in Delhi, where rapists (some of them fairly well-off) have abducted a woman and raped her in a moving car? So the distinction she draws between 'rural/power-ful' and 'urban/power-less' rapes is not sustainable, even setting aside for a moment her dismissal of the very idea of gender power.

Maya John's contention is that when the 'powerless' (the working class, urban poor) rape, they are

'stealing sex,' because they are exposed to a market culture that sells commodified sexuality, but starves them of access to sex. Such men, she claims, are not raping women because of patriarchal misogyny: they are just desperate for any 'orifice' to gratify frustrated desire. Child rape proves this, she claims: children are raped because they are easily available orifices. Why then, are there so many instances of upper class men raping kids: Jimmy Savile in Britain, accused of being a paedophile, for instance, or the French embassy employee in Bangalore accused of raping his own 3-year-old daughter? Capitalism routinely treats children's bodies as available for brutal exploitation as labour: is it a big leap from there to their exploitation as sexual objects?

If rapes are all about the slaking of desire, devoid of misogyny, then one wonders why so many of the rapes are wantonly brutal? If male sexual desire is all that is at play, then why insert rods and bottles and maim the objects of desire?

Maya John elaborately contends that working class men do not have access to romantic sex, that only upper class women would be able to exercise a choice of sex partners, that sexual contact in slums or fields cannot be based on love and mutuality, since the latter is available exclusively to people who meet in pub circles/date pools/social networking sites. Such a contention is breathtakingly elitist and patronizing; in the name of a Marxist analysis sympathetic to the working class, it deems the working class to be less capable of humanity. That's a far cry from Engels, who, in spite of his painstaking documentation of the squalor of working class life, could contend that the relationship between working men and women was more likely to be based on mutual equality and love than those among the bourgeoisie!

Maya John seems to entirely ignore the fact that in middle class and upper class, or upper caste households, the surveillance and discipline imposed on young women's sexual freedom, even in urban India, is very oppressive. So the claim that such women are able to freely exercise choice of partners is inaccurate. And though women are subjected to far greater sexual repression than men, that does not cause them to rape men. Maya John seems to have internalized the notion of masculine sexuality and desire as a force of nature, a 'hunger' that if tantalized and then 'starved', will inevitably lead to rape.

This is not to claim that masculine violence is unmediated by class and caste; that working class masculinities may contend with insecurities specific to its class. V Geetha, for instance, writes with great empathy about the ways in which masculine insecurities manifest themselves in domestic violence, and how class and caste shape those insecurities ('On Bodily Love and Hurt', V Geetha, *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India*, ed. Janaki Nair, Mary E. John.)

But Maya John evacuates gender entirely from her understanding of rapes by working class men. Denying even that such rapists recognize a woman as a 'woman', she strips the victim of gender, describing her as an 'orifice'. However, if the gender of the 'orifice' is irrelevant, its class is not: if the victim happens to be upper class, Maya John says, the working class rapists vent class hatred. In other words, working class rapists, according to Maya John, can feel class hatred but, inexplicably, not misogyny! One wonders why class hatred has to play itself on the bodies of women; if indeed it's all about class and not gender, why should it be upper class women rather than men who are the recipients of masculine aggression?

Maya John assumes that 'slutwalks' and slogans of '*azaadi* (freedom)' are all about celebrating patriarchal feminine hyper-sexuality. In doing so, she misses the point entirely. 'Slutwalks' are simply not a 'celebration' of sexuality: they are an angry protest against rape culture that brands rape survivors as 'sluts' who 'asked for it.' By adopting the term 'slutwalk', the protestors have defied and challenged the age-old patriarchal division of women into 'Madonnas and whores', 'satis and sluts'. In the Delhi protests as well, women held placards saying 'Main karun to slut, woh kare to

stud?’ (If I do it I’m a slut, if he does it he’s a stud?), challenging moral and sexual double standards. To claim that the ‘azaadi’ slogans have no relevance for working class women is strange. Do working class women not seek the freedom to move freely in the public space without fearing rape; the freedom to marry in defiance of caste and community norms; the freedom from domestic violence?

Maya John argues that “women in skirts and revealing tops are somewhere responsible for the rape of women in *burkhas* and *ghunghats*”, and the same goes for actresses who “display their semi-nude bodies on billboards or on the screen.” The assumption is that men slake the desire generated by such images by raping poor, vulnerable women. The blame for rape is then, displaced on to women’s sexuality, rather than acknowledged as a problem of masculinity. This is not to deny the sexism in most representations of women in popular culture and the capitalist market. But sexism is not restricted to displays of female nudity, nor is every instance of female nudity necessarily sexist.

Maya John’s is not really a critique of sexism at all, it is a replication of the tradition of blaming male violence on female sexuality. One wonders why she does not subject male actors or models whose semi-nude bodies are also displayed on billboards and screens, to the same moralistic finger-wagging she metes out to women? Maya John, in her ‘orifice’ argument, recounts that the 16 December rapists had earlier cruised around in the bus looking for a prostitute. Would Maya John, following on her arguments about rape being provoked by women in skirts, actresses and slutwalks, blame rape on prostitutes, who by making themselves available for commercial sex, invite men to ‘excusably’ view all women in the public space as prostitutes who are available?

It is a most welcome trend that, within the broad democratic discourse on violence against women and the movement for women’s freedom and empowerment, there are attempts to develop and sharpen a Marxist analysis. But we must be on our guard lest ‘Marxism’ and ‘class’ become sleights of hand to rehabilitate and make respectable the sexist excuses for rape. Such arguments are a disservice to the working class, and to Marxism. What we really need to do is to assimilate and analyse the valuable lessons emerging from the post-December 16 movement, and enrich our understanding of the intersections of class, caste, and patriarchy, globally, as well as specifically in the Indian context.

**Kavita Krishnan**

---

**P.S.**

\* <http://kafila.org/2013/05/23/capitalism-sexual-violence-and-sexism-kavita-krishnan/>

---

## Footnotes

[1] [http://pd.cpim.org/2013/0203\\_pd/02032013\\_3.html](http://pd.cpim.org/2013/0203_pd/02032013_3.html)

[2] <http://radicalnotes.com/tag/maya-john/>