

Silencing India's daughters

Vanya Bhargav explains the battle behind the Indian government's ban on a BBC documentary about a notorious gang rape.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often spoken out against gender-based discrimination and in favour of women's empowerment. Yet in early 2015 his government banned *India's Daughter*, Leslee Udwin's documentary on the 2012 Delhi gang rape of Jyoti Singh, a small but not insignificant effort to understand and provoke discussion on the deep-seated patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes prevalent in Indian society.

The originality of the documentary lies in capturing the candid statements of Mukesh Singh, one of the convicted rapists, as well as two defence lawyers, regarding women's place in society. Their statements reveal the belief that women have no right to decide for themselves how, where and with whom they wish to spend their time. Those are determined by "our society" and "our culture", which does not "allow" women to walk the city at night "with any unknown person." Women like Jyoti who foray into public spaces are seen as wrongly overstepping the bounds of domesticity and permitted female behaviour. In addition to this audacious act, Jyoti committed a second sin: she was out with a man with whom she had no relationship by blood or marriage. One of the lawyers said, "You are talking about man and woman as friends. Sorry, that doesn't have any place in our society." A woman who roams the streets with a man other than her son, father, brother or husband is seen as lascivious and her behaviour is seen as implying a license to touch. Indeed, Singh declared defiantly, "a girl is more responsible for rape than a boy." Women who flout the norms of domesticity and docility invite lewd comments and sexual intercourse. Their objections are seen as histrionics as it is they who, by their actions, invited it and even if genuine, they deserve to be "taught a lesson" for their deviance. The defence lawyer, AP Singh, agreed: "If my daughter or sister engaged in pre-marital activities and disgraced herself and allowed herself to lose face and character by doing such things, I would most certainly take this sort of sister or daughter to my farmhouse, and in front of my entire family, I would put petrol on her and set her alight."

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The frank, matter-of-fact avowal of these views without shame or guilt and Mukesh Singh's bewilderment at why such a fuss was made about this rape is, in a sense, understandable because he was merely voicing opinions that are commonplace. The rapist appeared to be an ordinary person because he *is* one. Rape is merely the most violent manifestation of the pervasive belief that a woman does not own her body or her life and it is these deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs that need to be challenged through persistent dialogue, debate and education. However, one must be careful not to overstate the lack of debate in Indian society regarding the legitimacy of patriarchy. Indeed, it is the success of these discussions amongst some sections that explains the rise of numerous independent women like Jyoti Singh, who are seen as threatening male status, and the rise in attacks on them, which represent a backlash to the existence of these debates. The 50 online petitions, with approximately 180,000 signatures, filed to protest the ban on *India's Daughter* are indicative of these debates, as is the existence of the long-established feminist movement. However, the ubiquity of patriarchy constantly squeezes the space for this necessarily herculean effort and makes it deeply controversial.

In the case of *India's Daughter*, two additional factors explain support for its ban among social media users. An analysis of #BanBBC tweets revealed strong resentment against any comment on India's internal problems by a foreign country, although praise has always been welcome. Seeing the film as a conspiracy to 'malign India on a global platform', these men justify curbing the free speech of 'anyone trying to abuse our nation's dignity and pride'. However, had the filmmaker been Indian, a ban might still have been insisted on, along with similar accusations of a plot to defame 'Hindu women', 'millions of Hindus' and abuse the nation's pride. This Hindu chauvinism sees Indians who bring excessive attention to the country's problems as lacking nationalism and deems the free speech of the 'insufficiently patriotic' as unworthy of protection.

A second, milder voice that approves the ban is that which supports gender equality but believes that the film makes a celebrity out of a rapist who does not 'deserve' space on TV and from whom 'one cannot learn anything'. Convinced that his statements would only trigger further prejudice and violence, these individuals condone curbs on them. The view that the film "serves to amplify views that encourage and justify brutal sexual violence against women" is shared by some Indian feminists who argued that while "many men across the world hold such regressive views, the amplification of the same by this film also serves to push back the work of the women's movement in India, which is engaged in contesting and challenging this mindset." Although these feminists did not favour a ban, they wanted to suggest changes before broadcasting, indicating their ambivalence regarding free speech that expresses misogynistic, victim-blaming attitudes.

While such secular feminist arguments in support of the ban may have impelled a few individual politicians, the deeper reason for the government's ban is the longstanding unwillingness of the political class to encourage free and open deliberation on gender inequality and discrimination. The government justified the ban by stating that the film would threaten public order by "encouraging and inciting violence against women" and lead to "a huge public outcry and serious law and order problem". It is effectively stating that it has quashed *India's Daughter* because it fears it might give

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impetus to the free and open debates already occurring in society, and consequently to the kind of protests that challenged the patriarchal status quo in 2012. The film's potential to galvanise existing struggles challenging the patriarchal attitudes that many within the political class themselves hold, or wish to leave untouched for fear of antagonising their constituents, is what best explains the government's desire to suppress free speech on this issue.

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