

What Do Men Have To Do With It?: Rahul Roy

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Guest post by RAHUL ROY

I have been sitting quietly trying to finish my new film and had promised myself that I would not get side tracked and concentrate on the task at hand. But enough is enough. I am shocked and disappointed at the way men high jacked a protest that could have been and probably still is the most significant pouring out of women who may never have thought in their wildest dreams that they would be facing water cannons and cops giving them a chase with iron tipped sticks. I am sure it is a coming of age moment for many young women of the city of Delhi.

I am aware that there has been a fair bit of cynicism about middle class women running up and down Raisina Hill and whether it adds up to anything. It damn well does. The next time they see adivasis being chased down by the police in Chattisgarh or in Orissa a penny will drop. It already is, today there is an article by a 19 year old student from Lady Sri Ram College narrating her brush with Delhi Police at the Parliament Street Police station and quite significantly she adds that if they are capable of behaving the way they did with a group of 'well connected' college students in Delhi then what must be happening in the more remote areas of non metropolitan India. Thousands of young women spontaneously gathering at India Gate and joined by their mothers is a big deal. The battle against patriarchy somehow has never been as kosher as the one against class and capitalism and quite conveniently what is forgotten is the direct and rather comfortable link between patriarchy and capitalism. The fact is that men decide what is kosher and what isn't. The fact is also that the gender question has been largely ignored by the proponents of class struggle and this has haunted the socialist movement from its very inception across the globe. The patriarchy of the left parties and the NGO sector in India is an open secret within these organisations and on many occasions I have been told by young women members of even left parties that are today at the forefront of the current protest about the kind of misogyny they face from their male comrades. I think the time has come for not only those that control the Indian state to do a quick rethink on their sexist, patriarchal and misogynist mindset but also for the party and non party left that create an impression that they are free of all patriarchal influence but are seriously infected by the virus and they are no different in their attitudes and thinking than any other political formation.

I am aware that this will not go down well with many of my friends from the left but I also know that silently a lot of women who are part of these organisations will agree with me. It may seem strange and inappropriate for me to raise this issue in the current context when the focus is on the shocking rape case that has stirred large sections of the Delhi population but I do believe that before we seek answers and demand corrective measures from the government of the day and the state we do need to look into our own homes and see how much disarray we keep smoothening over.

There are two kinds of reactions that seem to be gaining ground in the writings that are attempting to analyse the Delhi protests. One, that it is a bunch of middle class kids who have got incensed over what has happened to someone like them and the fear that this could have happened to any of them. And therefore it is about class solidarity and not really about a real questioning of patriarchy and all its ills.

The second opinion that seems to be floating around is that look we have been talking about rape in the context of Gujarat, Kashmir and Manipur and dalit women but there were never more than a handful to protest on these issues in Delhi and therefore the current protest is not truly about the hard reality of rape but a dilettante outburst with no clear focus and dangerous demands like the death penalty and mob justice.

What I have found disturbing for the last three decades of watching closely and often participating in what can be broadly termed the left politics of Delhi is the pompous moral superiority that we have carried and got buried under. Every protest has to be put through a scientific test of political clarity, correctness, class composition and has to come out with flying colours otherwise it has to be confined to the dustbin of history. How does it measure on the class angle? Is it informed by all the reports brought out on the Gujarat pogrom and the mass sexual assaults carried out by the saffron brigade? Is it anti neo liberal policy? Are they aware of all the gender debates that have taken place over the last forty years in this country? And of course the inconvenient question of their own class position is beyond any questioning because they have washed themselves clean of all sins by discovering a religion that has all the answers to solve all the problems of the world.

To these opinions all I have to say is that you stand in real and grave danger of being reduced to the bottom heap of the fast thinning history of the left dustbin. Wake up and smell the coffee is the best advice that as a fellow traveler and friend I can offer. Patriarchy and its discontents are as serious an issue as the play of class and struggles associated with it. I am aware that some people will be quick to give me the standard left line that women's oppression is part of capitalism and private property and that their ultimate liberation is linked to over turning the means of their oppression. My humble request to them is that while we wait for the revolution to occur what stops them from bringing a few changes in their homes and parties. Is capitalism sitting in their homes, offices or in their hearts? If fifty percent of human beings (much less in India!) are women why the hell do they have to wait for capitalism to disappear before they can breathe easy?

It may be provocative but I do feel it is worth examining why the question of women has always played second fiddle to that of class and why class itself is a euphemism for men in spite of all the nuanced understanding of it generated over more than a century. And I am also fully aware that there may not be a homogenous category called women and that they are divided through experiences of caste, class, ethnicity, etc but then what about patriarchy? While class, caste, etc divide women and pit them against each other patriarchy connects them and that is why while there is a plethora of celebratory literature that describe the moments of sharing and bonding of men across class, race and culture, there is a deep silence about the bonding of women. Men and women stand divided by class, caste and many other

social stratifications but patriarchy unites women. The only social phenomenon that makes men come together in spite of all kinds of other differences is of masculinity. Across classes, castes, political thought and ethnicities, masculinity and its ills bond men like nothing else. Masculinity is the great celebration of male bonding and has produced a significant amount of literature and history extolling its great virtues and capacities. If the young protesters at India Gate are not kosher on the scale of their political awareness then I would not hesitate to assert that those who question them are hypocritical because neither have they been uncompromising in their commitment against patriarchy within the traditions they represent.

While we well know the sickness that is Delhi Police and how worthless it may be expecting them to be institutionally gender sensitive it is far more serious that those political fronts that promise to have all the answers to human liberation are liberated of sexist, misogynist and anti women men and thoughts. While the dirt of the state and the government we want to wash in full public view, the patriarchy of the left we want to discuss in private and behind closed doors and not even in the organisational forums. This hypocrisy makes me sick.

In polite and more academic terms we could define masculinities as a sense of entitlement to power but if I were to put it more honestly it is a pathological condition. For sometime it has become popular to harp about the crisis of masculinity especially when sexual assault or violence has a class nature as some commentators have suggested while discussing the rape and assault of the young girl and her friend in Delhi but the fact is that masculinity has always been in a crisis. There never was a period when masculinity was not in a crisis. It is in a perpetual state of crisis because it valorizes itself at the cost of the feminine, it is obsessed with the idea of controlling female sexuality, it takes for granted that being male guarantees you with a set of power. It gathers a range of privileges and then neatly divides them amongst men on the basis of class, caste, sexual disposition, etc.

Men fight with each other over the share of these privileges but also unite when it comes to the question of women. And this unity is across classes and political spectrum simply because just like the young men who high jacked the protest and took the centre stage by throwing stones at the police and smashing police vehicles, men from the left and the right, in homes, in offices, in organizations, in factories, in political struggles think and believe that they are the centre of the universe, each one a special gift to human kind and with special rights , privileges and this comes naturally, no need to think, no self doubt, no self criticism. They are special and natural born sources of power and authority. So what if they don't even have an iota of sense of what it is to be a woman in this damn city and negotiate its public spaces, so what if their own parties and organizations are a dismal reflection of the discrimination and disparity women face. Men were born to be leaders and to lead and it would be impossible for them to even remotely entertain the thought that women should be leading this simply because it is fundamentally about what they undergo on a daily basis as a routine. The threat of rape and assault is real for women in this city and does not touch men remotely in the same way.

The disease of masculinity causes several related ailments, immunity and impunity being two main side effects. In recent past impunity of the state and its functionaries in the context of conflict zones has come in for sustained attention and examination. However, what seems to have missed attention is the fact that the training ground for impunity to be systematised and become part of practice comes from within the area of gender. The early lessons of impunity are taught in most if not all homes to all the male members. The disenfranchisement of girls and women within the domestic sphere then spills into various other areas of our social life. Masculinities provide an ideological basis for impunity to be legitimised and practiced. It makes it possible for men to think that they are the repositories of power and when that is the essence they carry then not just crime but also the right to lead all demonstrations and throwing stones at the police comes naturally. And crime against women comes that much easier because to be truly masculine men have to carry both a fear and hatred of the feminine close to their heart. Fear they say eats the soul. Women have been pointing out the toxic effects of masculinity forever, it is about time men too realised what they are doing to themselves by being defenders of systems that are not really concerned with their well being but instead use them as fodder to enforce discipline, punish errants, maintain status quo and act (in uniform or out of uniform) as front line protectors of all forms of injustice. In return for their services they get the right to subjugate and oppress women in the domestic sphere but then it is difficult to maintain these borders between the public and the domestic and women outside too become targets of an assertion of masculinity.

The last ten days have provided an opportunity of re narrating the sordid history of rape cases and rape trials in India. From Mathura to Soni Sori, from Kanun Pushpora to Manorama, from the daily humiliation and rape of dalit women across this country to Bilqees Bano, we have re read and re lived these horror tales. To me personally the only way to understand the nature of this phenomenon is to say that this is a war declared on women to achieve a range of affects that include masculine supremacy, communal revenge, caste subjugation and securing of national cartographic imaginations. Rape is not just about sex but it is an assault with the intention of marking bodies with a set of messages that can speak not just through the personal trauma of what the woman will go through but by what will be visible.

Rape is the memorialising of what can be achieved through the practice of masculinities. The inability of the phallus to live up to all its myth making capabilities requires then the use of phallic replacements, harder metallic instruments that are more capable of performing feats that masculinities pushes men to achieve through their phallus. The use of metal rods, guns shoved inside mouths, stones inserted into the rectum, knives used to carve the skin are all expressions that have rather erroneously being analysed as emanating from a crisis of masculinity. It is in the nature of masculinity.

Misogyny or hatred of women constitutes a critical building block of masculinities. Masculinity is a policing system that ensures the clock work functioning of all hierarchies. It comes in khakhi, it comes in saffron and it also comes in red and it comes with the threat of violence, always and without fail. It is utilised as much by patriarchy to punish errant women as by state authorities to subjugate protesting tribal populations in Chattisgarh and Orrissa. It is used to remind rebellious people of Kashmir that they are a subjugated lot and it is used by men on Delhi streets to remind women that they are transgressing. It is also used within the left tradition to dominate party positions, tell their women comrades what

appropriate dressing is all about and when they reassure women that their time will come after capitalism is brought down. Give me a break! And tragically, even those who suffer under its influence fall prey to responding to this policing by setting up their own version of it and thus casting themselves as the mirror image of those who oppress them.

The current ongoing protest in Delhi has become an opportunity for a collective catharsis, a moment that is allowing for the quotidian violence that women face to get a voice, an ear. It is a cry for help, an angry assertion of the right to free movement, a life of dignity and freedom from fear of rape. But what will it change? The irony is that if it had been organised and controlled by established political groups or even sections of the women's movement, it would never have achieved the sheer numbers and passion at display. However, its unorganised nature may also be its stumbling block though it is difficult to predict how these protests will influence individual lives. With media focusing on the radical demands of death penalty to rapists and castration, all the less sensational but more pertinent and creative assertions and demands being discussed and shared on the stretch from Raisina hill to Vijay chowk have faded into the background.

Irruptions are moments of churning when the establishment suddenly reveals its nature and for protesters the potential of political connections become that much more possible. However, we will have to wait and see if those connections were made by these protests. Did the dots add up to join the 23 year old student to Soni Sori and Bilquees Bano? It is when these dots join that the real nuts and bolts of injustices that function systematically become apparent, just as it did in the Mathura Rape case when it became clear to the women's movement that law as well as the justice system were not factors that mitigate violence but become sites for injustice, gender discrimination and violence. It is then that the dots reveal why the saffron brigade targeted Bilquees and scores of other Muslim women in Gujarat because as their leaders believe after a rape women are nothing but living corpses, a permanent reminder that we subjugated and violated 'your' women. Rape in conflict zones like Kashmir and Manipur carry the symbolic message of reminding local populations of who the rulers are and who the ruled. When dalit women are routinely subjected to verbal abuse, sexual harassment and raped it is a reminder of their social position and that they should not even dream of stepping out of local caste restrictions. When the 23 year old student was gang raped in a moving bus in Delhi it is a reminder to all women in Delhi that the city belongs to men. Rape serves multiple functions within patriarchy but they all have one common factor – men out to punish women. It is probably the oldest patriarchal sport. However, even if the dots don't merge, the young women of Delhi have a right to protest and remind men of this country that they are guaranteed equality by the Indian Constitution.

The young men and women at India Gate for a moment have provided a glimmer of a different order of things just like a carnival does, that it is possible to be men and defend the rights of women to be safe and to stand shoulder to shoulder with women against an indifferent administration. The protest until now has been significant because it has seen a large participation of young women who for the first time have taken to the streets in such large numbers and also for the fact that hundreds of young men have joined them in support and in empathy. However, many of these young men need to realize that they should learn to follow rather than assume leadership on the streets and at the picket. We can only hope that the protests have struck deep enough roots to make the public and domestic spheres of a country

that throws up some of the worst gender indices globally, a more tolerable one. And in the immediate context we can pray that the protest grows in strength and also manages to isolate those who through their acts of violence are pushing the young women off the streets and back into the so called safe domestic sphere. The women's groups and others have been quick to point out the problems of radical sounding demands like death penalty for rapists and mob justice, it is now for the protest to respond with a united front and a set of demands and assertions that will leave a much deeper impact as was shown by the women's movement in the Mathura rape case. Slogans and protest marches coupled with the deepest possible questioning of masculinities in homes, offices and political groupings could still make the current coming out of young people the most significant protest in post independence India against gender based violence.