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## Myriad Forms of Aggression

Geeta Ramaseshan

### THE VIOLENCE OF NORMAL TIMES: ESSAYS ON WOMEN'S LIVED REALITIES

Edited by Kalpana Kannabiran  
 Women Unlimited, Delhi, 2005, pp. 386, Rs. 500.00

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Women experience violence in myriad forms and changing political, social and economic structures have a deep impact in the way violence against women reconstitutes itself. Such violence brings forth complex realities and permeates all categories of women though the nature of violence would differ between different groups, classes and in different times. In the post-emergency period the focus of the discourse on violence against women was on concerns such as custodial rape and marital violence that was primarily linked to dowry. This gave rise to a series of legislations in this area. The eighties and nineties saw a shift in the discourse as fresh complexities arose with the rise of religious fundamentalism, identity politics, economic liberalization, increasing caste violence and internal displacement of large communities particularly adivasis. The violence that was unleashed in Gujarat in 2002 raised a host of concerns that has still left us benumbed as it did it in 1984 when violence was unleashed on members of the Sikh community.

The book in review addresses a slice of the kinds of violence faced by women. With a collection of ten essays and a rich introduction by the editor, the volume traces the development of a feminist understanding of violence against women across various fields. It also represents the range of writing that has been generated by the politics of women's movements in India. The essays cover a wide range topics starting from the traditional justice systems in India and gender relations in Adivasi communities, to women working in Export Processing Zones, lesbian women, women who are targets of communal hatred and the Gujarat Catastrophe. The essays explore various disciplinary standpoints in different locales. While much written themes such as dowry have been left out, the existing themes in the volume add a lot to the study of this subject and actually force a re-examination of the ways in which violence has been welded to the question of rights. The themes have been chosen with great care and include many issues that do not find a part in mainstream discourse.

In an exhaustive introduction Kannabiran addresses the complexity of violence that "locks women of different classes, castes and communities into multiple intersecting axes of inequality and discrimination that spread over a wide range—from social and economic life to political inequality—tying women of different classes together through the similarity of their experiences as women and holding them apart in almost unbridgeable ways through the differences in their experiences as members of different social classes." She includes a range of concerns such as practices of sexual violence against dalit women, right to survival among adivasi women and sexual harassment in the workplace outside salaried employment to name a few. Tracing the violence of caste and its link to gender in the Indian context, she stresses that the experience of dalit women gets written out of the realm of "women's rights" and gets "segregated" as a caste issue or vice versa disregarding the fact that there are interlocking mechanisms of dominance that together produce the vulnerability of dalit women. The segregation in civil society is reproduced in the law, so that the progressive articulations of justice for women, to the extent that they are available, become irrelevant to women of underprivileged classes. The introduction sets the pace of the book.

Vasudha Dhagamwar's "The Shoe fitted me and I wore it...." 'Women and Traditional Justice Systems in India', is a chilling narrative on disputes settled by caste panchayats that have their own substantive customs, traditions and procedures as well as rules of evidence. The violence meted to women starts from the way adjudication takes place, to the customs, procedures and rules for evidence, to the panchayat's perception of women. Her essay examines in great detail the working of these panchayats drawing upon the experiences and writings of dalit writers. There is very little documentation on how disputes get settled in the nonformal legal system and this essay is a very valuable contribution to an area which a lot more needs to be written about. Dev Nathan and Govind Kelkar in their essay, 'Women as Witches and Keepers of Demons' analyse the phenomena of witches and witch hunting among the Santal and Munda communities in Jharkand. In the 'Trauma of "Wage Employment"' and the "burden of work" for women in India', Padmini Swaminathan, addresses the violence on "gender biased development." Swaminathan bases her observations on narratives of women workers in the Madras Export Processing Zone. MEPZs are outside the pale of all labour laws and her paper offers a rare insight into the concerns of women working in MEPZ.

In 1994 mass hysterectomies performed on women inmates of a mentally retarded institution in Pune caused a big furor. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan focuses on this case in her detailed essay and raises the complex question about institutionalization in/ and the postcolonial state—and to explore strategies of social protest and struggle. Anjali Dave in her essay addresses the discipline of social work and its shifting patterns, the response of the criminal justice system to violence against women and the experience of the Special Cell for Women and Children.

In 'The Psychology of Domestic Violence', U. Vindhya addresses violence as a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in interplay of psychological, situational and socio-cultural factors. Basing her research on the etiology of domestic violence, she illustrates the multiplicity of coexisting

 

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perspectives ranging from psychological models of individual pathology and dysfunctional dynamics to social-structural and feminist explanations. Bin Fernandez and Gomathy N.B. address the violence faced by lesbian women in India. The authors begin with a discussion of

the complex intersections between gender and sexuality, and how people who transgress socially ascribed gender and sexuality roles become vulnerable to violence. Outlining the existing theoretical frameworks analysing violence against homosexuals they argue that institutional proscriptions against homosexuality act as a mandate for violence against lesbians and gays. The essay also discusses the intersections and the points of difference between the discourses on violence against women and violence against lesbians.

Stories |

Pratiksha Baxi's 'The Medicalisation of Consent and Falsity; The Figure of the Habitude in Indian Rape law' is a strong comment on the development of medical jurisprudence in rape law. While a large portion of the debate on reform of rape law in India has been in the area of evidentiary requirement of consent little attention has been paid to the requirement of expert evidence. The presence or absence of hymen is still an issue in rape trials and is used to attack the testimony of the women. The "two finger" test (that would indicate that two fingers could easily enter the vagina) is often used as an indicator to lead to the inference of virginity or sexual experience. Women victims—survivors of rape have to undergo this test on medical examination by the doctor who is then a crucial expert witness to the case. In her fine critique, Baxi observes, "the symbolic re-rape of women and female children by medico-legal techniques such as the two finger test describes how the particularized feminized body is wounded mimetically for society to name its humiliation. This acknowledgement is predicted on a repetition of the very act of humiliation for which the law is moved in the first place. We must ask ourselves how medico-legal techniques are deployed on women's bodies when rape continues to be normalized in courts of law."

The last two essays relate to Gujarat. Syeda Hameed in her essay describes her experience first as a member of the Women's Commission encountering gendered violence in the country and later as a member of a fact-finding team that went to Gujarat after the violence. Describing the testimonies she observes, "none of us who were members of the fact finding team have ever been the same again. Nothing that we had read or watched on television screens had prepared us for what we saw." It is the testimonies that need to be told again and again lest the events slip our collective consciousness.

Upendra Baxi's 'The Gujarat Catastrophe: Notes on Reading Politics as Democidal Rape Culture', situates the experience of violence and trauma in Gujarat in the larger context of the creation of hegemonic, religio-political apparatuses and ideological formations that are predicated on the enforcement of rape cultures. Addressing the question of what is "post Gujarat 2002", Dr. Baxi analyses it in eight ways. First, it constitutes a temporal register for practices of power with the return of Narendra Modi. "Second, the prefix also constructs the temporal register of many after-the-event diverse practices of politics for human rights. Third, the term also indicates the shattered lives of survivors of the catastrophe. Fourth, the prefix de-politicizes a political programme into a genre of criminal violence by randomly bringing to public view the individualized suspects, accused or miscreants while mystifying the community of perpetrators." Fifth, the difficulty in comprehending the term in view of the meta discourse of secularism in India, sixth, questions concerning globalizations and the kinds of impacts this has had for political, mass media, popular and academic representations of the violence, seventh, the role of persons of Indian origins worldwide in playing a Hindutva orchestrated Jehadi role. And the last poser, "How may 'we' avoid complicity in the practices of re-writing as violence?"

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