

OPINION



ALTAF QADRI / AP

Women need to feel safe in public, not hide in private

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by **Shilpa Phadke**

On May 27 in the village of Katra in Uttar Pradesh in northern India, two young girls belonging to a lower caste were kidnapped while they went to the fields to relieve themselves. They were gang-raped, murdered and hanged from a mango tree. When the girls' family sought to file a report, the police refused to lodge a complaint.

The image of the young women hanging from the tree was flashed across television screens and on the Internet, in a blatant [violation](#) of an Indian law that prohibits disclosing the identity of rape victims. The attack, perhaps because of this gruesome and horrifying image of lynching, has caught the attention of the Indian media. Several articles have latched onto the fact that the young girls were out of their homes after dark because they did not have a toilet indoors. This has led to a call for a focus on sanitation and the provision of toilets. There seems to be some sort of consensus that the provision of private toilets will prevent rape.

This conclusion seemed to be supported by the abduction and rape of four young girls from the village of Bhagana in March [while relieving themselves outside](#). The girls were knocked unconscious, and when they woke up, found themselves lying on a train platform 90 miles from their home, their bodies bruised and their clothes ripped.

Caste issues

There are two important arguments worth discussing here. The first is an argument that many feminist and anti-caste activist writers have made: that the two girls were raped, murdered and lynched not because of a lack of toilets but because of India's [caste](#) affiliations and the historical precedent that makes lower-caste women's bodies the subject of sexual and other kinds of violence perpetrated by upper-caste men. In the Katra case, the girls belonged to a lower caste than their alleged assailants, and this gave the men impunity. The police, who belonged to the same caste as the alleged criminals, initially refused to file a case. In the Bhagana case, the girls were Dalits, belonging to castes considered the lowest in the hierarchy, while the alleged attackers (who have not yet been convicted) belonged to the dominant Jat caste.

“ Toilet talk reinforces the notion that a good woman is preferably indoors, especially after dark.”

The second argument questions the role of toilets in India's rape problem. This is a development I have been following closely as a researcher on the subject of women's access to public space and facilities. There is, by all accounts, a lack of sanitation and toilets across the country in both cities and villages. And yes, toilets are important to women: They reduce their vulnerability to attacks and address the adverse health impact of poor sanitation, which includes dehydration from not drinking enough water and urinary and reproductive tract infections.

However, the point really is that women should have access to public spaces even after dark without fear, whether they're toilets in tiny villages or streets in big cities. What's more, going to the fields provides women with a space to chat and hang out among themselves. The presence of private toilets may well erode women's capacity to loiter in this fashion.

Honor code

Focusing on toilets conveniently elides the question of access to public space. If indoor toilets keep women safe, the implication is that women could be kept indoors forever — for their own safety, of course. Never mind that around the world, home is the least safe place for women: The largest proportion of assaults take place in the home. Toilet talk reinforces the notion that a good woman is preferably indoors, especially after dark.

And yet toilets are being promoted not just as a social good but as an almost moral one. As part of a recent government campaign promoting toilets inside the house, Bollywood actor Vidya Balan appears in an [advertisement](#) alongside a young bride who lifts her veil to drink water. The bride's in-laws frown on the action to show that traditionally women do not show their faces to outside men in their marital villages. The character played by Balan is sitting next to the bride and asks the mother-in-law where the toilet in the house is. “Not inside,” says the older woman. “She will have to go in the open.”

“Then,” says Balan to the bride, as if to shame her, “daughter-in-law, you may as well lift your veil.” Balan proceeds to tell the older woman, “On the one hand, you find it unacceptable for your daughter-in-law to even lift her veil slightly, and on the other hand, she has to go in the open.” A [similar ad](#) has Balan lauding a young woman for walking out of her husband's home the day after her wedding and (successfully) demanding a toilet inside the house.

The campaign is well intentioned, with Balan exhorting viewers with the tag line “Where there are thinking people, there are toilets inside the house.” However, a focus on private toilets in the absence of a similar effort toward public toilets and safer public spaces overall is a limited and limiting venture. The thrust of this campaign seems to be to protect women's privacy and dignity by keeping them veiled, hidden and indoors.

Fostering liberation

That isn't to say that the call for toilets inside the home isn't a good thing. It will certainly make women significantly more comfortable. But the movement conveniently dovetails with ideologies that equate honor and dignity with women's not being seen outside. Keeping women in the home also prevents their meeting “unsuitable” men of different castes. Ironically, in the absence of a law against marital rape, there is no protection from the ostensibly suitable men they marry.

My collaborative research based in Mumbai has focused on the value of public toilets as a means of enhancing women's access to public space. A number of recent reports mentioned that girls use toilets at school during terms but that those facilities are closed during vacations — hence their need to use the fields. School toilets hold the key to some transformation: The provision of public toilets (or community toilets, as they are often called) rather than private ones might solve the problems of health without restricting women to the home. In addition, it would address the problem that many people don't want a toilet (which they see as dirty) in their homes.

What we need to focus on, then, is public infrastructure for citizens rather than provision of private facilities for individuals. We must see the provision of toilets in the same light as the provision of public transport — as a means to create greater, not less, access for the public. The presence of public toilets that are always open sends the message that women are expected to be in public space at all times

of the day and night. They enshrine women’s right to have access to public space, as opposed to contributing to their forced confinement. As the women’s movement has articulated over and over again, the creation of private infrastructure does little to further a feminist cause of liberation and may even be an obstacle to it.

In this context, it is important to talk about the right to access and about public access as a value in itself. Unless we recognize that access to public space is inherently valuable — if only for the sheer pleasure of being outside and in the world, for the capacity to make choices about one’s own body and mind — we will not be able to transcend the focus on a restrictive and conditional safety for women, epitomized in the recent obsession with toilets. No matter where in the world we live, whether in Delhi or Mumbai or Katra or Bhagana or Steubenville or Santa Barbara, women’s safety must be tied not to the dubious promise of private protection but to the freedom to access public space as citizens.

Shilpa Phadke is an assistant professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai, India, and is a co-author of “Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets.”

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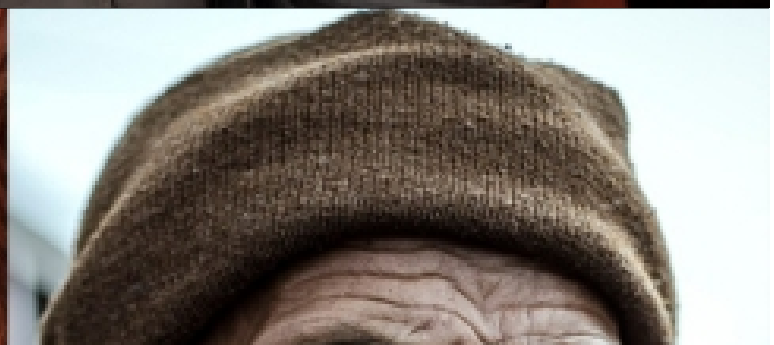




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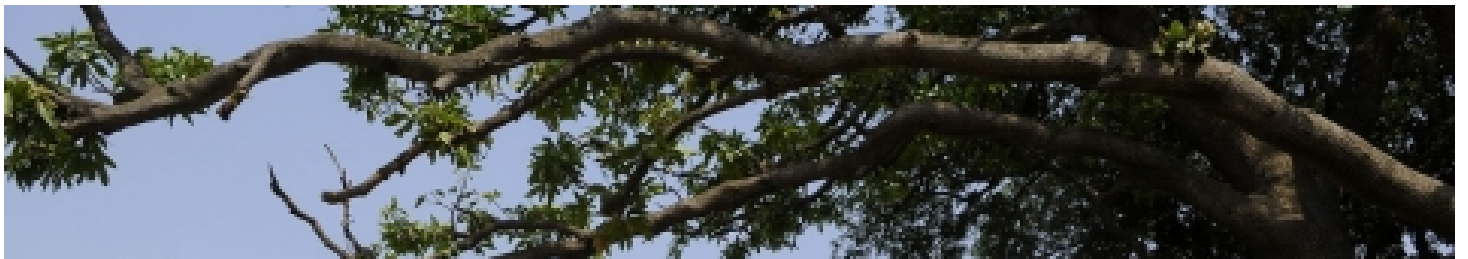
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dodi70

164 days ago

This is not about sanitation! This is about a nation that tolerates barbaric behavior. People are not respected equally and women are treated like animals. There needs to be a re-education of the entire country, from top to bottom. The caste system should be abolished, period. All rapes should be punished harshly. If you rape a child you should get death. Any officer that does not file a report when a female is raped should be fired and prosecuted.

REPLY

0



Soodipto Arts

192 days ago

Sanitation is perhaps one angle to the issue. What contributes largely to atrocities against women is the law for protecting women. There's a law that enable a married woman to seek legal safeguards against her husband and in-laws which in many cases, some men believe, are being misused by women to seek revenge of sorts. the entire families of both the bride and groom get into a nasty legal battle forgetting the good times they shared with

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women to seek revenge or sorts. the entire families of both the bride and groom get into a nasty legal battle forgetting the good times they shared with each other. This notion is fast spreading in many parts of India and is perhaps one major source in alarming rise of rapes.

REPLY

0 ↑ ↓



Paul Howard

193 days ago

India's core difficulty is it has become confused about its real spiritual culture due to so many years under foreign conquerors and the influence of Kali Yuga. The spiritual varnāśrama dharma system has unfortunately been replaced with caste by birth, and the worship of Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, has been largely replaced with impersonalism (advaita or māyāvāda), materialism, and demigods worship, which are all different forms of atheism.

Krishna says in Bhagavad-gītā 4.13:

"According to the three modes of material nature and the work associated with them, the four divisions of human society are created by Me. And although I am the creator of this system, you should know that I am yet the non-doer, being unchangeable."

In Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, Nārada Muni explained:

SB 7.11.35: If one shows the symptoms of being a brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya or śūdra, as described above, even if he has appeared in a different class, he should be accepted according to those symptoms of classification.

The chapter concluding with that verse describes how society can function perfectly under the Divine law given by Krishna, God. This is meant for spiritual upliftment, which gives a joyful atmosphere. No other plan can truly help. Kali yuga is advancing, but its bad effects may be easily countered with the resumption of true spiritual culture, with Krishna in the center.

As stated by Śukadeva Gosvāmi in Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam:

SB 12.3.51: My dear King, although Kali-yuga is an ocean of faults, there is still one good quality about this age: Simply by chanting the Hare Krishna mahā-mantra, one can become free from material bondage and be promoted to the transcendental kingdom.

REPLY

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sanaulla sharief

192 days ago

IS IT POSSIBLE?

For a Sudra to become a 'mahant' of Tirupati Mandir and Brhamans and Kashtrayas to be manual human excreta scavengers?

Just a role reversal.

REPLY

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Biranchi Acharya

189 days ago

Yes earlier it was possible till vested interest group take over!

REPLY

0 ↑ ↓



RichardSzulewsk

194 days ago

"As the women's movement has articulated over and over again, the creation of private infrastructure does little to further a feminist cause of liberation and may even be an obstacle to it."

Bizarre statement.

Toilets are about sanitation not "rights." Creation of public/private toilets is about sanitation. Making it a feminist act is pathetic in its shameless attempt at politicizing.

REPLY

0 ↑ ↓



Paul Howard

194 days ago

Criticising practical solutions for women's safety because of conflicting with feminist ideology seems rather unethical.

REPLY

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