

## **Our Duty to Morality**

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**Abstract:** Societal violence against children in general and sexual violence against the girl child are rising alarmingly. Seen as soft victims, neither multiple state legislations nor natural laws of morality have been able to keep them safe. The issue becomes contentious when violence is perpetrated along gender, class, and religious identities. The justice system is being co-opted to stand with the oppressors, intent on preventing the voice of support to the victims from rising, effectively shrinking and shutting down spaces for displaying solidarity and social dissent. A scene India witnessed in its horrific intent in 2018 in what came to be called the Kathua Rape Case.

Through the perspective of life writing, this paper will reflect on how an individual response to this heart-wrenching event developed into an organic community protest in a calm seaside town of South India, hundreds of miles removed from the mountains of Kashmir. When the State denied permission to assemble, fearing a larger discontent, the civil society demonstrated its resolve and coalesced to raise a silent voice against the violence and brutal molestation of an eight-year-old child. All this peacefully, without defying authority, and without breaking any rules.

**Keywords:** sexual crimes, child sexual abuse, justice system, failure, Kashmir, Kathua rape case.

### **The Case**

On 17<sup>th</sup> January 2018 in the forests of Jammu, the body of an eight-year-old Muslim girl child was discovered, she had been subjected to extreme physical and sexual violence. Our lives have been so inundated with an information overreach that the resultant clutter has made us inured to our surroundings. After all, how much can we react to? The how much becomes too much and, in hardening our senses, it also hardens our mind. But there was something about this

child from Kathua that held me captive. Maybe her expressive eyes or her impish smile or the oversized tunic of purple with yellow flowers or her hair.

The deeper I explored the more I worried about her parents. I read she was an adopted child, the parents had lost two young girls the year before in an accident. The mother was despondent and the father, to bring some comfort to his wife, had adopted his brother-in-law's daughter. The semi-nomadic family rearing horses and sheep, moved from the mountains to the plains together and the child must have been loved and pampered by all around her. She ran like a 'deer' when the group travelled and looked after the herds. I thought of the birth mother and her pain. No one seemed to remember to share her grief.

And then the details of the case starting emerging. Revolting and soul-searing reports. The child had been reported missing on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January and from then till the time she was found, she had been kidnapped, sedated, and held captive.

She was held captive in a Hindu temple and sedated to prevent her from attempting an escape or to respond to sounds of her name being called out by her rescuers and the search parties formed to locate her. Ironically, her father looked everywhere for her didnot search for her in the temple, for he knew that it was a very sacred place. The sexual violence continued for nearly seven days before she was strangulated and bludgeoned to death with a large stone. A little child suffering so much pain; cold, hungry, terrified, and alone. What will-power she must have summoned to stay alive; in her drugged state and mind, how many times must she have called out to her mother, her father, her brothers? And waited for them to come and fetch her and save her.

It was in this sacred place that eight men, including two special police officers, held the eight-year-old child captive and abused her body until it went limp and bones broke. People from different walks of life banded together to protest. I was relieved when I read the headlines but my hope soon turned to despair. The article suggested that many groups had been formed to protest against the arrest and detention of the eight men. The state of Jammu and Kashmir and the entire country too, stood divided on religious identity. The crime itself had been committed to terrorize the ethnic nomadic Muslim Bakerwal tribe, from the mountains of Srinagar, to drive them away from the water sources and grasslands of Jammu (Sharma, 2020).

It disturbed me that, at a time of great shame and sorrow, there were people who were defending the perpetrators of this heinous crime. As a nation, when we should have come together to heal, we had somehow managed to divide ourselves even more, along sectarian lines. The blame game reached a crescendo when lawyers of the Jammu Bar association prevented the Crime Department police officers from entering the Courthouse to file the charge sheet . The lawyers offered to provide free legal aid to the accused.

I was in a commuter job in 2018. Travelling between two cities, Chennai and Mumbai. In addition to keeping up with the work and the travel schedules, I had to manage my Mumbai house as my husband had taken over running the Chennai one. In the coming and going of life, I kept up with the news only as much as the available time would allow. My two elder daughters had recently moved to the USA to pursue their graduate studies and I was worried about them and their safety all the time. My youngest daughter, in her first year of college, was at my home in Chennai. The state of my mind, missing my daughters thousands of miles away, amplified the pain. The news and the reactions, political and social, seemed like a body blow. I worried about my daughters. I also mourned the loss of this ‘little bird’ as the eight-year-old girl’s mother described her. I could neither eat nor sleep. I felt compelled to stand up for the ‘bird’ now, so that she and her mother would know that she was cared for.

Disregarding the guidelines protecting the identity of the victims of sexual crime, her name and photographs had been splattered all over town. I could see her face, and her eyes and her purple dress with yellow flowers, and it seared the soul. The dress defined her in life and identified her in her death. The eyes, when open and alive and happy, their gaze pure and trusting, spoke of innocence and hope. But the same eyes, open and glassy, were terrifying. They revealed the depth of depravity to which men could fall. And then the ignominy didn’t stop there, the family was denied under threat, the right to bury their child in a plot they owned and had to bury her in a cemetery about seven kilometers away from their surroundings. A child left lonely in her death.

### **#MyStreetMyProtest**

#### **A social revolution through social media**

Away from her State, India reacted differently. The Kathua case turned out to be the catalyst of a social movement in India. India already saw the strength of social voice after the Nirbhaya Case (Ahmed et al, 2017). Social movements primarily take the form of non-institutionalised collective political action which strives for political and /or social change (Shah, 2004). India has witnessed many social movements over the last hundred years, from the peasant, tribal, students, independence, women’s, caste, labour, many social revolutions have helped in societal course correction and developing a more just society (Shah, 2004).

Amplifying the voice of anger now more than ever was the omnipresent social media. Comprising of internet-driven online platforms, like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, social media have caught the fancy of the young and the old alike. It has become an important medium available for content-sharing and reaching people beyond one’s networks (Asur and Huberman, 2010). Social media have recently played a significant role in social revolutions, specifically

those in Tunisia, Egypt, Iceland, Spain, and the global Occupy movement. Government control over pliant media can ensure a wily method of hidden censorship, such that views and opinions inimical to the authorities can be prevented from reaching the masses. Thereby, social media's role becomes very important in social revolutions. This is well illustrated in the statement, "The revolution will be tweeted", a rhetorically forceful phrase, to borrow a concept from the media sociologist Michael Schudson (1989). The phrase invokes Gil Scott-Heron's 1970 track "The Revolution will not be Televised" (Kidd and McIntosh, 2016).

Something similar happened in India too, the media's efforts to sanitize the whole issue with carefully released sound-bytes met with incredulity. The entire country erupted at this depraved violation and mind-numbing violence to which the child had been subjected. Online street protests were organized all over India under the hashtag #MyStreetMyProtest. Almost everyone wanted to do their bit, play their part. The purple dress with yellow flowers, the big brown eyes, child-like innocence in a gentle child-like smile shook the system out of its slumber. To me, struggling with my emotions and worries, this seemed like the path that I was trying to find.

Living in Chennai, one can not be detached from the sea and the sand. They are a part of Chennai's lifeline. As the summer heat sizzles, the vast expanse of water cools down the city. The beach attracts life forms of every kind, crabs, fish, mollusks, crows, dogs, cats. Horses are available for short rides. Small fairs are an integral part of the beach. It is a magnet, it attracts people, families, lovers, grandparents, children, uncles, aunts, office-goers. A sea of differences on a seashore, everyone trying to find an evening breeze to cool down. In a way, the beach is every Chennaite's 'my street'. The peaceful satyagraha by standing on the beach with a placard honouring the child from Kathua seemed the most natural thing to do.

I wanted to organize a peaceful vigil at the popular Besant Nagar Beach. I didn't know if others would join me, I was not going to ask anyone. Post the JalliKattu flare-up, public gatherings are banned on the many beaches of Chennai (Kalaiyarasan, 2017). And due to a large number of people out at the beach on a Sunday evening, I did not want anyone to take advantage of the situation and foment trouble. I approached the Besant Nagar Police Station and asked for permission to silently stand at the beach or off it. The first salvo came from the local police. I was asked if I was related to the girl, I was also asked if I was a Muslim. I was questioned about the numbers. All answers in negative, and I told them I want to stand alone. As I anticipated, even the permission was 'negative'. And I was directed to the Police Commissioner's Office.

An email to the Commissioner's office asking for an appointment received a quick reply, reiterating the state government's stand. It also informed that there was no need to visit the Commissioner's office. Gatherings at Bessie (Besant Nagar's beach's local name) will not be allowed but the venue of the vigil could be shifted to a place called Valluvar Kottam. I told the

officer that I did not want to shift there as the place is marked for political protests. I told them 'I am just an anguished citizen. If I go there, It will get a political hue'. I was politely but firmly told that there will be no assembly at the beach. My response did not even register. The police were worried about containing the crowds if they decide to 'gate crash' my party of one, uninvited.

I was trying to organize a vigil, not a protest. To grieve the child from Kathua, the little life lost viciously and senselessly. A girl, stalked, drugged, trapped, brutalized, strangled with her scarf, and then bludgeoned to death. The sheer physical effort of explaining my intentions to the police functionaries exhausted me and I called off my imaginary program, as yet only worked out in my mind. If a gathering at the beach creates a problem as the Commissioner's office thought, then it is not going to work. I wanted to work within the ambit of the law. Justice has to be claimed through the laws of the country. It is the law that has to be strengthened. Creating lawlessness was not the aim.

### **The Sunday, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2018.**

By Sunday afternoon, I had all but given up and was delving into the depths of despair when I received a phone call from my daughter. She had designed the poster for the vigil. To hold and stand asking for justice for the young girl. A simple red placard with the words #Justice for Kathua. It was sitting in my downloads folder, unprinted and waiting. A vigil that I had all but given up. She told me, no, she instructed me, to walk a hundred meters from our house to the local beach down the road. Stand on the side of the road away from the sand. Not to step on the sand. And hold the poster and just stand there. The poster was printed in a hurry, and I walked accompanied by my youngest daughter to the spot my eldest daughter had indicated, and the two of us stood there. And we waited under the hot sun holding our white, red and black posters.

Two of us. Just the two.

Chennai is a strange place, highly educated demographics, well advanced in technology, science, and learning. Religion and caste are dominant factors of life. One can not miss it, for no one hides it. The Brahminical symbols, the religious identities, the caste markers are all there. Everyone sticks to their identity. My twenty years of living in Chennai always found me an outsider. My house help still calls me Delhi Amma. Standing here, I was reinforcing my identity as an outsider.

But something unexpected happened. First hesitatingly, and then following others, in ones and two's and groups, everyone who passed by, stopped and joined us. They asked for posters to hold, to show their solidarity, to show their anger, and above all to show that they

cared. The religious identities, the caste divisions just melted into nothingness. I had to send word home to print more posters and send them across as quickly as possible. I had to send this message three times.

People on their way to the beach chose to stand with us. The numbers swelled and the lines grew magically. Started as two and on the way we met so many people who helped, supported, and made today possible. It quickly moved from me to we to us. In doing so, it demonstrated the power of decency and the power of community.

There were many who were not interested, questioning the need, use, and also the impact of this; how will it change, this is a rotten system, but after they questioned us, they too deferentially joined the lines, because hope triumphs over despair.

The local police also dropped by, but not a single person was standing on the sand, everyone was on the side of the road. Quietly and peacefully. No laws were broken, no lawlessness created. A peaceful gathering, remembering a young child with no other connection to the people gathered there, except for the one ingrained in humanity.

That day, standing with so many people; some known, most unknown; some friends, many who became friends, maids, drivers, fisherfolks, corporate big-wigs, academicians, doctors, IT professionals, college kids, young kids, babies, beach-walkers, dog walkers, grandparents, retired civil-servants; one thing became abundantly clear. No one can destroy the idea of India. They may try, they may temporarily succeed too, but we are much bigger than the sum of all our parts.

In a land by the sea, far away from her cold mountains and grassy plains, the little, wide-eyed girl from Kathua, managed to unite the country and remind us of our duty to morality.

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