

India's Daughter? A Take on the Recent Documentary Film

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ABSTRACT: *We witnessed yet another disturbing incident of brutal gang rape and murder on 16th December 2012. The pent up anger of a million such disasters found vent. People were out on the streets, there was halla bol, a revolution of sorts was born. This is not to say that any of the things that happened was happening for the first time. But the level of participation and oneness of opinion against the establishment's apathetic and insensitive take on every serious issue was spectacular. All efforts during the December 2012 movement and since were to widen the canvas, make a shift from the idea of just a few animals who perpetrated violence on a woman on 16th December and to make a platform of action and debate against a more systemic rape culture and "denial of autonomy to women in homes, schools, by the state machinery, by the caste system, by communal violence." What started with a peaceful protest, ended on an ugly and shameful note with violence perpetrated by authorities in power robbing us of many rights all in one go. Women and men were engaged in high scale mass protests of a level never witnessed before and establishments were visibly shaken. All of this came undone with a 'saviour' documentary film, that was made and released three years after the gang rape. A film that screams 'patriarchy' from its very title, Leslie Udwin's, "India's Daughter".*

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KEY WORDS: *Patriarchy, Revolution. Orientalism and brutal violence.*

THE Saviour Attitude of the West

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that was made and released three years after the gang rape. A film that screams 'patriarchy' from its very title, Leslie Udwin's, "India's Daughter".

There has been, I would say, a dishonest and to a certain extent, successful effort of sentimentalizing the whole issue by capturing the rape victim Jyoti's mother's outbreak of tears on the screen, along with other emotional snippets of Jyoti's kind heartedness at treating a beggar boy who steals her things, with love and buying him clothes and food of his choice. This did, largely help in diverting many people's minds from the many loopholes of the film, making it, to some level, immune to critique. But on a second viewing, things might become clearer. And then when one goes back to recall the time of the protests three years ago, it can be recollected, as Kavita Krishnan very rightly mentions in her article "**Nirbhaya film: Solidarity is what we want, not a civilising mission**", 'people who followed the movement that flooded India's streets after December 16, would have noticed the anger of the women protesters against being identified as "daughters", "mothers", "sisters" instead of as individual women in their own right. One of the most important things about that campaign was the rejection of patriarchal protectionism'. Is this movie then a global campaign against gender violence or gender violence personified?

The film lacked objectivity and clearly a sense of purpose. Or perhaps, the purpose was too strong and patent. If only "India's Daughter" had made a direct claim in the first place of being a one of its kind global rescue mission for 'uncivilised' Indians, there would not have been so many eye brows raised on its innocent and well meaning attempt of simply campaigning against gender violence. At multiple points the film seeks to prove that rapes in India are a result of our cultural backwardness. I would like to mention another point here, from Krishnan's essay, that I agree with. While we sitting here in India would find it tempting to say that women in "Muslim countries" or the Muslim community are much more unsafe than Indian women or Hindu women, similarly it could be reassuring for someone sitting in the UK or the US to feel 'pity' and horror at the gender violence and "brutal attitudes" in India. However, pointing fingers on such matters not only makes us blind to our own 'brutality' but also does something much more dangerous. It leads to internalization on our part of what happens at our end. It assumes the stature of the 'norm'. It becomes 'normal'. We come to terms with what happens at our side, as right somehow because only if we see ourselves as right can we usually see the 'other' as wrong. Sometimes, an action that takes place away from our comfort zone, helps us see things in a better light. With that realization, we ought to share views and try to seek 'civilised' solutions to problems. Assuming the role of 'saviour' limits our understanding of the situation and does not help us offer the aid we might really want to.

Issues have been raised in India about how the violent speech of Mukesh Singh and his lawyer will not only perpetuate more violence against women but also show all Indian men in bad light. One response to this has been that giving Mukesh space to voice his opinion seems to be a good exercise because it gave us a glimpse of the rapist's psyche. But when we talk of rape culture, we

need to understand and appreciate that rape is not about fun and sex. Rape is about a want to overpower the body of the other. "We wanted to teach her a lesson," Mukesh says because she was out late at night. A woman's entry into the world of the man at 'his time' kind of encroaches on his space and questions his power. So talking of rape just as a medical condition then, not only trivialises it, it also over simplifies it to a great extent and it then becomes an aberration.

The film is Orientalist in its approach at many junctures. In terms of the shooting of the slums and squalor, along with the perpetrators' families and their surroundings, in laying over enthusiastic and at times, unneeded emphasis on the poverty of the rapists, their hand to mouth condition, Udwin does something very dangerous. She seems to be proving, that a rapist-psychology emerges out of lack of bread and butter and unemployment in third world countries. We know this is not true. Effluent men who supposedly have no good reason to indulge in any kind of violence, have been found guilty of multiple rapes both in India and abroad. The director should have tried to focus on why this poverty has found place in any system at all. A good idea would be to explore the prevalent structural violence, the rigid binary between the rich and poor, the haves and the have-nots and the role of the Indian elite sector, and even more so the West. But in the movie, Udwin's attempt, no matter how well-meaning, seems very limited to me and has made the individuals look culpable for their own social and economic condition.

Another point is that, more than once in the movie, we find mention of the fact that 'Nirbhaya' was "a speaker of good English", a typical oriental comment. I understand why Paromita Vohra calls the movie 'primitive' then. Its works in a predictable fashion and explores very little for topics as inflammatory and volatile as gender violence and structural violence in a country like India and world over as well. Udwin's intentions might be good but it is, more often than not, the West with good intentions that is more dangerous than the hostile xenophobe. The cultural essentialism, so visible in the movie, is a harmful thing that we should stay immune to.

Another very dangerous and perhaps the most dangerous thing that the movie does, is to valorise Jyoti/ Nirbhaya to an extent that she becomes almost aerial, nonexistent. She is accorded the status of a girl so fine and with such good 'morals' that if anything bad had to happen to anyone, that anyone surely shouldn't have been her. This is much like what Victor does in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. He frequently calls his beloved "angel" and so on, never letting her be a solid, living breathing woman with traits both good and bad. Women there, are frequently likened to roses; fragile, dainty, beautiful and not human. M.L Sharma does the same here in this documentary movie with his "woman is a flower, woman is a diamond" theory. But the documentary at its own level also does the same thing, which is its biggest failure. The film lays unneeded emphasis on such trivial points that one is forced to believe that Udwin wishes to make a point through their mention. Nirbhaya's friend wanted to watch an action movie but she wanted to watch Life of Pi. Had she not wanted to watch that movie and seen the action one instead or if

she would have watched a romantic movie with her male friend, would that have made her rape justifiable?

The movie shows a clipping of the second defence lawyer who stated he would take his womenfolk to his farmhouse and set them ablaze with petrol if they behaved 'immorally'. The West, on the one hand, maintains that the Indian mindset is narrow and needs much improvement. Udwin got her shock registered when she said "men's brutal attitudes truly shocked me," and there were comments made on the 'uncivilised' mindsets here and on the other hand the film places Jyoti in a safe 'morally sound' space by telling us that she concentrated on studies, was hardworking, very benevolent and that it was "only" eight in the night and she was not too late. To sum it up, she was a "good girl". If she wouldn't have been very kind, or would not have liked to study as many of us don't or if it was eleven instead of eight would she not have deserved to have a documentary made for her then? This feeds the ideology of the rapists of good women and bad women. The over dramatisation of the point of the woman's goodness takes the spotlight away from the main issue at many times. Irrespective of a woman's 'moral' report card, because morality is a subjective term, she needs to feel safe and free to do what she wants on any land.

It would be interesting to try to understand Udwin's psychology here too. Considering the fact that she was raped too and that she is a survivor, her 'love' for the victim finds some kind of legitimisation. But does her construction of the victim seem fair? Would she have liked to have a film made on her which seemed to say that what happened with her was wrong not because everyone deserves to be safe but because she, of all people had a very 'good' character? Keeping this in mind that she too had been subjected to similar kind of trauma, Udwin's movie should have been more open in its outlook and more inclusive of larger issues at hand, and she should have exploited her directorial license to the fullest and perhaps gone all out to make a strong point. This movie however seems to play into the hands of patriarchy, justifies the idea of 'moral codes of conduct' and at various levels, forgets its main purpose (if it had any) and gets too busy in highlighting India's general brutal mindset and poverty.

However, all said and done, a ban on anything is the worst fate that the work can suffer. By all means, the documentary should have been open for everyone to watch and there should be free debate about it. I have listed out here, important points that I feel were either emphasised on too much or not emphasised on at all. I have pin-pointed matters that appear to me, loopholes in the documentary. By pointing out that the movie projects India, Indian women or men a certain way, I am not waving a nationalist flag at all. I am merely voicing my opinion on something I viewed carefully. I firmly believe that airing of any such documentary or anything else should not be prevented at any cost. It should be open for dialogue. Such platforms give birth to multiple narratives and various takes on one issue which helps us enter texts and other media through spaces which we did not even know, existed. We should be free to form an opinion, whatever it

may be, of everything around us. No authority should have the power to rob us of the right to decide what we like to watch and comment on. And no one community should think that changes be made to a certain thing and only then should it be aired because a certain group dislikes what is shown. This is where platforms of discussion come in. What had to be made is made. What should follow is discussion, not ban. Udwin's discourse should most definitely not shape how we look at this issue or how we view the various 'others' in different contexts. In fact it should give us more space to voice our take on the subject as well as on the director's take on it.

Works Cited

1. Krishnan, Kavita. "Nirbhaya film: Solidarity is what we want, not a civilising mission", 2015.