



The outrage over the Kathua and Unnao rape cases has its problems. The major one is that it leads one to believe that these crimes – and their fall-out – are something new, when in fact they are the norm in India. Rape has been used historically all over the world to terrorise, but continues so in India, where rapes of the vulnerable – women and men, children and adult – are routine. Plus some rapes are not even considered crimes by the law, like marital rape. Many rapes are also not even reported because the rapists are relatives and other known people, and the new death penalty will only worsen this. Besides all this, the armed forces of the country are routinely accused of horrifying rapes, including Kunan-Poshpora of 1991 and many others in Kashmir, and the 2004 Manorama case in Manipur, about which justice has rarely, if ever, been done.

What would be the response of our leaders to this ugly situation? Very little, except for the populist quick-fix of death penalty, which will only worsen things, as many women's organisations have pointed out, making it more likely that rape will be accompanied by murder of the victim, and also increasing the stigma attached to rape and the raped. There has been no attempt to address or even acknowledge the social and political scenarios, along with the law enforcement disaster, that fuel our rape culture. Instead, the Vice-President, BJP's Venkaiah Naidu, now declares that abuse of women was not Indian culture at all, but the result of colonial rule. Indian tradition sees the nation as Bharatmata, he says, while the major rivers were named after women and worshipped; if women were not respected despite such traditions, it was because of foreign rule.

It is interesting that Naidu could not think of actual women being respected, only the nation and rivers. And Indian rivers may be worshipped as goddesses, but they are also among the filthiest in the world; while portraying the nation as mother is just another example of patriarchy, where the nation becomes something whose 'honour' has to be 'protected'. Such logic in fact creates the situation where communities are attacked through sexual violence on the women.

But Naidu's main argument – of blaming colonial rule – is nothing new. India's problems are

usually put down to colonial rule (if not Islam) by the dominant castes, for it's an easy way to hide the failures of post-1947 nation-building and their own culpability, and also to protect the caste system that they continue to profit by. We've heard a similar argument in Goa too, when Lata Dhavalikar, of the Sanatan Sanstha, declared that rape is the result of girls studying in convent schools. This disgusting attempt at victim-blaming was supported by her husband, Deepak Dhavalikar, then Goa's Factories Minister, who said that "When girls used to follow Hindu culture, there was no instance of rape."

This theory is actually laughable, if not perverse. The truth that the colonial period is the time when many South Asian women got a chance to escape oppressive situations, say many historians. For example, Goa in the sixteenth century saw the prohibition of the heinous practice of sati, and widows being allowed to marry again; women are also recorded as being enthusiastic converts to Christianity as it offered them greater freedom to participate in worship (Angela Barreto Xavier, 2007), and also to inherit property. Meanwhile, in 19th century British-ruled Pune, Savitribai Phule was able to become the first woman teacher and, with her husband Jyotiba Phule, start the first girls' school, facing vicious opposition from Brahmanical sections but transforming the lives of many girls in the process. And as for child rape, it had been normal practice for South Asian men to marry small girls, and even to consummate the marriage, before colonial rule. The infamous 1889 case of the ten-year-old Bengali child Phulmoni Dasi, who died after being raped by her 30-year-old husband, resulted in the British introduction of the Age of Consent Bill which sought to raise women's marriage age from 10 to 12; this was condemned as interference in Hindu religion by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, celebrated in post-1947 winddows as a nationalist hero.

Such practices were common in Goa too, as seen in a case which came up before the Inquisition much earlier, in 1710. Now, the Inquisition is a much-maligned institution by savarna myth-makers today, for supposedly oppressing Hindus. But the fact is that the Inquisition primarily targeted 'New Christians' (former Jews) and local Christians; cases against others were much less frequent (M N Pearson, 1987). This case, described by Pearson, is of a Hindu (sic) man who married an orphan girl who was less than 10 years old. This was against the law of the time, according to which all young non-Christian orphans were to be converted to Christianity. Although the husband protested vehemently, the child was taken away and converted. Now, our anti-Inquisition brigade will definitely call this oppression of Hindus, but any sane person will see that the Inquisition Tribunal actually saved the child from gruesome torture and possible death.



Even today, the 'modern' or 'liberated' woman of Goa and India is commonly associated with westernisation and Christianity, both fostered, if not introduced, by colonial rule. When searching for information on my late aunt Mitra Bir, a participant in the anti-colonial movement, I met one of her old friends who described her as 'like a Catholic'. Why, I asked. (She had always seemed typically Hindu to me, from her attire.) Because of her confidence, I was told, and the fact that she started working after finishing her studies, instead of getting married like other savarna Goan girls in the 1950s.

'Like a Catholic' thus meant being able to go out of the house alone, to hold an independent job, and to be confident enough to face the world. It is such abilities that the champions of Hindu culture probably don't like.

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Blaming Rape on Colonial Rule