

By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA



The Latvian Tourist Rape Murder case in Kerala rings a bell for Goa!

As this article goes to the press, there has been a gang rape on the beach at Betalbatim, on Goa's southern coast – a beach that is by now a tourist beach. The newspapers have reported that a 20 year old woman and her friend who were at the beach were accosted by three persons who first sought to extort money from the them, then gang raped the woman, forced her friend to be in a compromising position with her, as they videographed the same, then they left threatening the woman that if she didn't cough up the money they demanded, they would circulate what they videographed. So much for the state of law and order in what is called a tourist state!

The gang rape abovereferrred and the murder of a 33 year old Latvian tourist Liga Skromane in Kerala reportedly after she had been drugged, illegally confined and raped, has once again brought to the fore a range of issues: the need to contextualize the incidence of rape, rather than have a ready-made script of exclusive attribution to patriarchy or economics; the police-drug peddler nexus that emboldens a person intending rape; the nature of police inquiry when a woman goes missing; the gendered media messages from the establishment; the obsession with rescuing the tourism industry rather than preventing crimes against women.

As a matter of fact, the rape murder of Skromane is reminiscent of others in Goa, such as that of the British tourist Scarlett Keeling in 2008, who was drugged, gang-raped and murdered, or, that of Irish tourist Danielle McLaughlin in 2017, whose corpse was found in the bushes. In all of these cases, there is a familiar script which shows the State's response, which deflects from the issues at hand in preventing and redressing rape-murders.

First, in all three tourist rape murder cases, the police initially attempted to offer a version of events in which they claim that the tourist might have drowned or has committed suicide due to depression. Also familiar was that the police investigations only gained steam after the relatives and friends of the deceased initiated online petitions and approached the press. The State then acts speedily to prevent embarrassment and negative attention towards its tourism industry, making announcements about special measures for tourists.



The Latvian Tourist Rape Murder case in Kerala rings a bell for Goa! The Latvian tourist was first reported missing, with the police unable to find her and alleging suicide. Her decapitated and decomposing corpse was found in a mangrove 38 days after she went missing – that too only after her sister and husband, launched a determined search for her and raised a public outcry. The police began by suggesting that she might have drowned, and attempted to dismiss the case as suicide brought on by depression, highlighting the discovery of such items as cigarette packets, packaged drinking water and lighter near the scene of offence.

The police then arrested two men: a 28-year old drug peddler and a 24-year old unauthorized tourist guide. Upon their arrest, the police stated that both these men “were addicted to wild sex”; that the former “preferred sex with men” and the latter “had a fetish about (*sic*) white skinned foreign women.” This is a typical response where the rape accused is made to seem like the monster, when in fact oftentimes the rapist is the friendly looking ‘normal’ next door neighbor. It is also typical to caricature the rape accused in the likeness of the person or community who the dominant people do not like.

There was a ray of hope however when the police also disclosed to the press that they had collected significant scientific evidence against the accused, that helped them recreate the crime and identify the perpetrators. They said Skromane was raped and murdered and then hanged to make it seem like a suicide. Considering that India or its states are keen that the tourist image of their territory is not affected, and are under diplomatic pressures and adverse international media glare, it is highly probable and possible that an innocent individual, though one with a previous conviction or charge, is made a scapegoat. Scientific evidence collection could avert this casualty.

But there were some other differences from the familiar script too: Kerala State Government representatives were present at the funeral of the tourist as well as the memorial, as against only friends at similar gatherings in Goa after rape-murder cases of foreign tourists. These representatives also notably did not make any statements to suggest that the victim invited rape unlike the right wing Ministers in Goa and other State Governments in recent times. They also did not dismiss the rape cases stating that “one-or-two cases in a country as big as India should not be hyped” as, for instance, the Union Minister of State for Labour and

Employment did after the outrage over the Kathua and Unnao cases, or as for instance, the Union Tourism Minister did, when he suggested through his advice that women should not wear skirts or go out alone at night in small towns, as such comportment invites rape. The Latvian Tourist Rape Murder case in Kerala rings a bell for Goa!

If, for a moment, we turn our attention toward the accused, we can see that be it with the Latvian tourist case or with the rape-murder cases of tourists in Goa, the accused appear to be lower middle class local people, who are cogs in the wheels of tourism, and criminal businesses parasiting on a violative tourism industry. The violative tourism industry is in turn part of a violative development industry. I use the word *violative* because the dominant 'development' industry, of which the tourism industry is a manifestation, is characterized by all kinds of violations, including environmental violations and violations of local people's fundamental rights. When these violations are brazenly carried out by the industry, it sends out a message that there is no respect for the rule of law. This disregard for the rule of law then becomes the slippery slope on which legality slides. Several other criminal businesses such as the drug peddling industry then find it facile to pile on to this violative tourism industry, which they do. It seems that the audacity to commit the rape-murders comes from the nexus of such accused, already involved in criminal activities, with the police.

For instance, the accused in the Danielle McLaughlin murder case was working as a tourist guide in Canacona, a southern taluka of Goa, just like the accused in the Latvian tourist murder case. So also, just as there have been suspicions about the victims' drinks being spiked with drugs in Goa, it is alleged that the drinks of the Latvian tourist may have been spiked with drugs, given their ready availability with the accused, who are alleged to be small-time drug peddlers.

At the end of the day, all the cases that we read about are manifestations of power riding on patriarchy, and other axes of marginalization such as caste, class, ethnic origin, and sexual orientation. It may seem from one angle that being a tourist is a source of privilege, being treated as God (*Atithi Devo Bhava*), really basically on account of the revenue tourism is supposed to be fetching to the State. Yet, despite their privileged location as tourists, it is clear that these women nevertheless suffer the dehumanization resultant from entrenched local patriarchy, whether in their victimization, or in the treatment of their complaints.

When the State is always crying poverty with respect to resources to be invested in prevention and redressal of crimes against women, it hits a raw nerve locally when special measures are announced just for tourists' safety. It feels that the already scant resources are then concentrated on the tourists who are in some ways a privileged section of society even as they suffer from vulnerability on account of their gender and 'other' ethnicity/nationality. Therefore special measures can only become the slippery slope through which discriminatory as against differential treatment gets entrenched - for disadvantaged vis-a-vis advantaged women, or for who the State calls 'good' women vis-a-vis who the State and dominant society styles as 'asking for rape'.

When the Centre or the Goa Government or the Kerala Government announce special measures for tourists after outrage over a tourist rape-murder, it seems that the particular case is taken in isolation and as an aberration from the many rapes and rape-murders taking place in India. This overlooks the pervasive culture of rape, in which every woman/child is perceived as good prey. When the State's concerns merely stem from a desire to rescue the tourism industry from bad publicity, the project of prevention and redressal fails!

It has to go beyond that - in terms of redressing a violative development politics that creates a conducive culture for rape, in terms of creating a deterrent by prompt and effective investigations into crimes against women, whether the women are Goans, migrants, or tourists.

(My special thanks are specially due to activists Judith Almeida, Colva, Goa, and Aleyamma Vijayan, Trivandrum, Kerala, for the engaging conversations with them which have helped sharpen my insights)

(First published in *Goa Today*, dt: June 2018)



Share this...



Facebook



The Latvian Tourist Rape Murder case in Kerala rings a bell for Goa!



Print



Email



Twitter



Reddit