

By AMITA KANEKAR



When Will #MeToo Challenge Hindu 'Sanskaar'?

In one of the #MeToo cases which received widespread publicity, media reports of the allegations against the actor Alok Nath were accompanied by the information, in either shocked or ironic tones, that the man had always been seen as the most '*sanskaari*' of actors. What the tones implied was that all the '*sanskaar*' seems to have been just a hoax, with the real Mr Hyde now finally exposed. Implicit in this was the message that those who are really *sanskaari*, i.e. full of Indian, or rather Hindu, culture, will never behave like this. In other words, this behaviour is foreign to Hindu culture.

But the truth is in fact the opposite. If you are really *sanskaari*, i.e. cultured in the Hindu tradition, you are unlikely to be treating anybody, except for dominant caste Hindu men, very well.

Some years ago, a Catholic friend who grew up in South Bombay next door to a rich and traditional Hindu business family, recalled an unforgettable incident from her past. She had been close friends with the daughters of the family, and on 'auntie-uncle' terms with everyone else, almost from the time she was born. But one day, when she was a teenager, she happened to be alone in the lift with the grandfather of the family, a very '*sanskaari*' old man. No, he did not assault her. He only told her that he was looking for 'hostesses' for some business visitors, and would she like to be one?

Twenty years later, my friend still remembered how shattered she had felt. There was no doubt about what he meant by 'hostess'. How could he have looked at her like that, when she had always treated him like her own grandfather?

But that's 'high' Hindu culture for you, a combination of patriarchy and casteism, plus double standards. A woman is either 'pure', 'chaste', and 'modest', OR 'loose', 'available', and a 'prostitute'. And only some women are - and have to be - the first, i.e. dominant caste Hindu women, for they have to provide the all-important male heirs. Everybody else is

automatically loose and available, just by their social location. The 'pure' women are to be worshipped (nominally) as goddesses or mothers of sons, while the others can be exploited, raped, and generally treated like dirt. That's the reason why the Hindu worship of so many goddesses does not do anything to change the fact that India is now rated the MOST dangerous countries to be born a woman.

This also recalls the victim-blaming advice by then Goa Factories Minister Dipak Dhavalikar's wife (a functionary of the Sanatan Sanstha), some years ago: Goans should not send their daughters to convent schools, as this western culture results in them getting raped. In short, a westernised woman can expect to be raped – because that's our culture! And her husband agreed, saying that when girls used to follow Hindu culture, there were no instances of rapes. Except within marriage and child-marriage, he forgot to add – the first of which is still not a crime in India, and the second of which is still a tradition in places like Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

This traditional Brahmanical culture, which then became general Hindu culture, was strongly critiqued by revolutionaries like Periyar, Phule and Ambedkar during British rule. The British era in India, like the Portuguese era in Goa, also saw the first South Asian women being educated and taking up independent jobs in the modern sector. But Brahmanical culture, instead of being rejected by post-1947 and contemporary Indian society, is still celebrated today, as we see with the media reports about Alok Nath above.

Another example of this celebration was the fight against Section 377, when critics of the draconian law almost always mentioned that it was a British law, not Indian, though without adding that the law was long dead in Britain; many in fact added that India had never been so prudish, the proof being in the Khajuraho sculptures, etc, etc. When it is well-known that Hindu temples even today are not open to all, these people talked as if anybody on the street was welcome to go enjoy the supposedly sexually-liberated art of the Khajurahos and the Konaraks – at a time when people of the wrong castes could not even freely use the street!

There are even those who have no problem with the patriarchal and rape-celebrating 'fun' of the Bollywood film industry, but are now shocked that the industry is apparently full of actual

rapists. This despite the fact that Bollywood must have made hundreds of thousands of films where the hero sexually harasses the heroine, where he chases, paws, and molests her, sometimes with the help of a hundred other men in song-and-dance scenes strikingly close to gang-rape, except that in this mythical take, the victim is won over by all the sexual violence and starts doting on him.

In other words, even when actually facing sexual violence, liberal Indians do not want to attack its cultural roots, but insist on seeing it as an aberration. Even when we know that Dalit and Adivasi women are the target for a multiplicity of systematic discriminations and oppressions, including slave labour, forced displacement, forced prostitution, and human trafficking, elite Indians insist that things are not that bad – haven't we also had women prime ministers, presidents, judges, CEOs, editors, et al? Yes, we have. But that's caste for you. One world for you, and another for me. Ivy League education for me, manual scavenging for you. Except that they are not really different worlds. Just one world with a culture where everyday sexual violence is one of the many normalised violences used to keep people in their place – including even women IAS officers, film-makers, and other privileged sorts.

Liberal Indian women flock to Goa in droves – for holidays or permanently – thanks to the different attitude towards women they find here. But the same women will often criticise Portuguese rule and the Catholic Church for attacking Hindu culture – when this is something they should be doing themselves! For, as Dalit activists have also pointed out, as long as this culture of caste, patriarchy and double standards persists, sexual violence will remain the norm in South Asia.

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