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NEWS // 10 FEBRUARY 2013  
**Indian women demand freedom, not 'protection'**  
 Author **Mama Cash**



February 2013- The gang rape of a 23-year-old woman in New Delhi last December has provoked unprecedented protests across India. The woman died from her injuries two weeks later. The crime has focused attention on the deep-rooted misogyny in politics, religious organisations, legal systems, and on the streets of India and countries around the world.

This watershed moment has exposed a deep divide in India, with women's rights groups demanding radical social change and conservatives blaming Westernisation and calling for further curbs on women's freedom. A month after the incident, the protest crowds began to thin out, while stories of rape and violence against women continue to be reported from around the country.

Mama Cash spoke to two Indian feminists, Geetanjali (Geeta) Misra and Prabha Nagaraja, to delve deeper into the work that women's rights activists have been engaging in for decades, and to try to understand why the recent public outrage about this case has been so strong. Geeta is the Co-Chair of our Board of Directors from India, and co-Founder and Executive Director of CREA, a feminist human rights organisation based in India and co-Founder of SAKHI for South Asian Women, a non-profit organisation based in New York, committed to ending violence against women of South Asian origin. Prabha is the Programs Director of TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues)- a Mama Cash grantee from India.

**What are the structures and norms in Indian society that allow rape to happen and go unreported? What is still needed to prevent rape and other forms of gender-based violence**

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*from happening?*

**Geeta:** It's all meshed together—a preference for sons, the importance of retaining women's honour and modesty, prevailing public attitude about the difference between boys and girls, how they're brought up, and the laws that reflect this mindset.

Hierarchy is strong in India; violence against women is essentially about the power of men over women. It's about patriarchal and unequal structures and attitudes coming together. So more attention needs to be paid to changing mindsets, and that takes time. People need to invest in that. There are no quick fixes.

Misogyny exists everywhere in the world in varying degrees; we need to question the system that allows men to have the confidence and bravado to enact violence against women. There is a lot of attention to this one particular case, but it is important to talk about rape in terms of responses. And, I think that we need to tie it into other things that are going on in the country such as India's growing position as an economic super power. Will economic growth, for instance, come to fruition if half the population (women) can't participate and women are seen as less valuable than men?

**Prabha:** There are a multitude of factors that allow a rape culture to thrive. The patriarchal foundation of our society, linked to that the whole idea of family honour or Izzat being embodied in the woman. The silence around sex and sexuality also makes it so difficult to preempt these acts. The woman is forced to stay silent, or risk having her character questioned.

Any form of discrimination is linked to multiple structures of power and more of these connections need to be made. However, it's difficult to expect people to be clued in about so many different issues. There are limited resources at our disposal; more often than not we are putting out fires, so there is little room for the 'luxury' of sitting back and looking at the larger picture to make connections with systemic problems.

***Why has this recent rape case received such widespread attention amongst the general public and in the media in India?***

**Geeta:** The incident resonated with people. Perhaps because it happened on a simple bus ride home from a film; perhaps because it reminded people how unsafe our public systems can be; perhaps because it reminded them that this could happen to anyone's daughters, mothers, wives (not women and girls in general). The shameful attitudes and actions of the police also contributed to the public outrage. There is growing frustration among the young people and the general public about systems in India not being able to deliver on the democratic promises of freedom, equality, opportunity, mobility, and so on. This is the new India, where young people want more space without apologising for it.

**Prabha:** The sheer brutality of this incident brought people out to the streets. Also the fact that she was not alone, exposing the fallacy that women are safer on the streets with a man. The groundswell across India, the peaceful protest by middle class Indians in multiple cities kept both the domestic and international media's attention on the incident.

***Do you think women's organisations and feminist movements in India have played a role in increasing public outrage against rape? If so, how?***

**Geeta:** They have done a lot! A part of the women's movement has focused on broadening the definition of rape. Some have focused on envisioning and advocating safer cities, while others have focused on gender equality. The women's movement in India has played a key role in the evolution of a public consciousness that says that this is wrong and shouldn't happen. But we must also acknowledge the complementing and important role of other movements – sexuality, sex worker, LGBT and the HIV/AIDS movements that have brought issues of sex and sexuality into the public domain.

It's the women's movement that has given us these expanded notions of power and control in

many aspects of women's rights. Recent research conducted by CREA challenges the women's movement to become more inclusive to women on the margins, including lesbian, sex-workers, and disabled women. Why has the women's movement privileged some women to be protected and not others? There is a lot of dialogue about domestic violence, but what about the lesbian, transgender, disabled, and single women who also face abuse outside of their homes?

**Prabha:** There is no 'one' women's movement in India. There are many, and each has played its part in constructing the architecture for combating violence against women. Some have been working at the policy level; others have encouraged a lot more dialogue about sexuality and diversity. Some believe that women need to be protected; while others have a more rights-based approach. There is a space for each of these movements. Including the 'Slut Walk' and 'Take Back The Night' – they speak to a different audience. Addressing the concerns of the young urban college student or professional woman.

***What effect do you think the public response to this recent rape and murder case will have on the movements to end violence against women?***

**Geeta:** There have been protests in the past, but this time, it's an expression of frustration over a lot of things—corruption, sexual violence, poor governance, and inequality. A space has opened up, which is giving movements to end violence against women visibility and strength. Also, this time, it isn't just the women's movement taking a stand. And, this inspired hope.

The problem is in the response of the government. It can't just be about adding more criminal procedures, more police officers that no one trusts, etc. It has to be about enforcing the laws, not creating new ones. We need to ask questions like what makes women vulnerable in private and public spheres? What makes men behave this way? We cannot forget that this is about power and control. Otherwise, at the end of the day, they will end up protecting women rather than their rights.

One outcome of the public uproar is the Justice Varma Committee, which has been tasked with looking at law and punishment for sexual assault. The authorities are listening. That's the best way to seize the opportunity that this present moment is bringing. The world is talking about this issue. The sheer strength of numbers has made it hard to ignore the protesters and their demands.

Civil society has a lot to contribute here, since it has the most creative ways to engage citizens. There is immense opportunity, resources permitting, to engage the citizenry on how people think about the new India and how they can be involved in making it a reality.

***Are women's organisations in India well resourced to respond to violence? What are some the important issues that need to be addressed?***

**Geeta:** Women's rights work and work on sexual rights is the least resourced type of activism anywhere in the world. Also, even within the available funding, the more you move your focus towards women at the margins (such as, sex-workers, disabled, trans, and lesbian women), the less available the funding becomes.

I think, it's important to direct funding towards changing people's mindsets around issues related to violence against women, sexuality, expanding women's freedoms. For instance, child marriage and sex-selection [of fetuses] have to be placed within the context of someone's thinking about our social systems. And, that is something that will take time and determined effort.

**Prabha:** The media has played such a vital role in keeping the issue top-of-mind. But the converse will also hold true. It's up to the people and the NGOs to keep the debate alive. We must continue talking about it at every opportunity.

We have been advocating better policing, more safety in public spaces, and other policy level issues, including sensitisation of the police. Also a fresh look at the budgetary allocations for

women's issues – the current allocation is miniscule – it's not enough to cover the many services promised in the law. A lot of it boils down to political will, or the lack there of.

We must continue advocating for sexuality education, and not the kind that's shame-based, but the sort of comprehensive sexuality education that talks about equality, rights, gender and safety and gives the agency to young people to make better decisions for themselves.

***What do you see as urgent needs to be addressed to strengthen the women's movement in the long term in India?***

**Prabha:** Violence in all forms against women needs to take center stage. We feel there has to be a long-term solution to this. A well-developed, comprehensive sexuality education program that starts very early in life could go a long way in bringing up a generation that thinks very differently than those who let something like this happen.

When we say comprehensive sex-ed that also means involving parents and teachers; therefore every household would have to get involved. This sort of gender sensitisation and stress on equality is grossly under-prioritised and doesn't take into account the fact that poor people, too, have sexual health concerns that need to be addressed.

**Geeta:** We are also too used to doing reactive work. My question is—can we work towards a more affirmative idea of women's rights? We are good at responding; but now, everyone is re-looking at advocacy strategies.

We need more voices for the women's movement to be heard in the mainstream media—it's one way of making the movement more expansive and one that seeks that other world that is possible.

**ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS**

***What are some lessons from the past for the women's movement in India?***

**Geeta:** The movement has learnt that you cannot reduce violence against women to only sexual violence; the discourse must include other/all forms of violence. Rape victims are seen as doomed, with prominent politicians using appalling language like "zinda laash" (a 'walking corpse') to describe the victim. This perspective, where sex is seen as the vehicle to the most ultimate form of purity or pollution, must change. The movement has learnt that we need to have a more complicated response to rape. It has also realised that the law isn't the only go-to place. So, the activism needs to reflect that.

Also, the women's movement has realised that investing in building women's leadership capacity, self leadership—so that women can question power, articulate demands, and access their rights—is more effective than just targeted vertical programmes that work in silos. It is now focusing on the intersections of various issues, including sexuality, gender, violence against women, and human rights.

***How can women's organisations deflect religious misogyny that targets the victims?***

**Geeta:** We need to ask ourselves—how do you increase the number of people who can be objective and say that this is absurd and wrong? What is the standard we propagate? Religion and morality are standards that millions live by. So, we need to ask what standard do we, as a modern movement (that works on sexuality, gender, rights), propagate? The answer is consent. It is the only modern standard for bringing rights, justice, and sexuality together.

Consent, at least, allows some agency and control to the person to whom these things are happening.

**Prabha:** We don't expect them to speak the rights language, but if they had just condemned the act, it would have made an incredible difference. What we can do is create a counter argument and make more people see things from our perspective. Often, when faced with such daunting odds, there are moments of demoralisation, followed immediately with a strengthened resolve to bash on ahead. We have an important job to do so let's get on with it.

**How does one tackle the apathy that stops a person from intervening or offering assistance when witnessing a violent crime?**

**Prabha:** Apart from the Good Samaritan Law, educating people on their civic duties and encouraging them to take pride in public service, it's also important to sensitise the police. We have progressive laws, but it's about effectiveness. Policewomen are as trapped by the system as you and I are; they have to show attitudes that are as patriarchal as their male counterparts. Those are perhaps their ways of protecting themselves from harassment and isolation.

**Geeta:** It's important to ask what the impetus was for each person to not act. What were they afraid of? Did they not know what was the right thing to do in this situation? Did they not know how to deal with it safely?

The information needs to reach the people. What kind of immunity are you offered if you do stop to help someone? How do you create a culture where, if you see something like this happening, you step in and stop it? We have now seen how scared people are, and how little they trust the police. Those of us who work with women in the margins have already experienced this. This often makes us wonder how effective police reforms are.

This business of hierarchy and exclusiveness is taught from a very young age. Our hierarchies are enmeshed. All forms of discrimination are linked to multiple power structures. And, they must be challenged.

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