

Excerpts from Equality for Women = Prosperity for All
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One Too Many

(From Chapter 2, The Virus of Violence)

On the evening of December 16, 2012, a 23-year-old female physiotherapy student, Jyoti Singh Pandey and her male friend, Awindra, boarded a bus to go back home after watching a movie in a New Delhi mall. As the bus trundled around the city ignoring would-be passengers, the driver and five other men on board took turns, over the next hour, to gang rape and beat up Jyoti after overpowering her friend. Afterwards, both of them were thrown off the bus. The young woman was in an appalling condition, severely brain damaged and suffering from serious internal injuries. She died in hospital 13 days later.¹

This incident sparked massive uprisings throughout India. Voices of outrage rose up and down the land; indignation was deep, anger was loud. Protesters called for tougher laws against rape, harsher punishment for sexual offenses, legislative reform and government recognition of the cultural impunity enjoyed by men who committed such crimes. Demands were made for swifter justice for the victims, for stricter law enforcement against offenders. It was noted that many police officers often failed to file charges for such crimes and were frequently bribed to hush the matter up when they did. But for once, this story could not be hushed up. Jyoti's rape and murder made world headlines and its reverberations lasted for weeks, for months. It was a watershed case drawing attention to the problem of violence against women in ways that had never been possible before. It was as though, after centuries of sexual aggression against women, millennia of violence against girls, this was one rape too many.

The New Delhi case catalyzed an ongoing debate in India about what the government could and should do to protect women. A 30-day investigation was launched conducted by the Justice Verma Committee whose findings, amounting to a 644-page report of great depth and detail, called for radical changes in government policy and legislation. The horrific death of the young woman heightened awareness and intensified sensitivities all over the country, not only about the pervasiveness of such extreme attacks like gang rape and murder, but also regarding the ubiquity, the extent and the dismal frequency of other types of incidents of sexual harassment in Indian society, including stalking, voyeurism and so-called "eve-teasing." This term, which covers all sorts of public pestering to which women are subjected in India, ranging from cat-calls and whistles on the streets, to nudging, groping, and unsolicited touching, not only highlights the general acceptance of such harassment but adds insult to injury by understating it, by minimizing its implications, by defining it in hokey language that turns a blind eye to its consequences. Since 2012, the dangerous inappropriateness of such behavior has finally been admitted by many in India; "eve-teasing" has been recognized as a contributing factor to sexual assault and conducive to instances of violence against women in that country. It is as if that rape and brutal murder in the New Delhi bus was the final straw: women cannot take it anymore.

¹ Nelson, 2013.

Even so, shockingly enough and despite the public uproar that ensued, there have been several other notorious cases since. According to the statistics of the National Crime Record Bureau, reported rape in India has risen alarmingly by 7.1 percent since 2010 and by 35.2 percent between 2012 and 2013 alone.² In late 2014, five men were arrested for the kidnapping, extortion and gang rape of a Japanese tourist who was held captive as a sex slave for nearly a month in the state of Bihar. Barely two weeks after her escape, four more men were arrested for the repeated raping of a Nigerian woman, kidnapped outside the same New Delhi mall where Jyoti watched her last film in 2012. The problem is deeply rooted.

But violence against women is not unique to India, of course.³ And the “one too many” phenomenon has been repeated elsewhere in recent years. The burned and brutalized body of Ozgecan Aslan, a 20 year-old female psychology student, found in the southern district of Mersin, for instance, created an uproar in Turkey in 2015. A young woman from an underprivileged background, but of outstanding promise and intelligence, Ozgecan was last seen catching a minibus home from her university at the end of the day. Once she was the last person left on the bus, the driver apparently diverted the route and tried to rape her. When she tried to fight back and defend herself with pepper spray, he stabbed and beat her down with an iron bar. His father and a friend helped him in the crime. After cutting off her hands while she was still alive, they burned her body and threw her remains over a cliff into a riverbed.⁴ Although the driver confessed to killing the young woman, he initially denied the rape, claiming that the murder was the result of an argument. And so it was: an argument over forced sexual intercourse, otherwise known as rape.

The ensuing protests throughout the country in 2015 brought the issue of violence against women to the forefront of attention in Turkish society. Women were up in arms; men took to the streets wearing skirts, to show their solidarity. These protests not only sharpened criticism against some senior government officials but resulted in vocal disapproval of their misogynist language, and overt condemnation of gender discrimination. They even led to a symbolic defiance against the religious authorities in the country. In spite of clerical censure and the established practice of Islamic burial rites, women claimed the right to carry the coffin to its final resting place instead of walking at the back of the funeral procession. In fact they were alone to do it, and not a single man was allowed to touch the young woman’s body again, although many thousands of them expressed their outrage at what had happened to Ozgecan and dozens created a circle of defense around the women during the funeral procession. Such insubordination to the express injunctions of religious leadership was unprecedented in Turkey. The violation and death of that young student was clearly one rape too many.

² Thakur, 2015.

³ Sally Kohn (2013) writes, in *More Magazine*, that “In India, a country of over 1.2 billion people, 24,206 rapes were reported in 2011. The same year in the United States, a nation of 300 million, 83,425 rapes were reported.

⁴ Carter, 2015.