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(En)countering Sexual Violence in the Indian City

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(En)countering Sexual Violence in the Indian City

Abstract: Over the past few decades, incidents of rape, sexual discrimination, honour killing, acid attacks and sex-related murders in Indian cities have come under much media and public scrutiny, significantly impacting conceptions of gender, risk and women's safety in urban spaces. The city itself has become a dominant trope for underscoring the anxieties, discourses and exegesis of sexual violence, as exemplified in the oft-cited designation of Delhi as the 'rape capital of India'. This introduction to the themed section critically engages with 'the urban' in attempts to understand sexual violence in India, and focuses on the multiple public (workplace, leisure, street lives) and private (domestic, intimate) arenas of urban life where sexual violence is encountered, and the resources they provide to counter it. The co-editors engage with the interdisciplinary research papers by contributing authors, that show how sexual violence is '(en)countered' in women's right-wing politics, processes of cultural production, community health activism, experiences of violent relationships, and men's growing anxieties about women's self-determination in Indian cities. With a specific ethnographic emphasis on women's experiences of rhetoric, representation and resistance to harassment, the themed section analyses sexual violence through the lens of urban social and spatial transformation in the region.

Keywords: sexual violence, sexual harassment, rape, India, intersectionality, urban transformations, city, crisis of masculinity.

(En)countering Sexual Violence in the Indian City

In the city, women should not live by themselves, should not live alone. Men can do it, but not women. Independent women confuse men... At night, when women walk alone on the streets, cars slow down and drivers roll down their windows.

A dialogue from a courtroom scene, *Pink*

(dir. Aniruddha Roy Chowdury, 2016)

This themed section, based on a range of ethnographic studies by contributing authors, critically explores the encountering and countering of sexual violence (broadly defined) against women in cities in India. Contorted sexual fantasies usually wrap themselves around modern female subjectivities, whether they are expressed in films, cause celebres, clinical practices or everyday sexual harassment. As is clear in the voice of an exasperated rape-case prosecutor, in the award-winning film on sexual violence in New Delhi, *Pink*, ordinary women's self-determination becomes the cause for lopsided male desire, and that can easily turn into excruciating expressions of urban disorder. Sarah Pinto (2014), in her study of vice and independent living, rightly identifies an emerging cultural imaginary where women's bodies become sites of affliction, aspiration or downfall, and women's freedom is cast as the primary source of twisted desire-related problems in the Indian city. With a specific emphasis on rhetoric, representation, and resistance to sexual violence, we analyse this violent Indian cityscape through the lens of urban social and spatial transformation in the region.

Sexual violence in rural India is often discussed in relationship to class, caste, politics, religious violence, honour and respectability. The bodies of women, especially those from marginalised rural communities, have been historically desecrated, hanged, stoned and severed, often to reassert the power of men over lower social and gendered strata (see Menon 2009; Basu 2011). Another genre of studies in sexual violence defines the latter as exertion of political power during 'critical events' such as communal riots and extraordinary moments of crisis and displacement (Butalia 1998; Das 2007; Sen 2011). Over the past few decades, however, incidents of rape, sexual

discrimination, honour killing, acid attacks and sex-related murders in Indian cities have come under media and public scrutiny, while impacting the conception of gender, risk and women's safety in post-industrial urban spaces (see Chatterjee 2016; Phadke et al 2011; Zabaliute 2012). The city itself has become a dominant trope underscoring the anxieties, discourses and exegesis of sexual violence, as is exemplified in the oft-cited designation of Delhi as the 'rape capital of India'. Such phenomena create an academic urgency to understand the diversity of women's experiences around contemporary expressions of sexual discrimination. It also compels us to unpack 'the urban' in comprehending sexual violence, particularly in historically masculinist public spaces in South Asia (Osella and Osella 2006).

In India, these anxieties about urban sex crimes surfaced prominently during 'the India rape crisis': with the brutal gang rape and subsequent death of a young paramedical student in a privately run Delhi bus in December 2012. This incident became the most widely reported rape case in the history of Indian broadcasting (Alturi 2013). In August 2013, a young photojournalist was also gang-raped when she had gone to photograph a deserted mill compound in South Mumbai. In the Delhi and Mumbai rape cases, the accused had thrashed the victims' male escorts (Yadav 2018). The incidents indicated a 'crisis of masculinity', and suggested that men were no longer able to offer patriarchal protection to mobile and ambitious urban women. More recently, 'the night of horrors' or the brazen mass molestation of young women carousing into the new year of 2017 at a major road junction in Bangalore, that too in police presence, led to further protests among students through the nation-wide use of social media (Swamy 2017). The perpetrators in the Delhi and Mumbai cases were eventually accorded the death penalty. Such arenas of resisting sexual violence in the city expanded more recently, as the Indian *#metoo* movement also used social media activism to expose cases of rape and sexual harassment in film, media and other elite circles. Even though several feminist groups were troubled that the debate about urban sexual violence did not exhibit solidarities with sexually vulnerable rural women, it was the globalization of news, celebrity support, and the colossal use of social media to express both outrage and endorsement of violence against women, that gave substantial legitimacy to the incredible public opinion/reaction against sexual assault in urban spaces in India (see Roychowdhury 2013). Our lens is trained on the metropolitan rather than on the *mofussil* (small-town, provincial), the latter requiring another series of ethnographic enquiry.

The collection includes six articles that examine '(en)counters' with sexual violence embedded in myriad means and modalities of urban life in India. Bhandari's article examines the romantic journeys of young, working women engaged in possessive and violent pre-marital relationships with middle-class men in Delhi. Using the IT-sector in Chennai as a case study, Shakthi's contribution analyses the legal implications for middle-class professional women seeking redressal for sexual harassment in the workplace. Both authors point to the disillusionment and dilemmas laden in being a 'modern' woman in contemporary India. Zabaliūtė's contribution explores the hazardous working lives of women from a different social strata – poor urban neighbourhoods in Delhi. She shows how governmental community health activists counter and encounter various forms of male teasing, while educating poor women on sexual and reproductive health. This vital question of fragile masculinity is taken up by Govinda, whose article studies the responses and reactions of taxi drivers to women accessing public spaces in Delhi. Together, Zabaliūtė and Govinda offer substantive insights on how lower class male and female workers understand urban freedoms and sexual violence, whilst negotiating their vulnerable status in a city pungently divided by gender, religion and class. Gupta researches the bold, creative and artistic resistances deployed by female students to oppose restrictions on women's mobility in Delhi. Tyagi and Sen's article reflects on right-wing propaganda in Meerut and Mumbai, and illustrates how young Hindu nationalist women critically engage with extreme and everyday discourses on sexual violence in the city. The last two articles underline the role of women's debate, mobilisation and direct political engagement in responding to gendered productions of the Indian city.

Scholars of gender studies have long argued for intersectional approaches that can attend to structural and contextual conditions under which violence affects women across diverse categories differently (cf. Crenshaw 1992). This themed section, responds to this call for intersectionality, as it discusses the assorted and unequal experiences of women across social categories in Indian cities. Sexual violence has disparate political consequences and dissimilar implications for women from poor, underprivileged backgrounds, and for middle-class women. And yet, a common problematisation of 'the urban' in these accounts also shows that the city creates spaces for intersectional solidarities, and enables ways to counter violence through building on shared experiences. We ask: how are gendered and sexual vulnerabilities experienced, represented and resisted in the city? How are notions of femininities and masculinities

articulated with regards to sexual violence, underlined by the dynamics of class, caste, poverty, ethnicity and urban modernity? What are the dilemmas faced by women and gendered social networks attempting to contest restrictive identity politics in the city? What are the structural constraints confronted by women while negotiating hostile landscapes? How are these threats articulated as specifically urban, and what resources are accessed to contest sexual vulnerabilities?

The Indian City

The city is not merely a context. It is also a motor: 'the urban' generates specific experiences, discourses, agencies, and critiques of sexual violence, while serving as an analytical term. In this themed section, we argue that cities such as Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai, can exacerbate gender-based violence, but they can also provide sanctuaries of resilience. While each city has specific histories, spatial geographies, and 'urban charismas' (Hansen and Verkaik 2009), we identify four major interlinked arenas that help us to unpack how certain forms of sexual violence come to be experienced as an urban phenomenon.

First, the articles examine urban space as a site for intensified, heterosexual encounters. Seeing contemporary urban development through what Sylvia Chant (2013) calls a 'gender lens' (i.e. the increasing feminisation of the labour force, human capital acquisition, and intra-urban mobility in cities of the Global South) allows us to explore hidden aspects of both men's and women's everyday lives, as they navigate wide-ranging environments. Chant elaborates that this gender lens 'calls for analysis that not only takes into account socially constructed differences among women and men, but also recognizes that gender is a multi-dimensional and intersectional concept' (Chant 2013: 10; see also Massey 1994). Our main focus remains on the experiences and agency of women across different classes, which are also refracted through men's encounters with various expressions of urban women's mobility (Govinda, Shakthi, this section). The articles focus on the liaisons, tensions and ruptures in these heterosexual confrontations (on violence pertaining to other sexualities in South Asia, see, for example, Agnes 2002). As highlighted in Zabaliute's article on lower class, women community health activists in Delhi, and Tyagi and Sen's research on low-caste women workers in Mumbai, underprivileged women have to constantly traverse through porous public spaces, which involve a nuanced process of laying structured claims in a divided city. The acceleration of urbanisation and the underlining anxieties about modernity

sharpen this gender lens against a backdrop of older and mutating conventions, as new and hybrid identities, arrangements and relationships emerge (such as women's increased participation in the labour market, delayed marriages, public visibility, and experimentation with love and sexual orientations).

Secondly, the articles show how the separations and tensions between the public and the private in the cities are constantly renegotiated alongside chronic and corrosive urban transformations (on the diffused nature of public-private distinctions in urban India, see Kaviraj 1997). Despite political transformations and interventions that favour women's rights in the city, the urban continues to be associated with the male. This entitlement has been elaborated eloquently in Walter Benjamin's (1999) discussion of the *flaneur* who wanders around the arcades of the city, observing the sights of modernity. Susan Buck-Morss' (1986) critique of the masculine privileges of the *flaneur* leads to a theorisation of the *flaneuse*, in this case, the whore who strolls through the city as she pleases. Despite her attempt to highlight subversive female agency, the *flaneuse* is perennially a suspect character who invites more violence – yet more reason to protect the 'good woman' and keep her safe indoors. This is certainly a theme that resonates in South Asia, where women without a male chaperone, whether from upper or lower class backgrounds, are seen as loose and/or available, and their bodies objectified as they move through the city.

These social crosscurrents are not relegated to urban exteriors, but also seep into more intimate spaces, urging us to consider what we understand as violence. With a focus on intimate partner abuse among young metropolitan middle classes, Bhandari persuasively states in her article that 'violences exist in a liminal state of being and not being; public and private; recognised yet unspoken of, as an unexpected consequence of being modern yet an ordinary reality of modernity'. Tyagi and Sen observe how in times of these public seductions, 'Love Jihad' - a Hindu nationalist discourse on Muslim insurgents romantically luring modern Hindu women into fake marriages - serves to return women to a conventional patriarchal discourse of public danger and private protection. The young women students in Gupta's contribution, however, resist the 'imagination of women as victims in public spaces', through creative public practices (Chatterjee 1989; Nair 1996; Sarkar 2001; Bannerji 2011).

This brings us to the third related arena of urban life that has implications for understanding sexual violence in Indian cities. Both central and peripheral cities in the region are hubs of rapid transformations, swiftly changing social relations, flows of

global capital, and shifting political economies. Anxieties about these changes have implications for experiences and discourses of sexual violence. Even though the mobilisation of professional middle-class women outside the domestic sphere becomes associated with neo-liberal entrepreneurial industries (Shakthi, this section), these emerging political economies do not necessarily entail women's empowerment. They may indeed go hand-in-hand with misogyny, especially when they are propped up by conservative political loyalties (Wilson et al 2018). Better employment opportunities could lead to greater economic autonomy, but women's mobility may unleash male envy, and a crisis of patriarchal expectations in the city (Govinda, Shakthi, this section). In addition, as cities become increasingly gated along class lines – evident in the mushrooming of mega-malls and affluent residential areas - lower-class working women become susceptible to more marginalization in 'unprotected' public spaces (Zabiliute, this section).

The fourth arena of urban life that the contributors highlight underscores how the Indian city is experienced in tandem with violent Othering processes and practices. The heterogenous social fabric of Indian cities is usually underwritten by histories of religious, caste and class-based communities living side-by-side, often not peacefully. The contributors show how memories of inter-community tensions and a derogatory construction of the 'Other' underline localised sexual politics, especially of fragmented masculinities and femininities (Govinda, Tyagi and Sen). Cultural differences are deployed by various social and political groups in order to legitimise or explain sexual violence against women. These virulent pathologies demonise the urban poor and minorities, including lower class men (Zabiliute, Govinda, Tyagi and Sen). Yet, in a globalized Indian city, the politics of Othering, as argues Govinda, extends to 'Russian' (or Eastern European) women in Delhi, who are stereotyped as sexually promiscuous, and pose patriarchal anxieties about lapses in the control of women's mobility. Thus, the threat to a gendered urban order is also produced by registering bodies and communities allegedly from outside regional borders (Muslim insurgents, loose women migrants, and tourists).

The collection highlights how the shifting built environment of the Indian city is overwritten by the individuals' imagination and construction of their social and economic realities, which in turn involves the merging of the structural, symbolic and affective. We show how the disenchanting representation of the urban landscape, as a site of fake romance and misguided seductions, deceptive liberties and multifarious

resistances, can become a product of men and women's animated encounters with multiple scales of conflict. By showing the linkages between the spatial imaginary (the city of freedoms) and the existential (the city of suppressions), the contributors analyse emerging inequalities and discrimination, as they are deployed in discourses, actions and contestations relating to sexual violence. As urban lifestyles in India have been dramatically transforming in the past decade, so have gendered norms, moralities and conceptions of respectability. The contentious discourses that have so powerfully reinstated the debates about sexual assaults in the metropole since the infamous Delhi case, often revolve around such notions of change (Datta 2016). Understanding how sexual violence in urban spaces in India is (en)countered also provides a perspective on changing gender relations in Indian cities. Collectively, contributors to the special section argue: as more women enter urban labour economies, professional and educational organisations, deal with dilemmas and opportunities regarding love, marriage, mobility, consumption, sexuality, dress and employment, questions about women's animated presence in the public space become largely reconfigured to accommodate debates about new sexual vulnerabilities in the city.

The Avatars of Violence

A comprehensive analysis of the definition of sexual violence, from domestic clashes to war crimes, is beyond the scope of this special section. (We appreciate that men can be victims of gender-based violence, but this concern, as well as non-heteronormative identities, are not our subject of enquiry). For the contributors, 'violence' remains tied to multiple confrontations and relationships in which sexual harassment, abuse and assault play an important role. It has resonance with a global treatise enshrined in the 1993 United Nations Declaration of the Elimination of Violence against Women (Article 1):

The term 'violence against women' means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (<http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/>).

Everyday violence in cities of the Global South is inseparable from sexual brutalities normalised during regional, political conflict (MacIlwane 2013). Rape, usually linked to such sociopolitical ruptures, has received enormous attention from both scholarly and policy perspectives, compared to other forms of unspectacular

violence levelled against women. Higgins and Silver (1991) in their work on rape and representation, note that perpetrations of rape are localised, but definitions of penetrative sexual violence traverse transhistorical and transcultural fears related to the sovereignty of women's bodies. This collection underlines how forms of sexual violence in the city, from public mocking to conjugal strife to violence against minorities, are interlinked with this cross-cultural gendered anxiety: that sexual misconduct by men in any context, in wider conflict or in quotidian skirmishes, might escalate to coercive carnal acts.

It is when viewed through this intersectional lens, that we see how violence extends beyond the spectacularly gruesome scope of a public rape, to the terrors of everyday life, where it is often abundantly experienced, yet more often than not, silenced. Like other forms of violence, sexual violence is experienced over time in 'ripples' (Bufacchi and Gilson 2016; Gill et al 2014). Many feminist scholars have long argued, domestic realms, families and community areas are not necessarily safer spaces for women (see Das 2008; Baxi 2000, 2014). As Nancy Felipe Russo and Pirlott (2006), state, 'Gender roles and expectations, male entitlement, sexual objectification, and discrepancies in power and status have legitimized, rendered invisible, sexualized, and helped to perpetuate violence against women' (2006: 181). Indeed, we underline the importance of understanding sexual violence in nuanced, contextualized ways, by granting voices to those affected by an intersection of macro- and micro-aggressions in the city.

The (En)Counter

We think of countering in terms of sliding scales from the national/political to the personal: an economy of scales that entail resisting normative discourses on women's bodies including the denial of feminine agency. Countering might include demanding legislative changes; and tackling lax (and even 'criminal') policing when it also resorts to violence against women. These demands come with a range of superficial and deeper changes, pertaining to women assuming prominent public leadership roles. As MacIlwane (2013) states in her research on cities and violence: 'Cities themselves do not generate gender-based violence. However, processes of urbanization can create heightened risk factors for women, making them more vulnerable to violence at the same time as they may create opportunities for them to deal more effectively with it, whether through informal or formal means (2013: 65-6).' Countering violence can

emerge in the everyday lives of women, through the staging of subtle critiques and small acts of resistance (cf Ong 1987, Scott 1990, de Certeau 2002). It also can assume the form of grassroots movements, vigilante patrols, and social awareness campaigns, efforts to reclaim space with rights-based campaigns, and night-time marches and activities to create new counter-spaces (see Kaur 2017; Sen 2012, 2018).

By deliberating on the concept of (en)countering, we note how attempts at ‘countering’ do not always enable an escape from violence, nor are they immune from generating other kinds of conflict. Reporting rape, for instance, is not necessarily a means to counter it. Although it can help to recognise the attack, it also opens up social, psychological and institutional violence on the complainant. The counter-allegation of ‘false complaints’ haunts male migrants and workers, as Govinda observes with respect to working class men in Delhi. Shakthi concurs that while harassment is rightly visibilised, the ‘overall climate of sexism’ (Menon 2004) remains intact. Regulations remain riddled with loopholes that do not necessarily serve the best interests of those it seeks to help. Zabaliute and Bhandari show that new liberatory opportunities of love and romantic/supportive marriages among poor and affluent women in the city leads to a plethora of vulnerabilities. Bhandari expands the notion of encountering violence to encompass emotional and mental violence; mostly in the form of acute surveillance exercised by possessive partners among affluent youth. The idea of ‘bringing violence upon yourselves’ often becomes a crippling stranglehold for the survivor of a sex crime. However, when Zabaliute’s informants, a group of community health activists in a slum, quickly respond to male-teasing about their work, saying that men also are born from women’s wombs, countering remains spontaneously embedded in the process of encountering sexual violence.

Even though we outline an ambivalent and dynamic space for the umbrella term of ‘(en)countering’, contributors to this special section draw specific elements from the encounter-counter spectrum to suit their ethnographic analyses. This is of course the forte of long-term qualitative fieldwork where the textured densities and enigmas of everyday lives end up eclipsing overarching umbrellas. We explore the multi-edged nature of these (en)counters in specific contexts. On the one hand, women and men locate their encounters with sexual violence in their social realities, without questioning the existing norms and urban structures that allow violence to occur. They may: encounter sexual violence as actual victims, naturalise daily violence, engage in victim-blaming discourses, and participate in individual and collective attempts to control

women's sexuality. On the other hand, women and men *counter* sexual violence by providing powerful critiques of its prominence in the city. This Janus process of (en)counter may also occur simultaneously among the same social actors. Critiques, as the contributors show, are not only generated through social movements, political art and activism, but also through women's and men's everyday sentiments of injustice in their urban milieus.

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