

RAPE RAGE

-Nandana Reddy

After the recent Delhi incident, Rape Rage has suddenly burst on our consciousness. It has ripped the lid off the ugly Indian underbelly. Though we all know that violence against women of all ages and social backgrounds, including the ultimate form – rape often combined with torture and ending in murder was common place, we kept it under wraps, allowing it to fester under the surface, denying its existence and suppressing any form of redressal, remedy or restitution or even discussion, by creating a climate where the victim becomes the guilty one tarnished, stained, suspect and immoral – often forcing her to seek refuge and absolution in death.

All the systems we have created to protect ourselves, all the constitutional provisions proclaiming equality and all our religious teachings pontificating the protection and veneration of women, fall apart, as we, so called civilized citizens of a democracy, the guardians of rights, the protectors of the weak, the custodians of law and morality turn violators and women are desecrate by those who are supposed to care. Our elected representatives, police, courts and even religious leaders – the ones we should turn to in need – all suffer from the same ailment – misogyny. As products of our society they only reflect what we have constructed in the name of progress.

The Delhi rape case attracted attention. Thousands came out onto the streets – young and old, men and women from all strata of society. Why?

Perhaps it was because the girl was just the girl next door – not a ‘wayward’ girl returning from a pub – not ‘gallivanting’ with a bunch of boys – not dressed ‘provocatively’ – not a call girl. There were no ‘excuses’ this time, though some tried; and “why was she out so late?” or “she was kissing on the bus” – but it was difficult to malign her with the usual denigrating clichés.

Perhaps it was because it was Delhi where there is a more politically and socially aware section of young and middle class. Perhaps it was the timing.

But perhaps it was just the last straw – the final ember that lit the fire – perhaps we had all just had enough. The simmering anger and discontent at having been wronged for so long burst into flames especially in the face of the apathy and absurdly patriarchal remarks of the authorities.

This outpouring of anger and the demand that something be done demonstrated that some sections of our nation [that are a part of both Bharath and India] have matured despite the prevailing popular culture – despite the so called popular opinion and the preverbal ‘what will our neighbours think?’

These are people, both men and women – who want to have normal tension free sexual relationships. To be able to explore their sexuality, experiment and discover what is best for them. They do this with respect for each other’s boundaries and honour the word ‘no’. They are tearing away at the false façade that covers deep seated misogamy and so it is they who are the

most threatened as they are threat to those who wish to 'protect' what they call so called 'Indian morality' and 'family honour.

Humankind was meant to procreate like all other life forms. This is a natural instinct and a biological predilection. Early humans didn't know that it took a man's sperm to fertilize the woman's egg to create a baby. It was just the fulfilling of a need like hunger or thirst. Sex was central to our being like eating, breathing and excreting.

As we evolved into thinking sentient beings and became civilized we elevated sex to an art form. In India we have the Kama Sutra, in Japan the Ishinpo that contains some of the Taoist sexual manuals and The Classic of Sunu that provides advice on sexual practices, in ancient Greek Eros the god of love, is equivalent to Kama, the Hindu god of love. Cupid depicted as a young cherub type of creature, armed with a bow and arrow, and Psyche, or Soul, is the Greek counterpart to Shakti. We infused respect, consideration and affection into what was a crude process of conjugation.

It was out in the open. We displayed reliefs on temples and temple carts; in paintings and wall hangings; we explained it through songs and games in marriage ceremonies and coming of age ceremonies and children grew up with a nuanced understanding of sex and sexuality and a feeling that it was normal. In Kerala men and women went bare chested until the Christian missionaries and social reformers arrived on the scene with their brand of morality and gradually in India and other countries of the Far East, sexuality eventually lost its sacredness and society became more sexually conservative.

With the spread of Christianity, sexuality became limited to procreation. Sex and morality were converging for the first time in history.

The Christian church had strict rules about sex and having children. Some strict theologians went so far as to recommend abstinence on Thursdays, in memory of Christ's arrest; on Fridays, in memory of his death; on Saturdays, in memory of the Virgin Mary; and on Sundays, in honor of the Resurrection. Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays were often religious holidays and fasts, so intercourse was banned on those days as well. Good Christians were not supposed to have sex during Lent, which lasted forty days, or on Christmas or other religious holidays and fasts. All of those restrictions meant the number of days you weren't allowed to have sex far outnumbered the days sex was permitted.

In the mid-1600s Europe developed and implemented modern amenities like sanitation and science, organized religion played a great role in the formation of one partner and one family and great constraints were placed upon couples to conform to the morality of the times. The modern perception of sex as sinful arose during this period.

We as a society also became more patriarchal and gradually we began to suppress the candid conversations, the dialogue and the knowledge, the songs and the ceremonies. We changed the way we dressed and the way we socialised, what was allowed and what was not was dictated by the patriarch until sex was mystified and sullied and became a tool in the hands of the powerful

to oppress and subjugate the weak and the less powerful. This patriarchy was also internalised by women who in turn have become instruments of suppression and oppression.

The politics of rape runs deep. The number of politicians who have forced women into having sex using their position and power outnumber the ones who haven't. It is their way of gaining a false sense of power and for them such despicable acts go with the territory – are part and parcel of their role. It is not surprising therefore that they come out with such insensitive and unsavoury statements. But we must remember that they too are a slice of our society and we have elected them!

Popular media – be it films or TV Serials – again a reflection of the society we have created depicts sex as a titillating series of gestures aimed at the groin, suggestive movements and erotic/pornographic dance sequences. All this but not the real thing! We do not show kissing or the act of making love. That is left to the imagination and if the imagination is ignited by the visuals one has seen – the act itself can only be construed to be an act of force, power, lurid and crude.

Would it not be better to show the act of love making with respect and tenderness, where two consenting adults come together for personal gratification and each other's fulfilment? Where sex is engaged in with respect for each other even if not for love? Where the human body and the act itself is not a means of demonstrating power over the other or a means of control and not an act of punishment?

Interestingly, cultures that are more open to sex and more comfortable acknowledging it as a normal human function have less incidences of rape. A Rape Map of India constructed by Dutta and Malhotra shows that the North East and the extreme West of India have the lowest incidences of reported rape. Though the actual figure must be higher as a large number of rapes are not reported and reported cases are just the tip of the iceberg just going by these figures, Nagaland reported 23 cases in 2011, Sikkim 16, Daman and Dui 1, Pondicherry 7 as against UP 2042, Rajasthan 1800, Kerala 1132 and MP 3400! Sikkim has had 16 such cases.

Tribal societies have a very low, if any, incidences of rape or even unwanted pregnancies. In Bastar girls and boys on reaching puberty choose their partners and go off into the forest together for a period of trial before they decided whether to become a couple and start a family and according to studies the girl almost never gets pregnant as a result.

But what is the solution? The protests in Delhi are proof that at least a part of India has moved on and is sexually mature. But will this lead to action? Will making more stringent laws and enforcement – an important and necessary step in the short term – but will that be enough to really improve things in the long term?

Perhaps we need to take even greater steps to rip open the lid of sexuality and spill the contents. Perhaps we need to take our children to Kajuraho and Konarak and show them the reliefs and tell them how love can elevate sex to phenomenal heights. Perhaps we need to relook at our censorship laws and ban the vulgar gyrations and allow more of the real thing. Perhaps we need to join the one million rising and sing the songs of love.....