The Gender Terrorists

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"Just being a woman is an act of courage", said the tagline to the 1979 film adaptation of Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar. One can modify that somewhat to suit the Indian situation – just being born a woman in India is an act of courage.

In 2010 a fellow researcher from Stanford University and I compiled a dataset from the Asian Recorder on insurgent attacks in India which occurred between the years 1955 and 2008. The Reed-Sirnate dataset recorded a total of 10,013 people killed over this period in insurgent attacks. We also recognised that this was not the complete picture and that we could, with ease, probably double this statistic. This number included security forces, civilians (men, women and children) and insurgents killed in terror attacks across the country where the aggressors were insurgent groups.

Academics from across the world have spent much time compiling statistics recording the number of people killed in caste and communal violence in India. For instance, the Varshney-Wilkinson dataset on post-Partition communal violence reports 7,173 deaths in all riots that took place between 1950 and 1995 (Varshney 2001). Similarly, the number of people killed in caste violence in 2011 was 673 and the number of dalit women raped was 1,557. Since 2006, 3,840 scheduled caste people have been killed in caste violence.

Now let us look at another set of figures. In 2011 alone, the number of women and girls killed in dowry related cases was 8,618. This number almost rivals the number we got from our insurgency dataset spanning 53 years and beats the number presented in the dataset on communal violence. Further, the number of dowry deaths in 2011 were far more than the total number of people killed in caste violence since 2006. Finally, the number of women (47,022) who died in 2011 alone outstripped the combined statistics of all kinds of violent deaths occurring in that year due to insurgency, caste and religious violence.

We are then left with a shocking finding: routine Indian male violence against women resulting in female deaths exceeds those that are caused by other kinds of community-based violence, including caste, communal and insurgent violence.
Now these female deaths in 2011 were not accidental ones. The accidental deaths are recorded in a completely separate section in the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) publications. Combining the figures for dowry deaths in 2010 (8,391) and 2011 (8,618) reveals that crimes reported under this section of the Indian Penal Code alone far exceeds the number of other violent crimes in society. We are looking at 17,009 women killed in two years for not providing a sufficient dowry in spite of several laws that legislate precisely against this practice.

According to the NCRB, a total of 24,596 housewives committed suicide by various means in 2011. This partial figure (some data is missing from the NCRB) shows that the majority of female suicide cases were women/housewives aged 15 to 29 years. The fact that younger housewives are more likely to kill themselves makes perfect sense given the harassment and bullying they face in their marital homes.

### Table 1: How women and girls died in India in 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dowry Deaths</td>
<td>8618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder/homicide: Ages 0-10</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder/homicide: Ages 10-15</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder/homicide: Ages 15-18</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide: Ages 0-14</td>
<td>1461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide: Ages 15-29</td>
<td>21410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide: Ages 30-44</td>
<td>14815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide: Ages 44- and above</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All India Total</td>
<td>47022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 2: How Indian women were routinely terrorised in 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>24206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapping and abduction</td>
<td>35565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molestation</td>
<td>42968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Harassment</td>
<td>8570</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Random homicidal killing of women is not that common. What we see is the targeted killing of women and abetment to suicide through harassment within the confines of the family structure. Again, this is only a fraction of the actual number of crimes against women since most cases of sexual violence, partner violence, domestic abuse and harassment go largely unreported because women are scared or ashamed, or both, to report them. Indian women know that they are fighting a losing battle since going to the state for redressal of grievances seldom results in actual justice for them.

A few years ago the NCRB reported that there had been a 700 per cent increase in cases of everyday rape since 1971. In the NCRB's 2011 report 24,206 cases of rape in India were reported. Out of these 93.8 per cent resulted in a chargesheet with a pathetic conviction rate of 26.4 per cent. There were 42,968 cases of reported molestation (27 per cent conviction rate), 99,136 cases of cruelty by husbands and relatives (20.2 per cent conviction rate) and 35,565 cases of kidnapping and abduction of women and girls.

Our child sex-ratio stands at 914 girls per 1000 men, with the ratio in the states of Punjab and Haryana being the worst. An estimated 20 million females are missing in India since 1950 because of practices that include abortion, or killing a girl at birth.

**What is Gender Terrorism?**

The largest chunk of people in India permanently living in a 'state of exception' are not always persecuted minority groups living in communally tense areas or people in insurgency affected areas. The people living under a constant regime of terror are the 58,64,69,174 Indian women (more than the total population of the United States). And there is a clear group of aggressors in this equation – Indian males and the women who aid and abet them. I call these individuals gender terrorists. By using the vocabulary of terrorism, I hope to draw attention to these patterns of violence against women as an internal security problem.

Indian women live in a continuous, terrorised 'state of exception' each and every day, where their legal rights, equality and human rights are suspended as a matter of course. Laws, codes and norms that are imposed on women by long-standing traditions have no relevance to life in the contemporary world, yet they endure because they are designed to keep them in check. Judgments on rape have used the problematic phrase of a victim being "habituated to sex"\(^3\), which means that women who have had sexual intercourse before cannot be raped. The perverted morality of our sociological conditioning preaches that ‘good’ girls do not get...
attacked, raped or harassed. And if our religious leaders are to be believed, some ethereal deity if prayed to can stop a woman from being gang-raped. All violence happens to ‘loose girls’ and many, including some women, believe that they either put themselves at risk knowingly, or they ‘had it coming’.

There is a tendency to treat gender violence as a law and order problem, and as incidents that occur at random. In fact, statistics clearly point to patterns of violence, and clearly identify the likelihood of who can be a perpetrator. Treating incidents of gender terrorism as random acts of crazy or disturbed individuals is misguided because it misses the crucial point that gender terrorism is organised, structured and systematic. That it is backed by the state when it chooses not to act on behalf of women, by extra-legal organisations like the khap panchayats, by patriarchal families, by school systems and by individual men and sadly, also many women.

That Indian women are the terrorised gender is well known. However, if there is a terrorised group, it stands to reason that someone must be terrorising them. We can clearly say that many Indian men terrorise Indian women in some form or the other.

Terrorism in the security studies literature refers specifically to some kind of violent action taken by an armed group that has a perceived grievance against the structures of power that exist. It deals with ideologically motivated killing of innocent people. Terrorism implies organised, or even a collection of individual acts directed against one community, territory or a group of people. It implies an ideology and a manifesto, and justifies why violence should be used.

Traditional definitions of terrorism cannot be fully applied to the concept of gender terrorism. Hence, I make a distinction between a political terrorist and a social terrorist. Political terrorism incorporates and encourages gender terrorism. A political terrorist typically attacks institutions of power as he has a bone to pick with those power structures. However, part of being a terrorist is to gain legitimacy through forced compliance. This a terrorist does by being a social terrorist as well. Think about the Taliban imposing moral and dress codes on society, and Punjabi and Kashmiri extremists imposing dress codes on women. Interestingly, political terrorists often start their local campaigns by policing what women can and cannot do and how they can and cannot dress. The reason why Taliban style political terrorism works is because the followed ideology is not just political, it also encourages a private individual’s capacity to use violence against a woman he knows or sees.

The manner in which gender terrorism as social terrorism routinely operates is not very different from political terrorism. The only thing absent is grievance against a power structure. If anything, gender terrorism is more like terrorism by the mighty and their handmaidens.

Gender terrorists are men (and women) who routinely enforce norms of behavior for women
and girls that are meant to curtail their freedom, choice, rights, and impede the exercise of their capabilities. These social terrorists also work to restrict women’s access to political and legal institutions, nutrition, education, property, and economic opportunities. They use violence as a matter of course to enforce their agenda. In keeping with the accepted characteristics of terrorism, gender terrorists also create widespread psychological trauma for the targeted group (women), which endures over time and is handed down from one generation to the other.

In Haryana, eleven cases of rape, reported over 30 days, were followed with some of the most idiotic rationalisations by the illegal, unconstitutional, informal and self-styled law-making tribunals called *khap* panchayats. Several explanations were offered by men in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh for beating up their wives, or raping women. They said, men get jealous if their wives talk on the phone. The phones were blamed for women eloping with other men. Therefore, a *khap* decreed that women should not use cell phones. Men cannot help being lascivious and violent if women wear tight ‘western’ clothing. So, women should be fully covered in clothes that do not reveal their form or body type. Since men do not have access to sex in their youth they find themselves raping women. Therefore, the marriageable age of women should be reduced to sixteen so that more girls can be sexually available to men legally, and this can- according to *khaps*- reduce rape. Marrying outside the *gotra* and/or caste, and marrying by choice is an assault on the dignity and honor of the family, the head of which is a man. Consequently, to restore and reconstitute this honour a woman must be brutally murdered, or in some cases publically punished and humiliated along with her chosen partner.

These pronouncements are classic acts of gender terrorism. This is not law-making; this is rule by diktat. Organisations like *khaps* enable and actively encourage acts of terrorism against women and the men who support these women. The judgments of these extra-legal bodies are not unlike the pronouncements of insurgent groups like the Tehrik-e-Taliban of Pakistan.

In political terrorism there is a deep-seated ideology (religious or political) that provides motivation for acts of terror. Call it patriarchy or misogyny, gender terrorists are bound by a code, and a majority of men agree on the rules of that code. This code shapes the gender terrorist to see women in a particular way- as a body to be possessed on the slightest of pretexts, which could be a short dress or a revealing blouse. There is no respect for a woman. She is treated like an animal, and is sometimes less beloved than a cow. She can be bought, sold, traded, collectively used for sex, pinched, prodded, branded, defiled, mutilated, experimented with, burnt, bullied, financially coerced, insulted, verbally abused, underfed, economically exploited and emotionally abused.

Gender terrorism can be found in legislations like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which allows for armed state actors to get away without any public accountability and scrutiny for their policing actions in conflict zones. These actions have often included rape
of women in northeast India and Kashmir. These offences have remained largely uninvestigated because of the shroud of secrecy that surrounds the actions of state actors.

Gender terrorism relies on the willingness of the terrorised to view abuse as normal, to be shamed by it and not report it. It uses an increased threat of terror in case a victim reports initial acts of terrorism. There are consequences to being a tattletale, and she is made well aware of what will happen to her or her family if she resists. It is also unpredictable. Any woman, at any time of day, wearing any kind of clothing, in any public or private space, is likely to be a victim of gender terrorism. In this manner, the gender terrorists are able to coerce a woman or a girl into complying with their agenda.

Ripples of Vengeance

On the heels of the Delhi gang-rape incident, a 19 year old dancer was gang-raped in Orissa, a three year old was raped at a day care center and an actress in Manipur (who bravely refused to hide her identity) was dragged off the stage to be raped by a militant. All these incidents happened within 72 hours of the Delhi incident. Many other incidents also happened in 2012. A minor girl was publicly lynched while coming out of a club in Guwahati and this was filmed and broadcast across the nation in absolute violation of media ethics. A girl in south India was molested and thrown off a moving train for refusing the advances of a group of men, and a 16 year old was raped in Silchar by her local guardian.

The anti-rape protests in New Delhi in December 2012 called for revenge in the form of castration and the death penalty for rapists in the glaring absence of justice for crimes against women. Now judicial inquiry commissions are advocating that women be allowed to kill rapists in self-defense, and right-wing organisations like the Shiv Sena are distributing knives to women for self-defense. In 2004, fourteen women in Nagpur stabbed a known rapist, Appu Yadav, to death in a courtroom. In the last decade in at least two instances, women in Bihar and UP have beheaded their rapists. When the 2012 anti-rape protests occurred in New Delhi, the Indian government instead of backing the supporters on an issue where there cannot, ethically speaking, be two sides, famously fumbled as it water cannoned and tear-gassed thousands of well-heeled protestors and tried to stop them from reaching protest points by shutting down key subway stations.

In the absence of justice, Indian women are indicating that they will settle for revenge. These women who are ‘recovering subversion’, as Nivedita Menon once articulated, often take the law into their own hands. The Gulabi Gang bullies its way into police thanas and offices of bureaucrats for better treatment of women, and bashes up husbands known to be wife-beaters. And let us not forget the increasing number of tribal women that join the Maoists every year to flee persecution and abuse by the state and its commercial handmaidens.

This is not an endorsement of the vengeance harboured by women. This is instead a recognition of a systemic problem in the capacity and willingness of the state to react and
respond to gender terrorism. It indicates the failure of the political process to secure rights for half the citizens of the country. Women are forced into being radicals to secure their personal safety because they are painfully aware that no one else will secure it for them.

**Bharat Versus India - A False Dichotomy**

In India, state actors mirror the anti-woman ideas that govern social behavior. Our police and paramilitary personnel are drawn from households that have seen violence within the family. Our constabulary comes from semi-urban and/or rural areas where their mothers waited on them hand and foot, and now their wives and daughters wait on them. For our police, who are supposed to be the first responders in a case of gender terrorism, a beaten up housewife is something familiar. They have seen their mothers get beaten up at home. A girl with her boyfriend who got raped is also familiar. They probably agree that women with boyfriends are “habituated to sex” and so their rape is not a big deal.

This sounds very much like an argument that pitches rural India (Bharat) versus cosmopolitan India where women are supposedly treated better. But this is not the case. If anything, Bharat and India agree on how women are perceived and how they should behave. Bharat and India agree on dowry practices. Bharat and India agree on the impossible attractions of short skirts that ‘allow’ men to rape women. Bharat and India both believe rape can be conducted with impunity. Bharat and India both have women that are victims of domestic violence and spousal abuse.

The arguments that construe metropolitan India as a socially evolved space are quite misleading and dangerous because they lull us into thinking that rape culture and gender terrorism are products of economic and societal backwardness. If this were the case we would not see gender terrorism in countries like the USA or a host of European nations. That we still see incidents of rape in developed countries, is an indicator of the global scale of gender terrorism.

**The Bromance of the State**

The people who staff the state shape state apathy towards gender terrorism. We have elected representatives who openly dislike women, openly buy women for sex and make them disappear when things get uncomfortable. Our representatives have repeatedly scuttled the tabling of the Women’s Reservation Bill since the late 1990’s. Many representatives have chargesheets pending against them on various counts of sexual violence, including rape. These charges have not impeded their rise in politics and have not stopped them from representing us.

Our military and paramilitary personnel have been accused of rape in conflict zones. A few years ago an army soldier was filmed sexually harassing a young girl in Assam in full view of other soldiers. No one stopped the soldier, and no one helped the girl. She retaliated by pelting him with stones. The rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama by soldiers of the
Assam Rifles in Manipur gave rise to forms of protest that included a mob of naked Manipuri women marching to the Assam Rifles headquarters demanding justice with signs that said “Indian Army Rape Us”.

During my fieldwork on counter-insurgency in India, I was told a story about a counterinsurgency operation in a northeastern state. In this operation army men- recruited from central India- who were part of a regiment stationed in Assam and the state police of an adjoining state conducted a combined operation against a newly discovered camp of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). The raid was successful. However, they found three female ULFA members in the camp. Tense bargaining took place that night between the northeastern cops, who were operating out of their jurisdiction in an adjoining state, and the Indian army soldiers who wanted the women released to them. The northeastern cops resisted releasing the women to the army. They saw the women as fellow northeasterners.

The cop I interviewed said, “you can guess what would have happened to them”. After half an hour or so of bargaining, one of the cops from the northeast picked up his rifle and shot the three women dead. It was to send a signal to the army men. The cops and soldiers went their separate ways, and no one was ever the wiser publically about what had transpired that night, how many rules of engagement had been broken, and how many men got away with multiple murders.

Such incidents are clear violations of all laws that globally govern our existence. However, these are men and state actors drawn from a society where women are ‘taught lessons’ through sexual assault and are beaten up and insulted for the slightest of transgressions. The standards of male behavior and the attitude towards women that exist in Indian society find their way into the actions of our military, paramilitary and police personnel. The institutions of the state don’t break down gender terrorism; they reinforce it.

It is hard to spell out the consequences for perpetrators of gender terrorism when state actors themselves are deeply misogynistic. The laws protecting women in the Indian legal system are far ahead of their times in many cases. However, they are sporadically and clumsily implemented. We as a polity need to define consequences for gender terrorists. Impunity exists in the absence of consequences.

“Just being a woman is an act of courage”, said the tagline to the 1979 film adaptation of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. I modify that somewhat to suit the Indian situation – just being born a woman in India is an act of courage.

**References**

The term ‘habituated to sex’ became controversial when it was used in 1974 in the judgment of the Mathura Rape Case. In this case a sixteen year old tribal girl was raped in Maharashtra’s Chandrapur district inside a police thana. The judgment ruled that rape could not be proved; only intercourse could be proved because the victim was determined to have been ‘habituated to sex’.