

India's Daughter and the Limits of Transnational Feminist Solidarity

Written by Meenakshi Gigi Durham

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MEENAKSHI GIGI DURHAM, APR 10 2015

She is a marked woman, but not everybody knows her name [1]. In India, she is referred to as “Nirbhaya” — one without fear. Her brutal rape and murder sparked firestorms of protest and debate in India as well as around the world, and Leslee Udwin’s new film — *India’s Daughter*— is reigniting the controversies and contestations about this crime and its ramifications.

Her name, in fact, was Jyoti Singh Pandey, and she was a medical student. On December 16, 2012, she was savagely sexually assaulted by six men after she boarded a private bus. She was flung, naked, disemboweled, and bleeding, into the street. Shortly afterward, she died of her ghastly injuries.

Telling her story matters. It mattered when it happened, not only because it was a horrific crime, but because it launched intense public dialogues around long-repressed societal problems of sexual violence and misogyny, in India as well as elsewhere. Nirbhaya’s rape and murder revealed the darkest side of contemporary gender politics and the crucial need to confront and challenge them.

India’s Daughter, released in March 2015, is part of that continuing global discourse — as is *Daughters of Mother India*, a 2014 film by the Indian director Vibha Bakshi, and *The United Kingdom’s Daughters*, a recent YouTube production by amateur videographer Harvinder Singh. There are probably others I don’t know about yet.

Udwin says *India’s Daughter* was inspired by the protests in India — “the hope, the optimism, occasioned by the massive show of solidarity for women, the momentous expression of determination and courage by civil society to end offenses against women” (quoted in Dominguez, 2015). Her aim, she declares, was not to vilify India, to blame Indians, or to isolate the incident in the Indian context; rather, she wanted to explore the issue of rape and the imperative of publicly and massively contesting it.

The Indian government responded by banning the film. (By contrast, Bakshi’s film won a national award.) Not surprisingly, the ban propelled *India’s Daughter* into the international spotlight, and critics on all sides started to weigh in. While the Indian administration took some heat for censoring the film, Udwin was also excoriated for a variety of transgressions: she was accused of using underhanded techniques, like bribery, to obtain her interviews; of compromising the defendants’ legal appeals; of failing to adequately depict Nirbhaya’s agency and achievements; and of perpetuating xenophobic stereotypes of India from a biased Western perspective. Udwin, in return, maintains that she was scrupulously ethical in her filmmaking and that her aims were based in feminist global solidarity rather than in any notion of Western superiority or righteousness.

The discourses around the crime and its cinematic interrogation are thus fraught with the particular tensions associated with feminism, sexual violence, geopolitical tensions, and mediated representation.

It is crucial, of course, to realize that a great deal of the rhetoric around “global sisterhood” and feminist emancipation has actually worked to sustain hegemonic power relations, privileging the perspectives and priorities of the global North/First World [2]. Chandra Mohanty famously made this point when she analyzed the strategies by which

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"Western feminisms appropriate and colonize the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in [nonwestern] countries" (Mohanty, 1998, p. 63) or as Chilla Bulbeck reminds us, " 'other' women still often appear as just that, footnotes of difference in the general themes of white women's lives and experiences" (1998, p. 4). In this way, Laura Bush's vaunted mission of "saving" Muslim women from veiling was used to justify American neo-imperial military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, deliberately overlooking the complexity, agency, or specific histories involved in practices of veiling. It would be easy to come up with other examples of the fallacies underpinning "sisterhood" as an emancipatory trope.

In my own recent analysis of the media coverage of Jyoti Singh Pandey's rape, I demonstrated the ways that U.S. journalism reasserted global hierarchies, positioning India as a barbaric and brutal place in contrast to the apparently civilized and nonviolent United States (Durham, 2014). So it would be possible to read *India's Daughter* as yet another salvo from that arsenal — another Western film depicting India's inferiority and primitivity.

I've reflected on this idea, prompted in part by criticisms of the film that press the point, and I believe that conclusion is a little too easy. It's not altogether wrong, but it doesn't take into account the rather complicated ethical framework of the film and its implications for transnational feminist activism around sexual violence.

The film is harrowing in a number of ways. The heartbreak and raw grief of Jyoti Pandey's parents moved me to tears; the casual recounting of the crime by one of its perpetrators, Mukesh Singh, is bone-chilling. Perhaps even more infuriating is the attitude of the defense lawyers, who go out of their way in on-camera interviews to blame the victim as well as to justify the crime on reductive cultural grounds. One of them, M.L. Sharma, declares smugly, "We have the best culture. In our culture there is no place for a woman."

As I watched the film, I realized I needed to know this part of the story. These interviews shook me out of any illusions I might have had about a universal horror about this crime. They may contribute to the view that India is an entrenched patriarchy where women are dispensable and worthless — but on the other hand, Udwin has also included countervailing Indian voices, especially those of women, who concede the prevailing culture of misogyny but also point out the widespread resistance to it, the very resistance that inspired Udwin to make the film.

Feminism is, indeed, deeply rooted in Indian culture. The theorist Uma Narayan argues persuasively that her own feminism was catalyzed by her observations and experiences of gender dynamics in India. From her perspective, "Third World feminist critiques are often just one prevailing form of *intra-cultural* criticism of social institutions" (Narayan, 1997, p. 19).

Vibha Bakshi's film is a great example of this. *Daughters of Mother India* foregrounds and celebrates the Indian feminist energy that converged powerfully around this incident. Is it problematic that *India's Daughter*, too, gave voice to that critique? Should it have been banned? I think not, even if the latter film was not made by an Indian. For me, the two films are complementary, with Bakshi's film tackling the "big picture," macro-level societal issues, and Udwin's moving in close to (literally) interrogate the perpetrators and their motives, as well as to communicate Nirbhaya's parents' grief. Udwin, like Bakshi, was committed to documenting Indian women's voices. In the same spirit, she interviewed Indian men, as well, who challenge patriarchal culture, including a Supreme Court justice who was instrumental in changing India's rape laws following this crime.

She is also careful to explain the violent and poverty-stricken circumstances of the perpetrators' lives, offering context and even compassion for them despite their gruesome crime and evident lack of remorse for it. Again, because the film begins with and dwells on Mukesh Singh's dispassionate account of the rape and murder, his certainty that the victim deserved everything she got, and the lawyers' unswerving adherence to the same view, it would be easy to accuse the filmmaker of perpetuating what Namita Goswami (2014) has called "heteroimperial masculinity" — a frame that casts working-class Indian masculinity as innately pathological compared to Western gender norms. But in the documentary, Udwin interviews a number of working-class Indian men who think differently, including Jyoti Pandey's tutor, a soft-spoken young man who, speaking in Hindi, asks, "What was Jyoti's crime? That she went out at night?" It's hard to accuse Udwin of demonizing all Indian men, when so many men featured in the film share, support, and express feminist understandings of rape.

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Documentary filmmaking is fraught with ethical and moral issues, and feminist film in particular grapples with “the connective and conflictual tissues of sexual, racial, and class differences” (Waldman and Walker, 1999, p. 2) as they relate to the power dynamics of filming. The person wielding the camera also tends to wield more power than her subjects, especially when she is more educated as well as wealthier than they are, and she is privileged by her geographic location and race. Documentarians, like anthropologists and journalists, tend to “study down” in terms of focusing on the lives of people at a comparative socioeconomic disadvantage. Udwin does this more than Bakshi does. But in reading and thinking about Leslee Udwin’s motives, practices, and explanations, I am persuaded that she worked in the spirit of transracial and transnational feminist alliance — that is, in solidarity with the Indian women and men who demonstrated and advocated against sexual violence and its sociocultural sources, seeing her film as a site of reparation and inspiration. As Aimee Carillo Rowe writes, “[T]he relation between power and victimization is characterized by the active and interactive process of ... healing the splits that arise from imperial trauma” (2009, p. 19).

I believe Udwin genuinely wanted to heal the splits. But “healing the splits” carries with it a greater imperative than documenting a crime in India: it would also involve acknowledging the culpability of the First World, indeed the rest of the world, in this circumstance. It would involve reflexivity and a sense of accountability rooted in one’s own cultural location— and this is a framework that is missing from Udwin’s film (even if some versions of the film ended with global statistics about rape). It is a fact that in the past couple of years, gang rapes have occurred all over the world: in France, Brazil, China, Canada, and the U.S., among other countries. It’s true, too, that Jyoti Pandey’s assault was particularly savage and culminated in her murder, but the Indian subcontinent has no monopoly on vicious sexual assaults.

So I’m waiting for the world to recoil at the realities of sexual violence in every part of this planet, and for people in the capital cities of the First World to take to the streets, as Indians did, to demand redress and reform. And when they do, I’ll be waiting for Leslee Udwin’s documentaries about the rapes in Texas and Ohio and Paris and Amsterdam. I’ll be waiting for the BBC to air an exposé of the misogyny and hatred among the American and British and European and Australian men who have committed similar crimes — or even to confirm the claim made in *The United Kingdom’s Daughters* that some 30 percent of all Brits believe, just like Mukesh Singh, that rape is a woman’s fault.

I have a feeling I’m going to be waiting a long time.

Notes

[1] As many readers will recognize, this sentence is a reference to Hortense Spillers’ famous description of the figure of the black woman [Spillers, H. J. (1987). *Mama’s baby, papa’s maybe: An American grammar book*. *diacritics* 17 (2), pp. 65-81].

[2] I’m aware of the debates around terminology, but I will use “First World” and “global North” synonymously in this essay, as they illustrate the oppositional frameworks that pit them against “Third World” and “global South” in public discourse.

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