

Cite as: Devasundaram, A. I., & Barn, R. (2020) Performativity of rape culture through fact and fiction: An exploration of India's Daughter and Anatomy of Violence, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, First Published 27 May, 1367877920911937.

Performativity of Rape Culture through Fact and Fiction: An Exploration of India's Daughter and Anatomy of Violence

Abstract

The power and influence of film and documentaries in public discourse and in formal pedagogical practices is recognized as critical. The content and message of a documentary are likely to be regarded as the 'truth'. This is generally located in the belief that since a documentary is focused on a real-life event, it seeks to objectively expose key issues and concerns to reveal the veracity of the phenomenon under scrutiny. This article explores the portrayal of fact and fiction through film and documentary as exemplified by Deepa Mehta's film *Anatomy of Violence* and Leslee Udwin's film *India's Daughter* (2016 and 2015 respectively), selected for their focus on the rape and murder of a Delhi student dubbed by the media as 'Nirbhaya' in 2012. The article investigates how these two media forms make use of fact or fiction to enhance understanding of a key social quandary, examining notions of temporality, spatiality, determinism and patriarchy.

Keywords

Bollywood , cinema, documentary, India, media, rape

Introduction

Critical evaluations of rape and gender violence through the cinematic medium are a vital representational tool for prompting deeper investigations of particularly brutal acts such as the focus of this paper - gang rape and murder of 23-year old student, Jyoti Singh, at the hands of six men on a moving bus in Delhi in 2012. As Indian law prohibits the press from revealing a rape victim's real name in the aftermath of an assault, Singh became synonymous with the media-generated pseudonym - Nirbhaya (fearless). Ever since this shocking rape-murder incident, India has been at the epicentre of global and national discourse surrounding rape and routinised violence against women. Following the Jyoti Singh story and a wave of other rape-related events, Delhi has been deemed the 'rape capital of India', with 1,996 rape cases reported in 2016 (National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2017). Annual reported incidents involving

female victims of rape in India, during 2016, stand at 38,947—an increase of 56% since the 2012 high-profile and brutal rape and murder case of Jyoti Singh in Delhi (Dutta & Sircar, 2013; National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2017). While these are the reported annual figures, it has been estimated that only 15% to 20% of the rape incidents are brought to the attention of the police (Barn & Kumari, 2015). Multiple class, political, religious, legal and socio-economic complexities are often overlooked or underestimated in discourses surrounding rape in India.

It is also worth appraising the broader Indian cinema landscape in which *India's Daughter* (2015, dir. Leslee Udwin) and *Anatomy of Violence* (2016, dir. Deepa Mehta) could be located, in the specific context of portraying rape. Cinematic interpretations of rape and sexual violence were often presented in reductionist, essentialised, sensationalised and simplified idioms, especially in mainstream commercial Hindi cinema in the 1970s and 80s - which became better known as the Bollywood industry in the 1990s. In an analysis of depictions of rape in commercial Hindi cinema, Ranjani Mazumdar (2017) argues that the failures of the Indian criminal justice system become the focus in a genre where cinematic vigilantism operates as a visceral response. Through discussion of films including *Ankush* (1986), *Raakh* (1989), *Insaaf Ka Tarazu* (1980), and *Zakhmi Aurat* (1986), she raises key questions about the graphic enactment of rape on screen and its relationship to political culture in the 1980s. There has been a distinctive departure from mainstream Hindi cinema's 'gratuitous and perverse' portrayals of sexual violence on women (Varia, 2012: 21), particularly since the emergence around 2010, of a new wave of independent non-Bollywood Indian cinema, which is engaging with topical socio-political issues and concerns, particularly from the standpoint of women (Devasundaram, 2016, 2018). In this regard, Chatterjee (2017) argues that the

‘Nirbhaya’ case has inspired a genre of film-making that seeks to address the everyday gendered violence directed at women, specifically in the city where Jyoti Singh was raped and murdered. Recent films such as *NH10* (Navdeep Singh, 2015), *Parched* (Leena Yadav, 2015), *Pink* (Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, 2016), *Ajji* (Devashish Makhija, 2017) and *Totaa Pataaka Item Maal* (The Incessant Fear of Rape, Aditya Kripalani, 2018) show the leading women characters to be resolute and strong in the face of adversity (Devasundaram, 2018). *Pink* seeks to restore confidence in the criminal justice system and challenge rape myths about victims and perpetrators (Barn and Powers, 2018):

Moving away from the tendency to frame uneducated, lower-income migrant males as the primary threat to the sexual safety of middle-class women, *Pink* comments on the more prevalent trends of rape and sexual violence in society: intraclass and often perpetrated by men known to women (Chatterjee 2017:14).

The particular representative approaches and strategies adopted by Mehta and Udwin (as independent overseas filmmakers operating from outside the Indian filmmaking matrix) present an area of further study, especially in this contemporary scenario, where new independent Indian fiction feature films are undertaking interrogative, critical, diverse and nuanced hermeneutics of rape culture within the country.

In *Anatomy of Violence* (2016), Deepa Mehta adopts an experimental docufiction approach to reconstruct the Jyoti Singh rape incident, using a troupe of nine theatre actors to portray the perpetrators and victim - Jyoti Singh is given the pseudonym Janki in the film. Mehta’s motive is to present the perpetrators’ perspective, undergirding her film with the catchphrase ‘no one becomes who they are in isolation’. The avant-garde approach also features the male actors oscillating back and forth in time and space in dual portrayals of the perpetrators as adults and as children. This dramaturgical strategy is designed to extrapolate the rapists’ motivations for

their crime in 2012, by connecting to their own traumatic childhood experiences of impoverishment and sexual abuse as causal factors for their violent crime.

Leslee Udwin opts for a conventional documentary verité approach in *India's Daughter* (2015), training her gaze on the specific synchronic timeline of the incident, mapping its prelude and immediate aftermath through interviews with the victim Jyoti Singh's parents, but also providing a platform for the perpetrators and their relatives to articulate their side of the story. Udwin uses TV news footage in her attempt to situate these voices within the larger outraged chorus of street protests triggered by the incident in Delhi and across India, marked by pitched battles between young demonstrators and the police.

Overall, Mehta strives to anatomise the incident and to identify the causal stimuli across childhood, adolescence and adulthood that may have precipitated the actions of Jyoti Singh's assailants. Udwin restricts her frame to the brutal incident as the spark that set off widespread social unrest. These two arguably deterministic designs present an opportunity for this paper to undertake a more discursive mapping of the performativity of rape culture in contemporary India.

In this study, we will analyse the two documentaries' filmic endeavour to formulate a structural mapping - an anatomy of the Jyoti Singh rape case. In the process, we will shine a light on the impact of some of the daily performative aspects of rape that reside in a complex matrix of utterances, social behaviour, cultural norms, everyday actions, collective practices, legal and political structures, religious dogma, accepted and performed patriarchies. In this vein, it is essential to ascertain whether the slice of 'verisimilitude' offered by the two films adequately addresses the act of rape as constituting but a thread in a tangled skein of discursive practices

and enactments. These discursive instantiations are embedded in daily lived experiences - the performativity of rape culture in both tangible and intangible ways, ambiguously cloaked or brazenly open in various underestimated avatars and enabling factors. In relation to this analysis, positing a discursive web of multiple strands and minutiae could help create a more representative cartography, or extend a more scopic representation of rape in India. Broader intersectional mappings are especially useful in this instance, considering the restricted temporal frame of the cinematic medium – the finitude of film duration, which often delimits and dictates what can feasibly be articulated or engaged with in the specific timeframe of a documentary or docufiction film.

In order to decipher how the spectre of rape often constitutes an ever clear and present peril, and hence should be treated as a perennially present *psychological* discourse seared into the subconscious mindset of women in India, we will disentangle some discursive elements that the two films may not have factored sufficiently or may have overlooked altogether. This entails a generative attempt to understand the broader and multiple realities of rape culture involving ‘a wide range of oppressive social structures that cause women’s subordination to men’ (John & Niranjana 2000: 375).

The theoretical orientation of this analysis will draw from and build on the work of several scholars investigating the Jyoti Singh case. This includes Krupa Shandilya (2015), who has called into question the homogenising of Jyoti Singh as a middle-class, upper-caste Hindu ‘everywoman’ figure, thereby evoking affect and outrage from a predominantly middle-class demographic. This undifferentiated appropriation of Singh as a symbol, especially by ‘activist media narratives’, marginalises ‘rapes of invisible others (neither the elite beneficiaries of colonialism or of globalization), lower-caste, lower-class, non-Hindu women

whose rapes do not incite middle-class horror’ (Kumar and Parameswaran, 2018: 353; Shandilya, 2015). Atluri (2013) advocates the need for more discursive constructions whilst appraising the 2012 incident and the youth-led protests that followed. This discursive approach will be applied to the themes and issues addressed in this essay.

Our method for this analysis will include specific visual, textual and discursive readings of form, style and content in the two films, summoning comparative examples where necessary whilst drawing simultaneously from data pertaining to the pervasiveness of rape and gender-based violence in India. In particular, we interrogate the themes projected in the films including patriarchy, masculinity, gendered norms, sexual violence, poverty, migration, economic exclusion, and the criminal justice system. We will also draw from our panel discussion on ‘Gender Violence: Cinema as a Mirror for Ethical Evaluation’ conducted as part of a UK Asian Film Festival (UKAFF) 2017 screening at Queen Mary University of London - video of the discussion is accessible in the public domain (Devasundaram & Barn, 2017).

In terms of structure, we will commence with sections that locate and appraise Mehta’s and Udwin’s filmic approaches to a shared theme. Subsequently, we will explore themes of socio-economic typecasting, the slum as dystopic space, class, caste and religious stratification, and the anti-rape protests that followed the 2012 incident. We will also gesture towards implicit and often underestimated cultural conduits that promote rape culture – such as the role of sexualised song and dance sequences – the ‘item number’, that has become a nationally lauded and almost mandatory feature of blockbuster Bollywood films. Prior to our conclusion, we will signpost crucial developments that have transpired between 2016 and the time of writing this article in 2019. These include a series of high-profile rape incidents involving prominent

politicians and tintured with religious fundamentalist ideology, and India's #MeToo movement that has swept across the political, journalistic and cultural sectors including the Bollywood industry. We will address the more overt machinations of Indian legal and political apparatuses, socio-cultural mores and dominant religious ideology that buttress a patriarchal national narrative and uphold a male-dominated social status quo. These events will be summoned upon to lend credence to this study's central argument that the performativity of rape in India must be mapped as a discursive network rather than being compartmentalised into a deterministic schema of predictability or stereotyping. We will now inspect the approaches undertaken by the two filmmakers

Locating Udwin and Mehta's approaches

It is noteworthy that both films could ostensibly be located as 'outsider' interpretations of a specifically Indian context. Deepa Mehta self-identifies as a Canadian-Indian 'crossover' filmmaker and Leslee Udwin is a white British documentarian. It is worth appraising how this apparent spatial and experiential distantiating of the filmmakers from the immediate Indian context of the Delhi rape case brings to bear on their desire to tell a universal story about the trauma of rape. Factoring this notion of physical separation rather than proximal embeddedness in the daily dimensions of this discourse could facilitate deeper understanding of the two directors' individual deployment of the documentary and docudrama approach to interpreting the incident itself and its discursive entanglements with contemporary lived experience in India.

Locating the filmmakers' geopolitical point of orientation and mode of address is also relevant to the backlash faced by these two directors, as exogenous commentators on Indian political

and social themes. Deepa Mehta's previous controversial female-themed films *Fire* (1996, depicting a lesbian relationship) and *Water* (2005, Indian widows stigmatised and socially segregated) and Udwin's *India's Daughter* have borne the brunt of incendiary socio-political debate in India. On a scholarly level, Deepa Mehta has been criticised for scripting in *Fire* - a filmic portrayal of a taboo lesbian relationship, 'a much too happy ever after ending outside of the home, the family, and in a sense even the Indian nation' (Barron, 2008:71) thereby sidestepping the realities of social structures in India. On the other hand, Mehta has been credited for her 'Janus-faced' perspective that can see both sides of the issue of gender-based violence as exemplified in *Let's Talk About It* (2005) that tackles the theme of abused women in Canada, echoed in *Videsh: Heaven on Earth* (2008) (Jaidka, 2011: 10). The latter film's juxtaposition of reality and fiction to deal with violence visited on diasporic women seems to solidify Mehta's credentials as a crossover filmmaker who can see both sides. This is noteworthy in an internal field of especially fierce resistance to representations of Indian issues by 'outsiders', epitomised by the banning in India of *India's Daughter* and American academic Wendy Doniger's book *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (2009).

The above points lead to the question of internal cultural resistance to self-reflexive representations of reality. This prompts queries about the ideological dimensions of 'outsider' auteurs representing an Indian social issue – from a distance – drawing on Mehta's statement that India is the 'inspiration for its stories' and Canada provides her 'the freedom to tell those stories' (Simonpillai, 2017). Does this long-distance double lens facilitate a glocal, hybrid perspective to the problem of rape or does it fall prey to Orientalist othering epistemologies that view problems of postcolonial nations merely as incubators, a wellspring, or breeding ground for western commentators to exploit for creative content? In this vein, Udwin has been accused of regurgitating stereotypes and magnifying a traumatic incident, of focussing on India

whilst rape remains a widespread reality in the west (Durham 2015; Barn, Barn and Raimondi 2018). There are a few instances where Mehta endeavours, in some measure, to position rape as a pan-global problem. This is evidenced in the opening sequence of *Anatomy of Violence*, featuring an acousmatic assortment of transglobal women's voices, speaking in different languages, testifying to their experiences of sexual assault. Udwin's foregrounding of the anti-rape protests in the aftermath of the Jyoti Singh incident suggests optimism for an indigenously-orchestrated radical mobilisation towards transformation in legal processes and social attitudes to rape culture in India. Udwin's heralding of mass protest as a transformative event will be discussed in more detail later on.

Udwin utilises the documentary film strategy of an introductory epigraph certifying that the film was made with the consent of Asha and Badri Singh – Jyoti's parents. This ploy also signposts at the outset the ostensible verisimilitude of the film, denoting how insider approval was solicited and acquired by an external investigator. It is also worth bearing in mind that Udwin gained unprecedented and exclusive access to interview Mukesh Singh, one of the perpetrators incarcerated in Delhi's Tihar Jail. This led to ethical questions from Indian feminist organisations relating to whether the filmmaker had made Mukesh Singh aware of the ramifications of his participation in the documentary on the ongoing court case. These articulators also questioned the mechanisms via which Udwin acquired access from the jail officials. An article in *The New Indian Express* (2015) alleged that Udwin paid Mukesh Singh 40,000 rupees to act as an interviewee – accusations denied by Udwin. Often overlooked, is Udwin's own disclosure of her experience of being raped, when she was a teenager in her first year at university (Faleiro, 2015). In spite of Udwin's 'insider' perspective as a rape victim, she was still portrayed as an outsider, and her film deemed unacceptable by several socio-political structures in India.

This discursive domain makes it even more pertinent to assess the authorial power dynamics surrounding Mehta and Udwin as external commentators, scrutinising the notion of privileged voices enabled by transglobal funding repositories to gain access to and speak for marginalised individuals. Concomitantly, an attempt must be made to situate the prevalence of rape within India's larger turbulent tug-of-war between tradition and modernity, poverty and affluence, mythologised religio-political nationalism and globalisation. Therefore, in an age of global cultural flows and hyperreal network society characterised by the consumer-oriented neoliberal model currently pursued by India, the restrictions imposed by an insider/outsider representational binary is an important factor to consider. Similarly, a Cartesian representation/reality duality would be incompatible with this paper's positing of discursive entanglements that frame representations of rape as a synapse in a larger dendritic system.

The voice of god narration in the early stages of Udwin's film provides contextual information – 'a woman is raped in India every 20 minutes' – declaring that the ensuing public protests meant 'the silence had been broken'. Arguably, this application of lyrical voiceover on top of graphic footage of protestors being bombarded by water cannon is a form of dramatic licence, as it overrides the voices from within the diegetic world of the documentary. The disembodied voice can use affective manipulation to influence audience perception – 'an omnipotent, unseen' narrator 'interprets the images' (Gateward 1999: 284). The situational and short-lived nature of the violent protests and the initial furore following the incident prompts the critical question of whether the silence was broken momentarily only to subside subsequently and slide back to status quo. Jayasankar and Monteiro (2016: 22) cite Julia Lasage's (1986) interview with radical feminist Indian filmmaker Deepa Dhanraj, to draw attention to more radical and activist modes of documentary filmmaking which 'locate the specificity of women's struggle

within the context of the larger class struggle’, framing protests as participatory strategies.

Dhanraj expresses her hope that

films will reveal clearly the structural conditions which cause oppression (economic, political, social, and cultural oppression) as well as demonstrate concrete means of fighting against it in those cases where struggle has taken place. The picture that emerges will derive from our representing all the circumstances and all the stresses that operate. (Lasage, 1986)

These intersectional facets of protest and structural conditions may have been overlooked by the two filmmakers in the larger interests of creating dramatic and affective impact. The above points once again pull into focus, the detached/remote position of the two high-profile western filmmakers, and correspondingly, the notion of elite, privileged or informed audiences that may have been in a position to access the two films. This scenario stands apart from approaches undertaken by activist documentary filmmakers as ‘participants in the politics’ at the ground-level, ‘working in tandem with grassroots organisations and movements to reach out to audiences outside the ambit of theatrical distribution’ (Jayasankar & Monteiro, 2016: 22-23).

Foregrounding affect, Udwin selects the most incendiary, shocking and provocative soundbites. These include Mukesh Singh’s antiquated views on women, effectively blaming Jyoti Singh for her own rape and death – in his view, ‘good girls stayed home after dark’. He asserts that ‘a girl is far more responsible for rape than a boy. Boys and girls are not equal...About 20 per cent of girls are good’ (Singh in *India’s Daughter*, 2015). These intensely sexist perspectives are magnified by the perpetrators’ lawyers, whose own opinions on the place of women are antediluvian in the extreme degree – Sharma, one of the defence lawyers, expressly states ‘there is no place for women in Indian society’. A.P. Singh, the other defense lawyer, asserts:

If my daughter or sister engaged in pre-marital activities and disgraced herself and allowed herself to lose face and character by doing such things, I would most certainly

take this sort of sister or daughter to my farmhouse, and in front of my entire family, I would put petrol on her and set her alight.

The careful selection of soundbites foregrounds Udwin's strategy to present the most disconcerting utterances by the male articulators. Although it may facilitate an 'impact-generating' documentary provoking disbelief, shock and anger, not only at a despicable act, but also the apathy of legal custodians, there is a lack of localised, nuanced and broader structural and cultural contextualisation. This is owing to intentional ellipses and deliberate preterition in the interests of telling a poignant and compelling story, and therefore excludes vital clues relating to the socio-cultural factors and structural power dynamics that enable the pervasion and easy articulation of patriarchy in its most primitive form, by the sample of male respondents in the documentary. We will now turn to a deeper discussion of the filmmakers' approaches.

Comparing Documentary and Docufiction Approaches

Udwin adopts a realist fly-on-the-wall investigative documentary approach juxtaposing talking head interviews with the aforementioned news media footage. This interview-based *verité* form and style is architected to convey a sense of immediacy, urgency and intimacy involving an array of protagonists and the perpetrators. The *raison d'être* of this documentary multilogue between diverse interlocutors is ostensibly to demonstrate the discursive fissiparousness of perspectives that typified the rape case.

Mehta's heterodox approach is more avant-garde and experimental but nevertheless co-opts the established documentary film technique of drama reconstruction into its docufiction format. Mehta's use of dramatization is a strategy to obviate graphic representation of child abuse

sequences, also enabling the filmmaker to decentralise the act of rape on the bus. The film's proxy narration by quasi-fictional characters fits into the larger scheme of the film's focus on mapping the anatomy of violence in whose grand scheme, the act of rape is but an element. Therefore, the perpetrators' depraved act and the impact on the victim's parents (in Mehta's film we only see Janki's mother) is not the cynosure of the narrative, the way it is in Udwin's film. In essence, the agenda of Mehta's film appears to be a filmic autopsy – an anatomisation of rape through an exploration of causality. However, this emphasis on causality is itself susceptible to deterministic delimitations, which in Mehta's film reinforce the stereotype of rapists as indigent, slum dwelling, underclass precariat, who invariably revisit, as an act of vengeance on middle-class female victims, their own suffering of violent childhood sexual abuse. What are the other similarities and divergences between the two filmmakers' approaches to capturing the reality of rape through representation of a common social malaise?

Both films target a synchronic slice – a single rupturing event, thereby presenting a paradigmatic snapshot of the protracted historiography of rape in India. In so doing, the two films are obliged to exclude nuances, finer details and variances in order to tell a compelling story. Mehta's fictionalisation permits greater leeway with backstory and appraisal of the perpetrators' antecedents, imagining them as innocent children, and thereby humanising them. In this sense Mehta's method appears to afford greater malleability of time and space – we seem to be able to oscillate between the past and present, the village and urban slum. However, it is important to note that this transportation through time and space is largely dependent on the imaginative participation of the audience. Unlike *India's Daughter*, Mehta's drama-based method is mostly unaided by audio-visual clues, location filming and expository narrative prompts such as news media clips and contributor sound bites – newsreel footage of the protests and the interview with Mukesh Singh only appear at the film's coda. In Mehta's film, voiceover

narration is personalised to introduce the perpetrators rather than to summarise the horrific nature of the Jyoti Singh rape incident, as Udwin's film does in its opening moments. In *Anatomy of Violence*, the site where the action involving the perpetrators as children and adults is portrayed largely remains the same. The audience is not whisked away to the rural environs that shaped the perpetrators formative years nor does the adult corporeality of the actors change when they switch to playing their child avatars. It is incumbent on the viewer to perform a collaborative cognitive mapping in order to make specific spatio-temporal connections. Overall, Mehta addresses a closed set of predictable motivational factors for the rapists' actions, but in so doing circumvents an array of structural, psychological, unpredictable and situational as well as historically-inscribed schema that must be taken into account whilst mapping the performativity of rape in India.

As mentioned before, Udwin largely moves her narrative pawns within the temporal precincts of the event, its prelude and its aftermath. The glue of cinematic editing is applied to address intermedial discontinuities and ellipses in portrayals of the assailants' lives. Udwin focuses on and seems fascinated by the depravity of the rapists. She relies on drama reconstruction of the rape on the bus, punctuating this staging with tense atmospheric music. As Mukesh Singh's voiceover reveals the grisly details of how Jyoti's entrails were ripped out, a cutaway of her mother's distraught expression fills the screen with melancholic background music to encourage optimum emotional impact.

By honing in on the heinousness of the act and the aggressors' callous disregard for the victim, as demonstrated by Mukesh Singh via the abovementioned voiceover and his prison interview, Udwin foregrounds the immediate filmmaking gratification of arousing and provoking instantaneous viewer outrage and revulsion. It could be argued that bereft of the backstory

Mehta constructs in her film, Udwin's cinematic target is firmly fixed on the singular incident rather than unpacking the constellation of historical, cultural and socio-economic discourses that form an interpenetrating mesh in which the incident of 2012 is implicated. Udwin's concentrated focus on the incident is a documentary technique often deployed to delve into the specificities of a particular event and engage with participants directly involved in the incident. In this context, her approach possesses its own merits and value. The catchphrase used to promote Mehta's film: 'no-one becomes who they are in isolation' illustrates the intention of the filmmaker to formulate a broader cartography of rape in India – ostensibly a distinguishing factor between the two films' representations of the reality of rape in India. However, Mehta's limitation of her anatomisation to predictable causality evokes questions about the applicability, representativeness and efficacy of her experimental filmic paradigm to foster deeper understanding of the diverse and labile daily performativity of rape across the heterogeneous terrain of the nation.

Mehta's approach facilitates magnified latitude with temporality, with the actors collapsing the transition from childhood to adulthood into an instant. However, the same cannot be said about Mehta's mediation of spatial configurations. As mentioned earlier, all the action seems to be situated in the slum colony and adjoining streets and roads, regardless of the actors bending time by playing the perpetrators as children and as grown men. This effacement of their native villages could be interpreted as erasure of the men's antecedents. The docufiction's static spatiality and circumscribed location also lead to diminished potential for any in-depth insight into the perpetrators' working life *outside* the slums. For instance, no portrait is provided of brothers Ram and Mukesh Singh and their assistant, Akshay Thakur, in terms of their specific daily experience of working on the bus, which they transformed subsequently into the gory site of Jyoti Singh's rape. The film elides representation of Vinay Sharma's lived experience as a

gym instructor, or Pawan Gupta – the 19-year old fruit seller, and the menial jobs undertaken by the unnamed 17-year old juvenile perpetrator. This entails a conspicuous lacuna, impeding deeper contextualisation of the men’s psychological state of mind and socio-economic status not to mention class and caste-related everyday encounters that may have contributed to their sense of marginalisation as well as patriarchal entitlement. In essence, short shrift is given to formative factors in the perpetrators’ *present*, when compared to Mehta’s focus on past stimuli from their childhood.

Udwin’s documentary is able to address some of these factual details with an enhanced degree of veridical detail by transporting her probing camera across spatial topography to interview Mukesh and Ram Singh’s parents in their home village. *India’s Daughter* also captures the abject privation of the juvenile rapist’s family situation through an interview with his mother, thereby presenting a portrait of rural desuetude and the failure of the farming profession that propelled the young offender to migrate to Delhi in the first place. This snapshot betokens the question of whether Mehta’s reconstructive representation factors the economic push-pull of migration with as much gravitas in comparison with the juvenile’s mother revealing this specific context directly to camera. The above arguments lend credence to the thesis that Mehta’s experimental theatre-influenced schema is strictured by a uni-dimensional fixity of ‘proscenium’ space, which remains tethered to the city slum, and in so doing essentialises it. However, Mehta is able to manipulate time in terms of portraying the perpetrators’ lifespan with greater malleability than Udwin, who largely restricts her narrative’s temporal duration to a ‘before and after’ the event perspective.

Udwin’s film again toggles between rural and urban spaces, interviewing Akshay Thakur’s family in Bihar in addition to Mukesh Singh’s parents. Thakur’s infant son stares innocently at

the camera as his wife adamantly vouches that her husband is incapable of such as heinous act. This is immediately followed by a clip of outraged Delhi women's raising their protest cry – 'wake up, wake up, we won't tolerate rape'. This editing-enforced counterpoint deepens the extant rural-urban schism stereotype of passive villager compliance and cosmopolitan agency. This simplistic binarization does nothing to address the reality that a large proportion of women in both rural and urban India are unable or fail to interrogate, contest or oppose the dictates of a patriarchal society, thereby becoming complicit in legitimising, normalising and reproducing this grand narrative of an always-already male dominated nation. On the one hand, Udwin is able to delve into deeper layers of the perpetrators antecedents which may have acted as causative factors to their ultimate crime. On the other hand, the representational counterpoint of Thakur's supplicating village wife who is prepared to die to uphold her husband's honour, and the apparently empowered and emboldened urban bourgeoisie Delhi women free to articulate their anger via street protests neglects the liminal zone of multiple discursive and interpenetrating structural inequalities that are often overlooked in the process of naturalising the rural/urban cliché. Structural and systemic disproportionalities entrenched through historical, colonial and postcolonial practices, economic disparities, caste and class dynamics, exploitative political and patriarchal power, religious orthodoxies, and the Indian state's failure to achieve 'ram rajya' – the welfare state for all, could be located as a discursive matrix in which the malaise of rape is enmeshed.

Mukesh Singh narrates how electric shocks, beatings and violence were a routinized ritual that punctuated his childhood. Jyoti Singh's parents' articulations position them as progressive, liberal, open-minded lower-middle-class and aspirational. The binarized representation of assailant and victim in *India's Daughter* seems asynchronous with the immensely amorphous caste and class stratification that continues to typify modern Indian society. By contrast, one

sequence in Mehta's film reveals the complex contours of socio-economic sedimentation, where the slum-dwelling perpetrators possess mobile phones and are technologically 'connected', and yet are rebuffed scornfully and insulted by middle-class girls whom they invite to a night out at the disco. The thesis that digital interconnectivity is afforded by even the most abject inhabitants of the Delhi cosmopolis exemplifies how structural dualities such as haves and have nots, rich and poor, urban and rural, educated and uneducated (20-year old perpetrator, Vinay Sharma had a school education and could speak English) is an inadequate and outdated template to represent the intricate reality of social, cultural and economic discourses in modern India.

Representation: Slums, Bollywood and Anti-rape Protest

The spatial constellation surrounding the crime and its representation in the two films could also be pulled into focus. Ravi Das colony in South Delhi, where most of the rapists dwelled has acquired several pejorative monikers including 'Delhi's Underbelly' and 'Den of the rapists' (Burke, 2012). Whilst the slum has been positioned as a 'dystopic' squalid space synonymous for depraved and desperate criminal acts such as the Delhi rape, it may be insightful to contrast Udwin's cinematic navigation of the slum's alleyways and arteries and Mehta's stylised reconstruction of this apparent dystopian dead zone.

Udwin is able to signpost the erstwhile shelters of the perpetrators whilst emphasising the pervasive privation of their circumscribing environs. This predictable perspective of the slum as a sanctuary of squalor is contradicted by the perspective of Ram Devi, one of the rapists' neighbours, who affirms his faith in Ravi Das colony as a 'nice clean neighbourhood with nice people', where a system of bespoke collective slum justice ensured that recusants not adhering to the community's tacit code of conduct 'were cast out' (Burke, 2012). Apart from these

subjectivities that are elided in Udwin's narration, it could be argued that her film does not accord adequate attention to the outsider status of the perpetrators who were all migrants from impoverished regions in states such as Rajasthan, UP and Bihar, congruent with the preponderance of rural migrants comprising the demographic of Ravi Das colony. The push-pull of the rural to urban exodus in modern India is a systemic phenomenon that must be accounted in the aforementioned schism between the fraught neoliberal and agrarian national narrative. However, documentaries such as Mehta's and Udwin's often present an underdetermined reading emphasising the economic privations suffered by rural migrants to cities such as Delhi, which in the filmmakers' interpretation then becomes a unilateral causative factor in the migrants' visitation of sexual violence on victims such as Jyoti Singh. Due diligence is not paid in sufficient measure to the intricate network of class, religion, caste, illiteracy and sexual repression that bring to bear collectively on the transmission of patriarchy across rural and urban sectors. Ayona Datta argues:

The connections between sexual violence and material lack of shelter, water and sanitation associated with slum-like living conditions misguidedly suggest that rape can actually be eliminated via the provision of basic amenities or by the creation of 'slum free' cities. It glosses over the misogynist networks of social power that led to these incidents - intersections of class and caste in the geographic contexts of the Delhi rape case...and the pervasive misogyny in the laws, policies and institutions of the state. This determinism has served to manipulate the geographies of sexual violence in the city to obscure the wider forces of social and spatial exclusion directed towards slums and other marginal spaces to suggest that rape occurs only in the public realm. It also presents slums as the site of misogyny, and therefore distances the causes and consequences of rape away from the wider debates on gender, class, caste and other social inequalities within the city and beyond. (Datta, 2016: 324-5)

The argument raised above is pertinent considering Mukesh Singh speaks of sexual deprivation – he once had unsatisfactory 'sex 5 years ago' whilst the perpetrators' lawyer adduces their actions to the six men acting out film fantasies. In the lawyer's opinion, the perpetrators 'left our Indian culture. They were under the imagination of the film culture, in which they could do anything'. Ironically his view turns a blind eye to the specific influence of Bollywood in

normalising the objectification and sexualisation of women through song and dance ‘item numbers’ (Devasundaram, 2016: 45). This theme is visited, albeit fleetingly, in Mehta’s film - the perpetrators gyrate to the tune of a popular Bollywood dance song in the bus, prior to embarking on their murderous journey. The dominance of sexualised images regularised in Indian society and culture through Bollywood song and dance is not given any attention in Udwin’s film. This is despite Udwin’s statement in an interview with Reuters: ‘I think Bollywood movies are pornography. I think that women are objectified. It’s all part of this disease, this culture’ (Kumar, 2015). Overlooking and hence underestimating the towering influence of a culture-shaping populist commercial Leviathan, such as Bollywood, could be identified as one of the lacunae in the filmmakers’ representation of the reality of rape.

In an American talk show interview, (Interview Exclusives, 2015), Udwin describes her film, continually referring to the ‘beautiful’ protestors, semiotically aestheticizing an incendiary and impulsive if transient public reaction to an ineffably brutal incident. In her enthusiasm to delineate the demonstrations in the aftermath of the rape as a revolutionary paradigm shift, Udwin’s valorisation of ‘beautiful protestors’ tends towards a subsuming perspective. Shandilya (2015) notes how the ‘Nirbhaya incident reproduced the Hindu, middle-class, upper-caste woman as the normative subject of protest’, arguing that as Jyoti Singh’s ‘body became the site for protest, the bodies of lower-caste, lower-class, rural women remained ‘useless’ for politics because they are unable to generate affect in the middle class’. This class-based disproportionality indicates that ‘legalistic measures launched by mainstream feminist groups are inadequate for addressing the rape of lower-class, lower-caste, non-Hindu, rural women’, who are often denied access to centres of legal and political power (Shandilya, 2015). It is therefore warranted to consider more closely and carefully, who the objects, subjects and stakeholders tend to be in protest movements, and appraise which sections of society these civil

justice movements seek to empower and speak for. The aim here is not to diminish the importance of the social mobilisations in the aftermath of Jyoti Singh's rape and murder. As we will demonstrate in the next section on the contemporary scenario of rape culture in India, the serialised recurrence of brutally violent rape-murder incidents, begets the question of whether required levels of structural and systemic change have been effected since 2012. BBC South Asia correspondent, Rajini Vaidyanathan, who covered the Jyoti Singh case in 2012, argues that 'little seems to have changed', noting 'the emphasis continues to be on how women can change, rather than looking at how Indian society as a whole needs to do better' (Vaidyanathan, 2019).

It is difficult not to identify elements of condescension tinged with echoes of a patronising postcolonial civilising mission, when Udwin states that before the incident and her film, Indian civil society largely remained mute spectators to the daily occurrence of rape. The implication by and large is that Indian civil society largely rose up only after the 'Nirbhaya' incident. This does a disservice to the reality of sustained grassroots level toil by a myriad microlevel women activists and support groups working without the PR machinations and resources that Udwin was privileged to wield. Bidisha Biswas (2018: 42) argues that 'the 2012 protests should be situated within a larger political history of feminism, sustained campaigns against gendered violence, and resulting legislative change'. She makes specific mention of the Mathura rape case in the 1970s, where public activism precipitated policy change (ibid.). Debolina Dutta and Oishik Sircar (2013) state that 'In feminist circles, the very names Mathura, Rameeza Bee, Suman Rani, and Bhanwari Devi also signify the dynamics of class, caste, and religion that are integral to the forms and methods of sexual violence against women' (Dutta and Sircar, 2018: 296). Arguably, Udwin does not account for these multiple discursive factors in her zeal to focus on the rape incident and the aftermath of vociferous protest. Overall, Udwin's focus on

the protest fails to dissect the implications of an overwhelmingly middle-class outcry of violent outrage, largely fuelled by incessant sensationalist news media images.

High-profile rape incidents and India's #Me Too

Despite the shock and horror generated by the gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh in 2012, prolific instances of rape have continued unabated in India. An early example, the gang rape and murder in 2014 of two teenage Dalit girls in a rural region of Badaun district, who 'dared' to venture out at night to relieve themselves in the absence of toilets within their homes, underscores the intricate discursivity of rape culture in India.

Mehta and Udwin certainly raise several interrogative questions and broach pertinent issues, despite often falling back on restricted, deterministic, binarized and predictable hermeneutic strategies. However, the perspective of rape as a recurring everyday lived, psychological and physical reality for women across the class divide – the unpredictably protean potentiality of rape, and the polymorphous, intertwining socio-cultural, legal, economic and political structures that are implicated in the Jyoti Singh case amongst several others, remain less diagnosed in the two films. The need for a more multi-dimensional, transitional and discursive mapping of rape incidents in India is emphasised by a continuing spate of execrable and violent rape acts, especially between 2016-19, which have been compared to the Jyoti Singh case. Several of these brutal incidents are conjoined with power structures of right-wing religious politics under Narendra Modi's BJP government and the complicity of the police force, thereby magnifying the missing elements of political, class and caste, law enforcement and religious power dynamics that Mehta and Udwin largely underestimate in their documentary representations.

Standing out, amongst the spectrum of recent rape crimes is the horrific gang rape, torture and murder of eight-year old Asifa Bano, a Muslim tribal girl, as a measure to drive out her tribal community from a particular part of the disputed Kashmir region, in January 2018. The rape was enacted in the inner sanctum of a Hindu temple, with the involvement of the temple custodian and police personnel. The perpetrators were defended vehemently by protesting groups of obstreperous Hindu nationalist BJP supporters and lawyers (Devasundaram, 2018). In Unnao, Uttar Pradesh, in 2017, a BJP MP Kuldeep Singh Sengar was arrested for kidnapping and raping a teenage girl, and was complicit in the custodial torture and death of the victim's father at the police station where he attempted to file a complaint. In another Unnao-based incident in December 2019, a 23-year old 'lower-caste' rape victim was set ablaze in Hindu Nagar village, by five upper-caste men including two accused of raping her. The victim was on her way to a court hearing to testify against her rapists – she subsequently died of her injuries. These incidents, epitomising interpenetrations of religion, caste, politics and power, once again signify the discursive mosaic in which the act of rape is implicated. Mass sexual assault of women on a central boulevard of India's most progressive city and Information Technology (IT) hub, Bangalore, during a New Year's Eve celebration in 2017 (BBC News, 2017) is another manifestation of unpredictability in rape culture. The perpetrators were mostly affluent middle-class men, not 'illiterate or uneducated' as indicated by one victim (ibid.). This again demonstrates how opportunistic predatory masculine entitlement transcends rigid compartments of class, caste, religion and ethnicity.

The gang rape burning to death of a 27-year old veterinary doctor, Priyanka Reddy, on 27 November 2019, in Hyderabad, sparked another wave of public outrage, especially on social media. The question being posed by civil society was: 'from Nirbhaya to this, have we made

any headway at all' (The Quint, 2019). Actor and *#MeToo India* activist, Saloni Chopra (ibid.), compares the rape and murder of Priyanka Reddy to the Jyoti Singh rape case, and castigates what she perceives as a widespread culture of rape, lack of awareness and education, and a patriarchal mindset. Chopra frames her attribution of these multiple factors with the assertion 'no woman wants to be India's Daughter'. In an Instagram message that gained around 500,000 likes and comments, she states:

It was Jyoti Singh, not Nirbhaya. You don't know if she was fearless. She wasn't fucking volunteering. Before people come up with a brave name for [the victim's] life lost amongst the other women we have lost in the last 7 years, let me remind you, that no one - none of us, want to be India's daughters. You wouldn't want your daughter to be India's daughter...Our men are deprived of sex and taught nothing about respecting the opposite sex **REGARDLESS OF WHERE SHE IS AND WHAT SHE IS WEARING**. We don't want to talk about that... from the richest of families to the poorer ones, no one wants to talk about how our 'culture & tradition' suffocates & erases a woman's identity & teaches men nothing about the opposite sex. (The Quint, 2019)

To some extent, these are the ground-level subjectivities, political and socio-economic multiplicities that have been elided in Udwin's film, which adopts unproblematically the homogenising moniker – 'India's Daughter' – a contentious title with which, as the aforementioned perspectives illustrate, several Indian women are reluctant to identify.

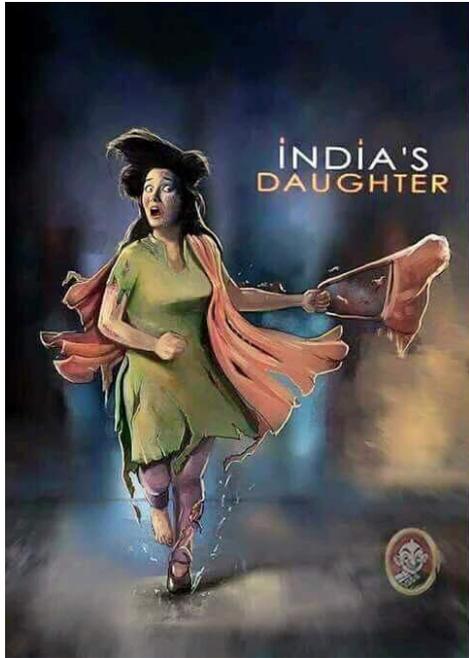
Indeed, some social media commentators identify this sobriquet as an innately problematic component of the issue:

Seriously, stop calling every raped and murdered girl India's goddamn daughter. It's not a compliment if this is how they're treated. She was a person. A citizen. Stop always seeing women as daughters, mothers, sisters, wives. FFS realize that's part of the problem. (Twitter user comment cited in The Quint, 2019)

Another Twitter user comment (ibid.) reiterates opposition to the term: 'Nobody wants to be India's Daughter we see what happens to the womxn (sic) who fall under that category and it's not what we want. We want justice'.

These online articulations link back to the argument raised earlier, about the psychological fear of rape that pervades the consciousness and lived experiences of

women in contemporary India. This entrenched paranoia is pictorialised (see fig below) in an interrogative image of ‘India’s Daughter’ – portrayed, not as a paragon of valorised bravery or fearlessness, but as a victim of enclosure and terror.



Source: The Quint, 2019

The arrival of India’s #MeToo movement in 2018 is the second facet that reiterates the discursive dimensions of the performativity of rape in India. The #Me Too campaign uncovered a cornucopia of sexual crimes and misconduct at the highest echelons of power, involving an array of powerful politicians, journalists, Bollywood film producers and actors inter alia. The deterministic myth that rape finds its impulse in rural poverty and is predominantly a condition of a proletarian underclass was dismantled by revelations about the serialised sexual domination of female victims by men in power.

The intricate network of perpetrators across the power grid unveiled by #Me Too demonstrates how binary models and delimited cause-effect paradigms are insufficient to understand deeper and latent discursive machinations that underpin the performativity of rape in India.

Conclusion

This paper has raised the contention that both films in their preoccupation with the particularly barbarous nature of the Jyoti Singh case, may overlook the multifaceted constellations and discursive complexities that must always-already inform any premises or hypothesis pertaining to perpetrator motivations, victim vulnerability, structural and political ineptitude or social apathy in the Indian context. In mapping the reality of rape in modern India, it is important not to underestimate or side-line the prevalence of a perennially present psychological fear of rape that is often seared into the mindset of women in India. This fear psychosis is entwined with the reifiable possibility of rape occurring at unexpected and unpredictable junctures of daily existence.

Representations of rape in Mehta's and Udwin's films to some extent regurgitate the stereotype of slum-dwelling abjects who react to the inequity of their socio-economic environment by enacting rape on more economically endowed victims. The disclosures of the #Me Too movement and multiple incidents of continuing sexual violence have underscored the complicity of powerful stakeholders and religio-political custodians. These religious and political dimensions of rape cannot be discounted, with the rise of populist right-wing partisan politics in India, since 2014. As demonstrated by the case scenarios mentioned above, rape as a tool for ethno-religious retribution, disciplining and punishment has become increasingly common. In effect, the specifically Indian context of rape, abuse and violence against women is performed discursively, psychologically and physically at macro, meso and micro levels, often through legitimacy offered by the daily enactment of a hegemonic national narrative that privileges patriarchy. The sites for these enactments are multifarious - on buses, trains, cinema

halls showcasing Bollywood item numbers, public and religious spaces, in the home environment, and most importantly, in the inner sanctum of the individual's cognitive space – their thought process. These multiple facets may not have been adequately accounted for, or anticipated, by Mehta's and Udwin's films - their compelling themes and affective narratives notwithstanding.

As mentioned earlier, cinematic disquisitions of sexual violence on women will be susceptible to slippages, owing to the finitude of film duration and the transdiscursive multidimensionality of representing rape. Therefore, the filmmakers cannot be censured in totality, for not integrating the entire array of discursive strands that inform the normalisation of rape performativity. That said, the circumvention of determinism, binarism and causality could expand and foster a more nuanced, relational, and diachronically contextual mapping of the performativity of rape in India.

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