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## The banality of evil revisited

VASUNDHARA SIRNATE

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"This sameness of Indian male behaviour across professions, classes, caste and religion is the context in which the film should be seen." Picture shows participants of a rally to protest incidents of molestation and abuse in Allahabad. Photo: AP

*India's Daughter, by telling us how particular rapists think, forces us to confront that this is what many men, from every demographic across the country, say*

Hannah Arendt wrote *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil* in 1963, a report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi officer charged with carrying out the Reich's "Final Solution." She wrote of Eichmann, "Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a "monster," but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown." She found him quotidian, almost unremarkable. She, controversially, did not

believe him to be a fanatic or a sociopath, but described him as someone who had made stupid choices for professional advancement.

India's Daughter, a reconstructive documentary by Leslee Udwin on the Nirbhaya gang rape, that has now been banned by the Bharatiya Janata Party government, essentially presents the "monsters" that raped the woman as everyday men, like Arendt presented Eichmann. In doing so, the film offers a damning portrayal of Indian patriarchy and misogyny.

Some years ago, a friend confided in me that in a fit of rage her husband had shouted that he wished she would be gang raped because she deserved it. Then he paused and said, "No, I think I want something worse than that to happen to you. I want you to die."

I watched India's Daughter before the government banned it. As I listened to the rapist explain how he and the others thought about women, I realised there was little difference between them and this husband. But that's where the similarity ended. He was an upper caste male, an IIT aristocrat living in Silicon Valley, studying at a top business school. The only other difference was that he never acted on his thoughts.

### **Problematic documentary**

India's Daughter is problematic on many counts. First, the appeals process of the rapists, sentenced to death in 2013, is still on. There is good reason to fear that the release of the documentary could hurt the appeal. However, while the trial was ongoing, no one raised the argument that the mobs outside the Delhi court, which were baying for the blood of the rapists, were hurting the actual trial and sentencing.

The second problem comes from those who say that the film is orientalist and colonial. Yes, a non-Indian person made the film, and her gaze on Indian society is not as nuanced as an Indian's would be, especially an Indian steeped in critical and social theory. But none of these is a ground for dismissing the film or banning it.

Third, the film is said to glorify the rapists and promote voyeurism. However, believing that is to misread the film. The film is not focussed on rape victims. Udwin is trying to understand why rapists rape. This is not unlike the work of Mahmood Mamdani (When Victims Become Killers) and Scott Strauss, who have tried to understand the Rwandan genocide also from the point of view of those who killed. It is not unlike what the Behavioural Sciences Unit of the Federal Bureau of Investigation does in the United States. Also, if there is a charge of voyeurism, should depictions of Auschwitz cease completely, because they may prompt people to become neo-Nazis?

The film gives the rapists a voice and in doing so shows them as ordinary boys capable of unspeakable horror. Bollywood has done far more to propagate rape culture through its Chikni Chamelis and Munnis than Udwin's film does (which has a very limited reach since the average Indian does not watch BBC documentaries). Even "Ranjhanaa," a film released after the anti-rape agitation, glorifies stalking, thus bearing testimony to how little the movement changed mindsets, even while it achieved far-reaching legal reforms. Heroines in Bollywood films are constantly scripted to reward the attentions of a stalker, a sexual harasser and a male who steals their dupattas. Fathers are scripted like Rapunzel's abductor; they lock their daughters in the house, who then has to wait for rescue.

Udwin's voice is conspicuous by its absence in the film. She does not judge what the men say. The men range from the rapists to the defence lawyers for the rapists. They say things like, "Ours is a great culture. There is no

place for women in it.” A lawyer says that he would burn his daughter in front of his whole family if she engaged in premarital intercourse. Another likens a woman to a flower and later to a piece of jewellery. One of the strongest feminist voices comes from the girl’s father, while a decidedly patriarchal voice comes from the wife of one of the accused, who asks why no one is bothered about her protection. A husband, she says, has to protect his wife. If her husband is sentenced to death, who will protect her?

The film tells us how these particular rapists think. In doing so, however, we are forced to confront that this is what we have heard men from every demographic say, across the country. This is why it has become a political problem. It is frankly embarrassing for a political class that talks about ‘India Shining’ and ‘Make in India’ and emptily parrots the words “women’s empowerment” to have this seen internationally. Meenakshi Lekhi said that the film would deter tourism, while Venkaiah Naidu stated that the film was part of an anti-India conspiracy.

### **Age-old thinking**

This thinking has existed in India for centuries — much before Udwin made this film. Khaps in India have been saying such things about women for a long time. One of the defence lawyers asks why his clients have been singled out for punishment when many sitting Members of Parliament have rape charges against them. The rapist, Mukesh Singh, also uses the cliché, “it takes two to clap.” He questions the woman’s character, asking if a ‘decent’ girl would be out on the streets that late. In doing so, he echoes Hindu godmen who have said similar things. For instance, Asaram Bapu said, “The victim daughter is as guilty as the rapists. She should have called them brother and begged them to stop.” Ram Sewak Paikra, a member of the Chhattisgarh BJP unit said, “No one commits rape intentionally. It happens by mistake.”

We are still a country where many believe that women have lesser intrinsic worth. Between the rapists in the film who tried to “teach her a lesson,” some of our political leaders, NRI aristocrats and male relatives, rioters who use rape as a weapon against women, unconstitutional village councils that sanction gang rape, policemen who violate women in custody, and the Army that has been accused of rape in Kashmir and the Northeast, there is a stunning and shocking sameness.

This sameness of Indian male behaviour across professions, classes, caste and religion is the context in which the film should be seen. The film only tries to understand one case, but in doing so it helps to reflect on how ordinary men are capable of stomach churning violence, no moral capacity, and remain unaware — like the rapist in the film — that they have done something monstrous.

*(Vasundhara Sirnate is the Chief Coordinator of Research at The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy. She is also a Ph.D candidate in Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley, U.S., and a Non-Resident Fellow at the Atlantic Council, Washington D.C.)*

E-mail: [vasundhara.sirnate@thehinducentre.com](mailto:vasundhara.sirnate@thehinducentre.com)