

Representation of Crime against Women in Print Media: A Case Study of Delhi Gang Rape

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Abstract

The cases of rape and other crimes committed against women are reported in media every day. The fatal gang rape of a 23 year old woman on a moving bus in the National capital of India captured media headlines not only in India but across the world due to the horrific manner in which this crime was committed. The present research paper attempts to understand the representation of crime against women in print media with special reference to Delhi gang rape case and also how the young Indian women feels about representation of such incidences in media. The data is collected from four newspapers, The Times of India, The Tribune, Indian Express and Hindustan Times published from Chandigarh from the first reporting of case till date. All the news items were read and re-read carefully and analysed thematically. The primary data was also collected among the 50 young women studying at Panjab University, Chandigarh, India to know about their views regarding the portrayal of crime against women in Indian print media with special reference to Delhi gang rape case. It can be concluded that media needs to be more sensitive towards coverage of crime against women and general public needs to be more vocal and aware to deal with these cases in more effective manner.

Keywords: Women; Crime; Print media

Introduction

Rape is an unlawful sexual intercourse with a woman without her consent. It is a cross-cultural crime stemming primarily from patriarchal ideologies and gender power [1]. It is generally used as an instrument of communication about masculinity and powerfulness [2]. The cases of rape and other crimes committed against women are reported in print media every day. A number of researchers have attempted to understand the portrayal of crime against women in print media. There are a number of myths related to rape in the print media [3]. These include: rape is sex, the assailant is motivated by lust, the assailant is perverted or crazy, the assailant is usually lower class, women provoke rape, women deserve rape, only 'loose' women are victimised, a sexual attack sullies the victim, rape is punishment for past deeds and women cry rape for revenge. The study highlighted the gender bias in the use of language for rape. The portrayal of 'the pink chaddi campaign' of 2009 in Indian print media shows the interlink ages between culture, government and politics in the light of Mangalore incidence and subsequent moral policing by SRS activists on Valentine Day, and highlights the male point of view in framing of crime against women [4]. The media can also play role of an activist and can generate a public opinion about the sensitive issues such as rape [5].

The fatal gang rape of a 23 year old woman on a moving bus in the National capital of India captured media headlines not only in India but across the world due to the horrific manner in which this crime was committed. The present research paper attempts to understand the representation of crime against women in Indian print media with special reference to Delhi gang rape case and also how the young Indian women feels about representation of such incidences in media.

Methodology

In order to understand the portrayal of crime against women especially Delhi gang rape case in detail, the data was collected from four newspapers, The Times of India, The Tribune, Indian Express and Hindustan Times published from Chandigarh from the first reporting of case till the prosecution. All the news items were read and

re-read carefully and analysed thematically. The coding of the themes and keywords has been done manually. A key aspect of coding is its reliability. There are two forms of coding reliability, both of which are important. The first is intra-coder reliability. To deal with first kind of reliability, the data was observed again and again over a period of time to gain a deeper insight, and to arrive at the common themes. The second form of reliability is inter-coder reliability. This form of reliability was taken care of by taking help of researchers involved in similar kind of research. The themes which were commonly agreed upon are included in the present study.

The primary data was also collected among the 50 young women studying at Panjab University, Chandigarh, India to know about their views regarding the portrayal of crime against women in Indian print media with special reference to Delhi gang rape case. The data was analysed qualitatively and presented in form of narratives.

Results

The theme such as 'the rape', 'the victim', 'the protest', 'the after-affect and 'the verdict' emerged which are discussed in detail.

The rape

In media, the Delhi gang rape incident was referred as 'capital gang rape' and 'Delhi shame' in The Tribune, and 'capital shame' and 'the gang rape' in The Times of India. It has been described as a 'ghastly incident', 'brutal violence', 'spine chilling incident', 'scar for

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life', 'shocking incident', 'matter of shame', 'aggravated sexual assault', 'brazen incidence', 'rarest of rare case', and 'unfortunate'. Rape is mentioned as a 'problem that has plagued all metropolitan cities'. The titles such as 'Delhi rape horror' (19 December, 2012, The Tribune) appeared and the related issues such as security of women in the titles such as 'ensure sense of security' (23 December, 2012, Indian Express).

With the background that Delhi gang rape was widely covered by the print media, the respondents were asked to define rape. The most common definition of rape appeared to be: "sexual assault with a person against his/her will". Of all respondents, two defined rape exclusively with respect to women only. Instead of defining rape, some of the respondents mentioned that *"it is very difficult to define rape and it is a 'horrible act' that destructs a victim's life"*. While some respondents only mentioned the physical dimension of rape but others also mentioned about psycho-social dimensions of rape such as mental harassment, social stigma and abetment to suicide. Some respondents mentioned the seriousness of the issue and stressed upon the need for a serious action against the rapists. A respondent mentioned that *"rape is worse than terrorism and destructs the social life of the victim"*.

The victim

By looking at the coverage of Delhi gang rape, the one obvious question that appears in one's mind is: why this particular case gained importance in the mass media? The answer to this question can be derived from what we call as 'media selectivity' and the 'dramatic value' of a crime. As Delhi gang rape case has repeatedly been called as a 'rarest of the rare case' due to the horrific nature of the crime. In order to know how rapes are portrayed in Indian media, the respondents were asked whether the media treat rape cases sensitively or sensationalise them. Most of them believed that a large number of rapes are happening in India and these often go unnoticed. Only a few are covered which creates hype for few days but later the issue of justice is lost. Except eight respondents, all other felt that media sensationalise the rape cases for various reasons which include desire for popularity, lack of sensitive training to deal with such issues and lack of concern for one who is raped. One of the respondents narrated, *"media uses someone's suffering as a stepping stone to popularise their newspapers and channels"*. The eight respondents who believed that media treats rape cases sensitively, argued that media creates awareness regarding sexual violence which is important to deal with such cases.

One of the most important issues in rape coverage in media is anonymity. Due to the stigma associated with rape, the identity of women raped is often not disclosed. Similar findings were made in the present study. Except two respondents all other believed that due to the stigma attached to rape and ways in which our society views rape victims and their families, the identity of one who is raped should not be disclosed. On contrary, one respondent narrated, *"rape is not a matter of shame for the victim but for the rapist. Shout for justice and tell the identity proudly"*. Another respondent mentioned, *"it should actually be left upto the victim and her family to decide"*.

In order to hide the identity of the Delhi gang rape victim, the names such as 'Nirbhaya' (fearless), 'Amanat' (treasure), 'Damini' (lightening) and 'Jagriti' (awareness) were used in the print media. The girl has been repeatedly referred to as 'gang rape victim' (27 December, 2012, The Tribune) and 'women in distress' (25 December, 2012, Indian Express). The respondents in the present study were asked whether the fictitious names should be used for those raped and does it provide any help. Except three respondents, all believed that such names do

not provide any kind of help. A respondent narrated, *"when a person's name is unknown to the people, use of fictitious names help to address the victim"*. Another respondent mentioned, *"the society use these names just as pronoun so that the victim can be spacificed"*. Yet another argued, *"providing fictitious names gives confidence to the women or girl who are rape victims"*.

In print media, optimism appeared in the headlines such as: 'I want to live' (20 December, 2012, Indian Express), 'very brave, positive and optimistic' (22 December, 2012, The Tribune) and 'optimistic about future' (22 December, 2012, The Tribune). In contrary to what print media has covered, the respondents felt that situation of those who are raped is far from optimism and there is social stigma that surrounds their lives.

In print media, the use of military metaphors was found in description of her struggle for life which is evident from titles such as: 'batling for life' (18 December, 2012, Indian Express), 'the patient is currently struggling against the odds and fighting for her life' and 'putting up a brave battle for life' (29 December, 2012, The Tribune). In the present study, the respondents also used the battle metaphors such as 'struggle' and 'fight against rape'.

The protest

The Delhi gang rape was followed by the violent protests in Delhi at Indian Gate, Jantar Mantar, Ramlila Maidan, Vijay Chowk and Rashtrapati Bhawan. These protests have been mentioned as a reaction of 'utter shock and anguish' which is 'justified'. At some places, these protests have been referred to as violent, 'goondaraj' (hooliganism) and 'vandalism', and the protestors as 'hooligans'. Some of the important title included:

'Turn outrage into action' (21 December, 2012, Indian Express)

'Demand for stringent action against rapists' (21 December, 2012, The Tribune)

'Anger justified' (22 December, 2012, The Tribune)

'After incidence, the Delhi on boil' (23 December, 2012, The Tribune)

'Protests shake Delhi' (23 December, 2012, Indian Express)

'Delhi protests take violent turn' (24 December, 2012, Indian Express)

'The good, bad and ugly' (24 December, 2012, Indian Express)

'This is a genuine and justified anger, and anguish at this ghastly incidence' (24 December, 2012, The Tribune)

'Utter shock and anguish' (27 December, 2012, The Tribune)

'India gets turns into virtual battlefield' (24 December, 2012, The Tribune)

'Delhi protests give minor girl strength to report rape' (26 December, 2012, The Tribune)

'Volcanic eruption of people' (28 December, 2012, The Tribune)

'Anguish of the country over the crime' (28 December, 2012, The Tribune)

'Outpouring of grief' (30 December, 2012, The Tribune)

'Heart of Delhi locked down' (30 December, 2012, Indian Express)

'Grief across India' (30 December, 2012, Indian Express)

'We are all in shock, it is too painful....the fight has just begun' (31 December, 2012, Indian Express)

A number of remarks made by various politicians and others against the victim and the protestors were presented by print media. Abhijit Mukherjee, son of President of India, described 'protests as *nautanki*' (28 December, 2012, Indian Express) and protestors as 'dented-painted' (28 December, 2012, Indian Express). These remarks were described as 'atrocious, insulting, sexist, sickening and result of perverted mentality'. Asaram Bapu, a religious *guru*, stated that if the victim addressed the rapists as her brothers and held their hand when they were about to do the "misconduct," the rape might not have happened (7 January, 2013, Indian Express). Certain *Khappanchayats* (local community councils) of Haryana issued a decree banning women from carrying cell phones and wearing jeans or any other clothing that might "invite trouble" (8 January, 2013, Indian Express). The other comments such as: 'respectable women in India are not raped' made by Defence lawyer, 'rapes happen in India not *Bharat*' made by Mohan Bhagwat, RSS Chief, 'women equally responsible for rape' made by Vibha Rao, Chairperson, Chattisgarh State Women Commission created a debate in print media whether the women are to be blamed for rape. Contrary to these comments, some comments such as a 'women dressing is not responsible for rape' made by Harsimrat Kaur Badal (Member of Parliament, Bathinda, Punjab) tried to save the women from the blame.

In order to know about how the young Indian women feel about the 'blame debate' that was widely covered by print media, all the respondents believed that women are not responsible for rape. They mentioned a number of causes of rape which include male patriarchy, western influences, stereotype of society, access to pornographic videos, drug abuse, alcoholism, lack of education particularly sex education, treatment of women as sex objects, weak judiciary and fearlessness of laws.

The after-effect and the verdict

This incidence generated a lot of debate regarding the strengthening of rape laws in India. Some of the titles described that 'there is a need for 'serious intent' to address the issue of rape (27 December, 2012, The Tribune) and called for 'harshes punishment' (29 December, 2012, The Tribune) so that 'strong signals must be sent to the perpetrators' (19 December, 2012, The Tribune). The amendment of rape laws has been described as a 'necessary action' (19 December, 2012, The Tribune). All the four convicts in the case were punished with death sentence. The titles such as 'showed no mercy, got no mercy', 'court cannot turn a blind eye to such a gruesome act' and 'tightening noose around heinous crime' appeared after the verdict was announced.

The respondents were asked about the role of police and judiciary in dealing with rape cases. The respondents suggested that speedy justice should be provided in rape cases by fast track courts and strict punishment should be given to culprits. Some others highlighted that police and judiciary should be sensitive to those who are raped and their families so that 'victims are not victimised' and mentioned that they should not be unduly harassed in the process. One of the respondents called Indian judiciary as 'slow churning machinery'.

Discussion

Rape coverage in the media has many effects in society. It often shapes the way in which people think about rape, as well as how they receive rape victims, rapists and those accused of rape. Thus, the media coverage of crime against women especially rape is very important area of interest for media anthropologists. The two aspects of Delhi gang rape case were covered: optimism and struggle. The optimism, on one hand, and the struggle for survival, on the other hand, appeared to be the most common themes related to the victim's portrayal. There was a wide-spread use of battle metaphors such as 'fight', 'struggle', 'battle', etc. With the repeated use of names such as '*Nirbhaya*' (fearless), '*Amanat*' (treasure), '*Damini*' (lightening) and '*Jagriti*' (awareness) for the rape victim and the stress on optimism about future of the girl, print media tried to garner a support for the girl and also provided the audiences with a never before presented way to look at a rape. It is due to wide-spread coverage by the media that Delhi gang rape case received attention both nationally and internationally. It also forced the law making bodies to take the crimes against women especially rape more seriously. Thus, media activation played a very important role in generating a public opinion and a nation-wide protest. It is also important to understand to note why the media chooses a rape story over the other to give a wider coverage. There is a 'dramatic value' in portraying crime stories, and this value is increased when the incidence is of rare nature [6]. Thus, due to the rare nature of the Delhi gang rape case, it has been widely covered in Indian print media. Repeatedly in the portrayal, metropolitan cities especially Delhi have been described as unsafe for women. It has been mentioned that there is insecurity among the women about their safety. The primary data suggests that media portrayal of rapes is often sensational and lacks the sensitive approach. The reasons for sensational coverage include desire for popularity, lack of sensitive training to deal with such issues and lack of concern for one who is raped. Contrary to optimism that appeared in print media coverage, the struggle appeared to be a common theme in the narratives of respondents. The use of battle metaphors such as 'struggle' and 'fight against rape' and the term such as 'victim' repeatedly appeared in the narratives of the respondents. It can be concluded that media needs to be more sensitive towards coverage of crime against women and general public needs to be more vocal and aware to deal with these cases in more effective manner.

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