The Sexual Politics of Modi, the BJP and the Sangh Parivar

by India United Against Fascism

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The systematic use of gang-rape as a weapon occurred in the Surat riots after the Babri Masjid demolition, and an ugly innovation was the videotaping of the gang-rapes. This was not a case of some random bystander filming the attacks, but a meticulously-planned spectacle with the venues flood-lit despite the fact that electric wires to the rest of the neighbourhood had been cut [1]. According to Praful Bidwai, Modi was the mastermind of the unspeakable atrocities against women in the 1992 Surat riots [2]. Modi is pictured there with Advani in their wake [3].

A decade later, the Gujarat pogroms of 2002 continued the grisly tale of gang-rape, sexual torture and mass murder; fake reports of sexual assaults on Hindu women were used to justify gruesome crimes against Muslim women and girls [4]. In some places, the rapists were actively supported or even instigated by Hindu women [5]. On this occasion, Modi presided over the sexual assaults as Chief Minister and Home Minister. His administration allowed the police to participate in sexual assaults, and made it impossible for survivors to get justice. A court in Gujarat closed the case of Bilkis Bano’s gang-rape and the massacre of 14 family members. She was able to get justice only because the Supreme Court directed the CBI to take over her case, and the case itself to be shifted out of Gujarat [6].

Sexual violence was also evident in the anti-Christian pogroms in Kandhamal (Odisha) in 2007-2008, including the gang-rape of a nun, Sister Meena. Harsh Mander notes the striking similarities to the Gujarat pogroms, including ‘the stunning brutality of the violence, often targeting women and girls,’ the inhuman conditions suffered by the survivors, and the complicity of the state government with the perpetrators [7].

The September 2013 anti-Muslim pogroms in Muzaffarnagar (UP), where Modi’s trusted Home Secretary Amit Shah had been sent six months earlier, also bore a striking resemblance to the Gujarat carnage. Once again, the violence included ‘using women’s body to inflict all kinds of violence, attack on children, rape of young girls and women and subsequent killings’ [8]. As in Gujarat, a fabricated incident of sexual assault on a Hindu girl was the pretext for carrying out a hideous ‘revenge’ on the bodies of helpless Muslim women and girls [9].

The pattern, over a period of more than two decades, is unmistakeable. Women and girls are seen, and treated, not as persons in their own right but as sexualised
embodiments of their community’s honour, and consequently deliberate, systematic sexual assaults are carried out against them as a way of destroying their community. In each case, the attacks are accompanied by arson, looting, massacres and ethnic cleansing, the refusal to let survivors from the minority community return to their homes, or allowing them to return only on condition that they convert to Hinduism.

This reading of the BJP’s attitude to women is confirmed in a very different context: the Delhi gang-rape in December 2012. BJP leader Sushma Swaraj referred to the victim while she was still battling for her life as a ‘zinda laash’ (living corpse) and demanded the death penalty for the rapists, with feminist activists objecting to both [10]. Swaraj repeated her demand for the death penalty in the aftermath of the Shakti Mills gang-rape in Bombay (August 2013), when the survivor was very much alive and had expressed her determination to continue working as a photo-journalist [11]. Since in India the death penalty is supposed to be reserved for the rarest of rare crimes, what qualifies the crime of rape to belong to this category? Since not all murders attract the death penalty, it is clearly the belief that not only is the life of the survivor over once she has been raped, but that the honour of her family and community have been assaulted.

However, in other rape cases there is no such demand. Dalit women and girls are raped every day; most of these attacks are never reported, but in the wake of the Delhi gang-rape, when the issue was in the news, we heard about some of them (for example see [12] and [13]). Yet there was no demand from BJP leaders that the perpetrators be punished at all, much less hanged; indeed, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat claimed these rapes never happened at all [14]. There was no protest from them when Adivasi teacher and activist Soni Sori was subjected to sexual torture in Chhattisgarh under the supervision of SP Ankit Garg, not even when he was given a presidential award [15]. No call for the hanging of an uncle whose two-year-old niece died after he raped her [16]. And instead of protesting against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which provides impunity for armed forces personnel accused of rape, BJP leader Arun Jaitley strongly opposes even a dilution of the act to allow for prosecution in cases of sexual assault [17].

The most glaring case is the sexual assault of a minor girl by self-styled ‘godman’ Asaram Bapu. Far from calling for him to be hanged, BJP leaders like Uma Bharati, Kailash Vijayvargiya and Prabhat Jha leapt to his defence [18]. Even when Asaram’s wife and daughter admitted supplying him with girls [19] and it became evident that the man was a serial rapist, Subramaniam Swamy of the BJP appeared on posters in trains plying from Gujarat alleging that the case against Asaram was ‘bogus’ [20]. Are these people really so naïve as to believe that he is innocent of all charges of sexual assault? Surely not. In his case, as in all the other cases where the BJP does not call for
punishing rapists, the implicit assumption is that dominant men of the majority community are entitled to use the bodies of subordinate women and girls as they wish.

If women have no right to say ‘no’ to unwanted sex with dominant men, they have no right to say ‘yes’ to a man of their choice either. The whole BJP campaign against so-called ‘love jihad’ targets cross-community friendships and romances. After being used to beat up young men and women in Karnataka [21], it was a potent weapon in Muzaffarnagar, where they used a ‘bahu beti izzat bachao mahapanchayat’ to launch a massive pogrom [22]. In Maharashtra too, Hindutva vigilantes target Hindu women in consensual relationships with Muslim men [23]. In the Gujarat pogroms, Geetaben was sexually assaulted and brutally killed by the Sangh Parivar because she tried to save her Muslim husband [24], and she was not the only Hindu woman attacked. If women are not acknowledged as persons, then their will and consent are not recognised either.

It is undeniable that some of these reactionary attitudes to women and girls can be found among members of all parties. But it is only the RSS, which appointed Modi as the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP, that has the distinction of seeking to replace the legal and constitutional rights of women in India with the law of Manu (Manusmriti), which dictates that women shall be subordinate to men from the cradle to the grave [25].
