



Opening the Boundaries of Citizenship

Haunted Citizens

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Hi, my name is Tara Atluri. I am a postdoctoral researcher working with the Oecumene: Citizenship After Orientalism project at the Open University in the United Kingdom. My research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. My work deals with gender, justice, 'citizenship' and social movements in India and transnationally.

Frantz Fanon once wrote that, "Every generation must discover its mission, fulfil it or betray it, out of relative opacity."

In December of 2012, I stood in the streets of New Delhi, India. I stood in the streets with people who represent every facet of the nation. I stood on the pavements of great cities of great histories, pavements erected over earth, walked upon by religious gurus, the business elite, and one legged beggars slithering like snakes on the concrete, the sound of the one coin clinking in their cup offering a small city symphony. I had walked these streets as a child. From rural village to train station, to the towering skyscrapers of city streets that would lead us as diasporic immigrants across country and continent.

These city streets that I once stood on, still stand on, watching a country change around me. Watching, in the streets, feet on ground, as girls with flowers in braided hair run to catch the last bus to the all night call centre shift, their flowers falling into the rush of traffic.

In December 2012, I stood on the cool concrete floor of a growing urban jungle and with many people of the Indian subcontinent, I cried out, for justice. The people of India have been crying out for justice for much longer than I have been alive, for much longer than any of us have been alive.

On December 16 2012, in New Delhi, a person named Jyoti Singh Pandhey was returning from seeing a movie with a friend. The couple caught a standard public bus. Little did they know, little did the nation know, little did the world know, the magnitude of violence they would experience. A group of men were on the bus that night. They beat the couple with a metal rod and gang raped Jyoti, to death. The violence inflicted on her body could only be called torture, with reports that one of the accused tried to rip out her intestines with his bare hands.

Her male companion was also severely beaten. Her injuries were fatal. Less than two weeks after the attack, she was dead. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Delhi_gang_rape_case). There are no words to express the severity of harm she experienced and the magnitude of the loss of her life. In these instances, one can recall the words of a character from Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, "This is not a story to pass on" (Morrison, 1987) And yet, the story to pass on perhaps lies in the remarkable courage of people, who politicised this moment in striking ways.

If, as Alan Badiou suggests, "...justice is the philosophical name for politics as a collective truth..." the protests of December 2012 can perhaps be read as a collective pronouncement of justice, in the streets. A collective truth was articulated not only in regards to this case, but in relation to the very common injustices enacted against women and gendered bodies marked as Other, marked for violence.

There was a universal wrong in violating a person's bodily integrity to the point of death in what has been called the "world's largest democracy," in what is referred to as an "India shining," owing to the promises made in the name of neoliberal capitalist growth.

An exercise in public justice not only declared the unspeakable brutalities committed by these people to be inexcusable, but exposed the scandal of the Indian state in its legislation of misogyny and indifference to violence.

And yet, I want to question the frames through which one sees spectacles of gendered violence in India. Partha Chatterjee suggests that colonisers used images of victimized Indian women to support Orientalist constructions of India. Chatterjee states that,

By assuming a position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country...

One can see traces of this thinking in narratives regarding the Delhi gang rape of 2012 and other similar stories that have surfaced. Within the global public imaginary, gender based violence in India is often explicitly and implicitly constructed as a symptom of reductive Orientalist readings of Indian culture as "backwards" and inferior. In radical opposition to this rhetoric, how might one read these protests as a form of anti-colonial activism?

When one considers that laws concerning gender and sex were instituted by British colonial rule, how might the collective truth told by protestors be read as a truth told against the duplicity of colonial ideology?

For example, following the protests of 2012, the Justice Verma Committee, a judiciary board set up to review rape law made a series of radical and revisionary proposals. One recommendation, which was not accepted by the Indian government was to criminalise marital rape, which continues to be legal in India, owing to British colonial law.

In *Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay*, Ashwini Tambe discusses how The East India Tea Company turned the rights of women into the rights of men who were thought to own them. Tambe writes that,

The East India Company upheld the right of husbands to buy wives and parents to sell children, and it targeted the 'enticing' of children and women into prostitution as an infringement on these property rights of husbands and parents. The law thus largely enshrined male private property rights to women and children... (Tambe, 28).

The colonial construction of women as property continues to inform the legal sanction of marital rape, despite opposition from progressive thinkers. Ongoing activist campaigns not limited to the Delhi gang rape protests are attempting to challenge these colonial laws and ideologies.

For example, one can consider that Section 377 of the India penal code, India's sodomy bill was also instituted by British Colonial Rule. In 2010, after a tireless campaign by activists and allies, the Delhi high court made the decision to read down Section 377, hopefully moving towards the lasting decriminalisation of same sex desire in the region.

My research therefore asks- how political movements can challenge colonialism at the level of gendered ideology?

My research involves archival study and interviews regarding activist and feminist movements in India. It will be insignificant in relation to the work of those who have been striving to enact political change for much longer than I have been alive, for much longer than many of us have been alive.

But, as Mahatma Gandhi once remarked, "Anything you will do be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it."