

Village Justice in India Doesn't Belong in a Modern Country.
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We hear all the time that India is the world's largest democracy. Certainly by demographics, this is so, but by quality, they are not good enough. However, the good news is that India's underbelly is no longer hidden; world press has caught up, and decent Middle Class urban Indians are outraged.

India continues to have too many published cases of gang rape and abuse of women. It is good that these are now in the open, but how many thousands more cases never make it to the light of day?

On January 24, police reported that a 20-year-old woman was gang-raped on the orders of a village council because she fell in love with a man from a different ethnic group. The AP report said that 12 suspects and the head of the council have been arrested for this attack. The woman told police that she lost count of how many men raped her (reported from her hospital bed).

It is heartening that this has not only been reported, but reported by the police themselves (not always so in the past). TV news reports have also weighed in. The woman is a member of an ethnic tribal group and the man is a Muslim from a neighboring village. The young man came to her village to propose marriage, but the villagers were not having it. They tied both to a tree while they decided their fate. The young man had the money to pay a fine and was released. The girl had no money, so the village sentenced her to gang rape, a sentence they carried out.

It is bad enough when gang rapists are just street thugs, as was the case of the medical student whose gang rape ended in her death. It is bad enough to have young brides burned and murdered by their in-laws because they want a new bride and new dowry. Acid attacks by rejected suitors is another too frequent horror. A teenage girl in a Calcutta suburb was gang-raped for two days in a row and set on fire when she refused to withdraw a police complaint. She died. Earlier in January, a Danish tourist was gang-raped in New Delhi by a gang when she stopped to ask for directions to her hotel. This is monstrous, but for rape to be used as a judicial punishment goes beyond all horrors.

Village councils are the rule in rural India, especially among tribal societies (non-Hindu). They have a horrible record for abuse of women, and the National Federation of Indian Women said that such councils destroy women's rights. The problem is that Indian law gives women rights, but the culture does not. The West Bengal government where most of these village councils flourish should start prosecuting them.

The burgeoning middle class has much to be angry about. India is developing very unevenly--by leaps and bounds in training a superb engineering and entrepreneurial class--but lagging in such basic amenities as clean water, sewage disposal, decent public schools, and modernization of the dilapidated infrastructure. The sight of bodies jammed into antiquated trains (with a poor record of safety) and even worse, to see the millions who flock for a religious observance of bathing in the Ganges River (a river so polluted it can be smelled from miles away) are sights that shock modern people. The new prime minister, Mr. Modi, promises to clean it up. Lots of luck.

Income inequality we hear so much about in the US is far more blatant in India. Although caste is illegal today, it is still alive in behavior. Domestic help and common labor are so cheap that people treat scorn and abuse them. Indian diplomats (like some from the Muslim world) bring their servants with them and treat them as if they were in their homeland. The recent arrest of an Indian consular official in New York was met with outrage by the Indian press, but there was no outrage over how her servant had been treated.

I hope Narendra Modi can do more than just talk.

678 words

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