

CAN CCTV CAMERAS REPLACE OUR MORAL COMPASS?

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By Shukla Bose



Of late, the newspaper headlines have been screaming of the mass molestation of women during New Years Eve in one of the signature roads of one of the most progressive cities in India. And this is not sensational journalism; it is just the highlighting of facts. Videos captured by CCTV cameras of horrific sexual aggression on hapless girls have been doing the social media rounds. We have been reading of how many such sexual assaults that are being captured by CCTV cameras will now be booked and retributed by law. More CCTV cameras are being demanded by the public to stop such crimes. I agree that the state needs to invest more on equipment that will empower the police to solve crimes unequivocally and fast.

However the question I ask here is, can CCTV cameras ever replace the moral compass of the public? CCTV cameras just capture after the crime is committed whereas our moral compass guides us so that such crimes do not take place. The question is, can we have better law and order through fear of being caught or by creating an ethos that does not want to indulge in such crimes? However esoteric it may sound I believe that it is definitely possible if as civic society and a member of governance, we go about analyzing and then addressing some of the issues that lead to such sexual assaults.

We have often heard prominent and eminent people publicly hold the girls' clothing responsible for such crimes. In 1996 a survey was done of judges in India and 68% of the respondents said that provocative clothing is an invitation to rape. After the well known Delhi Nirbhaya rape case we have heard opinion leaders calling the women protestors "highly dented and painted women" who go from "discos to demonstration". I believe that sexual assaults are not just an

aberration in society but a manifestation of society. I would argue that in violating women most attackers are not acting individually or out of some warped personal fantasy; rather they are manifesting and adhering to the consciousness of the culture in which they are immersed.

India has one of the lowest female-to-male population ratios in the world because of sex-selective abortion and female infanticide. Right through childhood girls are kept separate from boys and the boys never get to interact normally with girls. The number of co-educational schools is far less in India than other countries. And in state run schools where girls and boys are admitted together, the girls and boys are made to sit separately and discouraged from doing things together. This awkwardness with the opposite sex continues and repressed desires to mingle leads to distorted versions of eve teasing, assault and even rape.

While I say this, I also believe that we need to address the reality that sexual assault is not just a crime of passion, driven by a strong desire for sex but it is a violent crime driven by desire of dominance. It is also a reflection of how society thinks of sex, violence and women. A 2012 report by UNICEF found that 57 percent of Indian boys and 53 percent of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 think wife-beating is justified. Many young children have grown up seeing their mothers being beaten by their fathers and then indulge in forced sex. Many women from all economic segments themselves believe that it is their role to keep their husbands happy by keeping them sexually satisfied. And to add to that the objectification of women has not helped. We have turned women into body parts that exist and have value only to the extent they satisfy male desires and move merchandize in the marketplace. And to that extent our brand consultants and advertising agencies have to take some responsibility as well. But this only fortifies my argument that the entire society condones and colludes with the sexual violence that happens around us

In her 1975 book *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller argued, "Rape is a historical condition that underlies all aspects of male-female relationships. From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" In India ,throughout their lives, sons are fed better than their sisters, are more likely to be sent to school and have brighter career prospects. They grow up thinking they are better than their sisters and other girls and therefore can get away with anything. And so far they have got away, because of our poor law and order systems. There are not enough women police constables and officers who are expected to be a little sympathetic and understanding of the victims. The courts have not been that forthcoming in the past. In our country the pending cases run over years with 20 million pending cases because we have only 15 judges for every 1 million people, whereas in comparison China has 159.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau 2013 annual report, 24,923 rape cases were reported across India in 2012. And we all know that 60% of the cases are never reported. We need to salute those women who showed the courage to report these crimes against all the disdain, taboo and social discrimination they face. I salute that brave girl from UP who was gang raped at age 13 but pursued for 11 years till her predators were identified and put behind bars. Girls too, in our country have to be encouraged and guided to take a responsible and empowered position about how they are treated in society. I am not talking about western clothes and short skirts as a sign of modernization here, although it has been the latest preoccupation of many. Girls have to engineer to shift the psychological power from the men to themselves.

They must scream at injustice rather than being the silent victim. They must report any violence experienced or seen. And very importantly they must also be in control of themselves and the situation. I have heard from women that were present at Brigade Road on the 31st night that many young girls were frightfully drunk and not able to take care of themselves. I have been told that there were girls lying in the toilets of bars and restaurants unable to stand properly. I am the one who says that if men can enjoy liquor then so can the girls. But I would also like to add that if any one whether it is a girl or a boy wants to drink themselves silly then they must do that in private places and not in public ones where they are more vulnerable...both men and women. At least one-half of all violent crimes involve alcohol consumption by the perpetrator, the victim, or both (Collins and Messerschmidt 1993). Sexual assault fits this pattern. In other words both men and women must enjoy themselves but also know when to stop.

What I am saying is no rocket science. Much has been written about sexual assault and gender inequality. The only point I am trying to make is issues such as these should not be limited as individual crimes but should be seen as social crimes and therefore the root of apathy, callousness and marginalization needs to be shaken through proper understanding and planning. We need to recognize sexual assaults as human rights violation.

And it all begins in schools.

There should be more schools for both girls and boys together where social issues are discussed and analysed. The subject of gender sensitization must be introduced in schools, colleges and the workplace. We need to educate men and women on women's rights under the law and work with communities to develop a gender sensitive society that is underpinned by respect and equality. Students should not just be told what to do but they must discuss together and reason out why. We must develop in them the moral compass that guides them to do the right thing for themselves and world at large. This moral compass arises out of understanding the issues, thinking critically about it, discussing openly with peers of both sexes. Again, moral compass will be the best guide that will keep them away from doing the wrong thing whether there is a CCTV camera to catch it or not. Schools must spend as much time developing this moral compass in their students as they do for teaching Maths and English Language.

And when these students grow older, hopefully millions of them, they will understand the need to look at everyone through the moral compass of respect and equality. Till that happens, it is left to our generation to establish efficient fast track courts for sexual assault victims, induct more women in the police force, restrict inciting pornography although it seems popular with the politicians, encourage girls to speak out, and learn to focus on the right things instead of women's wardrobe. We will also need fully functioning CCTV cameras in as many public areas as possible. But real change can come only if we replace CCTV cameras with our own moral compasses and be the right role models for our children by doing and saying the right things.

(The writer is a founder-CEO of Parikrma Humanity Foundation — a not-for-profit venture that educates children from underprivileged sections of society)

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