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Why 'India's Daughter' should be seen in India

The documentary on Delhi gang-rape shows how the views of our society are remarkably similar to those of convict Mukesh Si

If you are Indian, know India well, or are concerned about the routine and widespread violence against women, Leslee Udwin's film tells you nothing that you don't already know. Photo: AP

I have now seen *India's Daughter*, Leslee Udwin's film, which h already gained notoriety without it being screened to a mass au As Indian government officials drummed up publicity for the film way that was beyond the wildest imagination of any marketing executive—calling for its global ban, complaining about defami India, worrying about impact on tourist dollars—the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) brought forward its telecast by days, to capitalize on the curiosity the film has aroused worldwi

If you are Indian, know India well, or are concerned about the r and widespread violence against women, the film tells you noth you don't already know. It focuses on one specific case—the br rape and murder of a physiotherapy student in Delhi in Decemb 2012—and tries to build a grand narrative about the country's " culture", as activist Kavita Krishnan characterizes it in the film. provides almost no wider context to rape—there are almost no statistics of the number of such cases, nor a reference to the M case (although it is a film dealing with the law and talks to defe lawyers, the police, and two members of the Justice Verma par and how the rape law has evolved. We do not hear about other cases that preceded the December 2012 incident that took plac moving bus, including the many allegations of custodial rape, or allegations involving the armed forces, or the far more common but rare reported incidents of spousal rape, or rape by someone known to the woman. There is an unsubstantiated claim by one of the defence l alleging that half the parliamentarians have rape or murder charges against them, without providing statistics or context. And curiously, religious cult leaders facing rape allegations like Asaram are spared embarrassment, and so are politicians.

If the film set out to assert that rape is an epidemic in India, then showing its spread across sectors, classes, religions, and regions was essential—that would have indicated the gravity of the problem. It would have also explained why the issue mattered so much to so ma Indians in the winter of 2012 when the fury over one case turned into a mass upsurge that the politicians in Delhi, and indeed the entire class, simply couldn't understand. To explain the context, the film relies on Maria Misra, an Oxford historian, to interpret India and its nu debates on gender. Misra appears often in the film to "mansplain" India, as it were, making sweeping generalizations, such as talking ab "stigma" of reporting rape (as though it is a uniquely Indian phenomenon) or implying that after this rape, the stigma has somehow disappeared. (Violent rape has continued since—think of the 2013 Shakti Mill case in Mumbai, or the Bangalore child rape case in 2014 rape of a disabled woman in Rohtak this year).

This is a serious film about a grave crime, but there is unintended comic relief in the form of the two defence lawyers. The rape accused the right to a fair trial, but the two lawyers are almost like caricatures, mouthing inane, sexist remarks, and arguably damaging the case clients.

And that brings me to the film's marketing. There are of course several scenes of interviews with Mukesh Singh, one of the men convict the case, whose more sensational remarks have already been given wide play in the Indian media. Getting to interview him has indeed scoop, but by focusing on marketing those remarks as the core of the film, it diverts attention from the far more important things being s Justice Leila Seth, for example, or the exceptional bravery and decency of the Delhi rape victim's parents.

Another claim the film-makers have made is that the film has an educational or campaigning purpose. Articles I read suggested that the would show statistics of sexual violence in other countries—that this wasn't about singling out India. At least in the version shown on BB night, I did not see any such statistics, so if you were a Martian who suddenly saw the film, you'd think rape is a big problem in India (no elsewhere) and in India this is the single-most important case, and that the problem has grown in the past two decades.

And yet the film should not be banned. There is a sound argument against showing the film in India while the appeals process is pendin not to prejudice the appeals and a potential mercy petition. But officials who want to ban it aren't guided by legal niceties; they've clothe themselves in the tricolour and are complaining about the defamation of India, among other things. The film does not criticize the judicia there is no potential contempt of court, and it takes at face value the claims a police officer makes, that Delhi is a safe city for women. N it challenge India's politicians.

The real danger, as some feminists have pointed out, is not that the judges would get swayed, but public opinion might: in an hour-long
the rape accused Mukesh features for perhaps a few minutes (out of an apparently 16-hour footage filmed over three days) but those ca
remarks have been give wide play in the film's advance publicity, where Mukesh talks about what women should wear or do, and wheth
should go out alone at night, and how the introduction of death penalty for rape may mean that rape victims would now get killed so that
cannot testify. And some of these attitudes are partly endorsed by the two defence lawyers. One of them, A.P. Singh, stands by his
controversial remark that he'd burn his daughter alive if she had premarital sex.

India's Daughter reminds us of the utter destitution of the families from which the rapists emerged. But of course it doesn't mean that the
alone are to blame for rape. But the way the story is presented—of a poor, aspiring young woman raped and murdered by poorer men v
any organizing principle in their lives—shrinks the complexity of rape in India into a singular narrative. It will sharpen demands for instan
justice and executions on one hand, and revive an entirely unnecessary debate about foreigners preaching to Indians about gender equ
(To be fair, Misra's is the only "foreign" accent Indians will hear in the film, and there is no intrusive narrator preaching throughout the sto

Finally, there is one important reason why the film needs to be seen in India, so that we know how many of our relatives, teachers, princ
politicians, police officers, religious leaders, khap panchayat leaders, and community elders have views remarkably similar to Mukesh's-
what women can wear, what they should do, when they can go out, and with whom—and how Mukesh's voice is surprisingly commonpl
For that is the discourse about rape in India, (as it is in many other places): it is not about sex; it is about control, power, and violence.