

I was gang raped three years ago, when I was 17 years old. My name and my photograph appear with this article.

I grew up in Bombay, and am at present studying in the USA. I am writing a thesis on rape and came home to do research a couple of weeks ago. Ever since that day three years ago, I have been intensely aware of the misconceptions people have about rape, about those who rape and those who survive rape. I have also been aware of the stigma that attaches to survivors. Time and again, people have hinted that perhaps death would have been better than the loss of that precious "virginity." I refuse to accept this. My life is worth too much to me.

I feel that many women keep silent to avoid this stigma, but suffer tremendous agony because of their silence. Men blame the victim for many reasons, and, shockingly, women too blame the victim, perhaps because of internalized patriarchal values, perhaps as a way of making themselves invulnerable to a horrifying possibility.

It happened on a warm July evening. That was the year women's groups were beginning to demand improved legislation on rape. I was with my friend Rashid. We had gone for a walk and were sitting on a mountainside about a mile and a half from my home in Chembur which is a suburb of Bombay. We were attacked by four men, who were armed with a sickle. They beat us, forced us to go up the mountain, and kept us there for two hours. We were physically and psychologically abused, and, as darkness fell, we were separated, screaming, and they raped me, keeping Rashid hostage. If either of us resisted, the other would get hurt. This was an effective tactic.

They could not decide whether or not to kill us. We did everything in our power to stay alive. My goal was to live and that was more important than anything else. I fought the attackers physically at first, and with words after I was pinned down. Anger and shouting had no effect, so I began to babble rather crazily about love and compassion, I spoke of humanity and the fact that I was a human being, and so were they, deep inside. They were gentler after

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"I Fought For My Life...And Won"

this, at least those who were not raping me at the moment. I told one of them that if he ensured neither Rashid nor I was killed, I would come back to meet him, the rapist, the next day. Those words cost me more than I can say, but two lives were in the balance. The only way I would ever have gone back there was with a very, very sharp

They took us down the mountain and we stumbled on to the dark road, clinging to each other and walking unsteadily. They followed us for a while, brandishing the sickle, and that was perhaps the worst part of all—escape was so near yet death hung over us. Finally we got home, broken, bruised, shattered. It was such an



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instrument that would ensure that he never raped again.

After what seemed like years of torture (I think I was raped 10 times but I was in so much pain that I lost track of what was going on after a while), we were let go, with a final long lecture on what an immoral whore I was to be alone with a boy. That infuriated them more than anything. They acted the whole time as if they were doing me a favour, teaching me a lesson. Theirs was the most fanatical kind of self righteousness.

incredible feeling to let go, to stop bargaining for our lives and weighing every word because we knew the price of angering them was a sickle in the stomach. Relief flooded into our bones and out of our eyes and we literally collapsed into hysterical howling.

I had earnestly promised the rapists that I would never tell any one but the minute I got home, told my father to call the police. He was as anxious as I was to get them apprehended. I was willing to do anything to prevent someone else having

to go through what I had been through. The police were insensitive, contemptuous, and somehow managed to make me the guilty party. When they asked me what had happened, I told them quite directly, and they were scandalized that I was not a shy, blushing victim. When they said there would be publicity, I said that was all right. It had honestly never occurred to me that Rashid or I could be blamed. When they said I would have to go into a home for juvenile delinquents for my "protection." I was willing to live with pimps and rapists, in order to be able to bring my attackers to justice.

Soon I realized that justice for women simply does not exist in the legal system. When they asked us what we had been doing on the mountain, I began to get indignant. When they asked Rashid why he had been "passive", I screamed. Didn't they understand that his resistance meant further torture for me? When they asked questions about what kind of clothes I had been wearing, and why there were no visible marks on Rashid's body (he had internal bleeding from being repeatedly hit in the stomach with the handle of the sickle), I broke down in complete misery and terror, and my father threw them out of the house after telling them exactly what he thought of them. That was the extent of the support the police gave me. No charges were brought. The police recorded a statement that we had gone for a walk and had been "delayed" on our return.

It has been almost three years now, but there has not been even one day, when I have not been haunted by what happened. Insecurity, vulnerability, fear, anger, helplessness—I fight these constantly. Sometimes when I am walking on the road and hear footsteps behind I start to sweat and have to bite my lip to keep from screaming. I flinch at friendly touches, I can't bear tight scarves that feel like hands round my throat, I flinch at a certain look that comes into men's eyes—that look is there so often.

Yet in many ways I feel that I am a stronger person now. I appreciate my life more than ever. Every day is a gift. I fought for my life, and won. No negative reaction can make me stop feeling that this is positive.

I do not hate men. It is too easy a thing to do, and many men are victims of different kinds of oppression. It is patriarchy I hate, and that incredible tissue of lies that say men are superior to women, men have rights which women should not have, men are our rightful conquerors.

My feminist friends all assume that I am concerned about women's issues because I was raped. This is not so. The rape was one expression of all the reasons why I am a feminist. Why compartmentalize rape? Why assume rape is only an unwanted act of intercourse? Are we not raped every day when we walk down the street and are leered at? Are we not raped when we are treated as sex objects, denied our rights, oppressed in so many ways? The oppression of women cannot be analysed unidimensionally. For example, a



class analysis is very important, but it does not explain why most rapes occur within one's own class.

As long as women are oppressed in various ways, all women will continue to be vulnerable to rape. We must stop mystifying rape. We must acknowledge its existence all round us, and the various forms it takes. We must stop shrouding it in secrecy, and must see it for what it is—a crime of violence in which the rapist is the criminal.

I am exultant at being alive. Being raped was terrible beyond words, but I think being alive is more important. When a woman is denied the right to feel this, there is something very wrong in our value system. When someone is mugged and allows herself to be beaten in order to survive, no one thinks she is guilty of willing consent to be beaten. In the case of rape, a woman is asked why she let them do it, why she did not resist, whether she enjoyed it.

Rape is not specific to any group of women, nor are rapists a particular group of men. A rapist could be a brutal madman or the boy next door or the too friendly uncle. Let us stop treating rape as the problem of other women. Let us acknowledge its universality and come to a better understanding of it.

Until the basis of power relationships in this world changes, until women cease to be regarded as the property of men, we will have to live in constant fear of being violated with impunity.

I am a survivor. I did not ask to be raped and I did not enjoy it. It was the worst torture I have ever known. Rape is not the woman's fault, ever. This article is one contribution towards exploding the silence and the comfortable myths which we build up to convince ourselves we are not potential victims, thus consigning actual victims to the most agonizing isolation a human being can know. □

Night Wind

*Night wind
wet with the tears of
women
whose wayward husbands
wander through the pubs and
paan and cheap drug stores
of Calcutta.*

*Night wind
wends its heavy way
over the slums of our existence
and salt tears
pass overhead.*

*Don't they ever meet you
on your way?
Don't you recognize the ones
that are mine?
Don't you get the message
of the wind
the warm night wind?*

—Mary Ann Dasgupta