

When India's daughter walk!



'India's daughter', a phrase which cast one's mind back to the documentary with the same name made post the rape of Jyoti Singh on 16th December, 2012, acquired a new meaning in the wake of recent incident of rape and murder of Dr. Priyanka Reddy in Hyderabad. It became a term that young women dreaded of being associated with. In a series of posts shared vehemently on the social media, young women exclaimed, 'we do not want to be India's daughter'. These women in the negation of the title which is usually conferred upon the (young and largely unmarried) victim of rape sought reclamation to the spaces where they and other minority groups, including poor or sexual minority, aren't vulnerable to (sexual) violence in their everyday acts of walking or using the public space.

The word 'daughter' evokes and reiterates the vulnerability of the feminine who require and should seek masculinist protection. With a constant escalation in instances of violence against the women, it becomes indispensable to probe further women's embodied experience of the spaces. It is crucial for us to understand the politics of this normalized idea of being a 'daughter' while accessing space. Whenever an incidence of violence is experienced by a woman, responses to two things are sought which include the identity of the women and the space she was occupying then. These two elements, space and gender identity intersected by age, class, caste, sexuality, together produces and reproduces the hegemonic gender-space. We can begin by understanding that gender is central in determining the spatial accessibility as intersected by age, class, sexuality, and physical ability. There exists a mutual interdependence between bodies and spaces as different bodies locate themselves and behave differently in the space producing and reproducing a hegemonic social order. Such a reproduction assigns and designate not only roles specific to different genders but also the ownership of the spaces. Feminist geographer, Valentine Gill, terms this appropriation of spaces as a spatial expression of patriarchy. She explains that just like patriarchy produces roles for men and women, similarly deeming of spaces as being legitimate and designated for male, female or other users should be seen as a spatial expression of patriarchy. It is this patriarchal control which subordinates and marginalizes the presence of women in spaces. Sylvia Walby, a sociologist, while theorizing patriarchy explains that public patriarchy is segregationist in nature which means dispossession of women is carried out more collectively than individual patriarchs through the means of patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality and cultural institutions like religions, media and education. Thus, we can infer that the subordination of women in public spaces is carried out through either being denied access, marginalised or invisibilizing their presence in the public sphere.

Walking which is an embodied act is much more than the simple act of walking over the physical space in order to commute but moving in and through the spaces is a process of interacting with power relationships embedded within the space. It is important here to emphasize that gendered bodies are not only reproducing the gendered norms of mobility but

are being reproduced by these norms itself. This gendering of space and bodies in space further produces constraints to women's mobility thereby limiting their movements. The act of walking in space for women is woven around the lines of maintaining one's safety and respectability as directed by morality, marriage, family and society. It coerces women to constantly manufacture a visible and socially legitimate purpose, respectability and safety to claim legitimacy (again societal) in their movement and occupation of the spaces. Internalizing these ideas, women's movement in the spaces remains not an embodied experience which they can live carefreely but can be mapped as a transit between two different locations. Walking in such instances is reduced to merely passing through the space in order to reach one's destination as against the idea of loitering or aimlessly occupying spaces. Thus, walking in space becomes a subconscious performance which ranges from rendering oneself invisible, self-policing, performing respectable femininity by appearing married or making a purposeful movement and forging an 'absent man' accompanying one. This subconscious performance arises due to an internalization of hegemonic ideas of femininity which define what kind of bodily comportment, movement and conduct is appropriate for women or not. However, apart from repeatedly performing such acts women uses practices like avoidance, deception, adaptation, defiance and care which in turn allows them to create their own sense of belonging to the spaces. In addition to these factors which govern women's mobility, temporality also significantly controls women's accessibility and mobility. It is this gendered fixation of night which positions women as 'inappropriate' and 'infrequent' users as night is perceived as a space where there resides "the unknown" and "the potential non-normalized behaviours" which are not present in the day time-spaces and if present, are legible enough to be dealt with. Thus, night time-space also significantly questions and subsequently restricts women's accessibility and mobility through the spaces. All the above-mentioned factors including safety, risk of violence, morality, respectability, safety and temporality are perceived as means of checking and regulating women's mobility. It is believed that a mere deviation from these lines of regulation means giving an invitation to risk of violence and violence itself. Thus, women often experience societal censure whenever their performance of femininity is not in accordance to the accepted norms which leads to their presence being questioned in the spaces.

The brutal rape and murder of Dr. Priyanka Reddy became another crucial moment in the context of (especially young) women's presence and safety in the public spaces especially at night. It brought forth the normalization of violence against women and their 'conditioned' access to spaces. These rape cases are the incidences of extreme 'eventful' violence as against the normalized 'everyday' instances of violence embedded in the spaces. It is these eventful incidences of violence which draws our attention to women's subordination and marginalization in the spaces controlled by masculine forces which include the material, sociocultural, political and ideological elements. However, it is also crucial to understand and address the everyday violence which can actually pave the way to curb the eventful violence. It is this culture of subordination of women reproduced through a hegemonic social order which needs to be negotiated with in order to strengthen women's reclamation of the spaces. The mainstream popular culture which objectifies women and earn profits by selling the idea that women are infrequent users of the space needs to be checked. Mob lynching of accused or other violent methods to physically torture the accused to send across a message of the consequences of one's action is another means of strengthening the masculine culture of violence. Violence in response to an act of violence can never be a solution but in turn would

act as a propellant to normalize the masculine form of violence. It is high time that we recognize that women's negotiations and strategies also have the potential to ignite a change in the gendered dynamics and spatialized gendered relations. A simple act of walking also challenges the appropriation of masculine spaces and transforms the exclusionary spaces. Such spatialization also enables a process of reclamation of not only spaces but also helps in reproducing gendered identities which can initiate a change in the hegemonic social order. So, let's walk as not being India's daughter but as everyday and regular users of space whose walk is not contingent upon any specific form of femininity, self-policing, surveillance and ideas of morality, safety and respectability.