

# No more 'calmly sailing by', not after what happened in Kathua

*It is impossible, when this level of mental sickness and brutality coalesce, to do anything more than fall into the silence of absolute despair. Until, that is, an overwhelming rage sweeps away the despair.*



ANURADHA ROY

WHO among us today, if we were born Hindu, does not have at least one relative or acquaintance who hates Muslims? Who among us does not have friends—men and women thought to be moral and humane—that have closed their eyes to the brutal amorality of the ruling regime, seeing it instead as the political road to India's salvation? Will they be able to carry on unchanged even now, after the people they voted in have sprung to the defence of the rapists and murderers of an eight-year-old? Will they fail even now to see that a girl of that age is neither Hindu nor Muslim but only a child?

The barbarism of victorious armies was meant to have been over and done with, and the founding of the League of Nations after the First World War came with the liberal belief—shattered by the Nazis—that civilised life was more or less inevitable. In the India where I grew up, the exploitative British regime was over, it was post-Nehru, a country peopled with liberal myths and socialist dreams. There were riots, the country did simmer and boil off and on, but in the end, it was agreed, and the judiciary would follow the Western institutions on which they were modelled. Until the early 1990s—when the Congress Party grew unbelievably corrupt and turned a blind eye to the Babri destruction—medieval brutality was, I thought, over: political enemies would no longer be poisoned, women and children would no longer be savaged as a matter of course to signal the conquest of a victorious army.

After their giant electoral victories, the new, democratically elected armies of the Hindu Right have proven the opposite.

I was about to catch a flight when the details on the little girl were published and as

I tried functioning with the normalcy and efficiency airports demand, it became a steady drum beat inside me: when you were taking a train down from the hills, a voice inside me said, they shoved two pills down her throat to drug her; while you were making yourself toast, they shoved themselves into her: grown men took turns forcing themselves into a child; while you were walking into the airport, they bashed her head in with a stone; they raped her in a temple; they hid her under a bed; they strangled her with her own clothes.

After that, one of them joined the search for the missing girl. Because he was a

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Around me, at the airport, a woman argued over why they had given her chicken noodles when she'd asked for veg noodles. A group of little girls were planning a movie outing on their first day of travel. I drank my lassi wondering why I had that strangely disjointed, disembodied feeling you have when someone close dies, as if there is a fuzzy glass between you and normal life. But nobody close to me had died. This was a child I had never known, a little girl who went out to bring back her family's animals and then was drugged, imprisoned, raped,

sky  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on."

That poem is about obliviousness, not indifference. The dogs who "go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse [who] scratches its innocent behind on a tree" have no idea there is someone being tortured, a boy falling to his death.

But what of those who do know?

I remember the preternatural hush that hung over Delhi after the Nirbhaya rape and am old enough to remember the countrywide horror over the Sikh pogrom following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. There is no horror any longer. These things happen, they happen somewhere else, they happen to someone else. At the airport there was no inkling of a national crisis. If you are affluent enough to fly, if you are not Dalit or Muslim, you are forever in a bulletproof, air-conditioned cocoon. But what is it like not to have the cocoon?

I went to a Muslim school in Hyderabad where most of my childhood friends were Muslim. At that age, I had nearly no awareness of my minority Hinduness, nor had my playmates much inkling of their Muslimness. I have a sense of where these friends are now: they are silent somewhere. They are feeling cornered somewhere, besieged by the sense of hunting dogs coming after them. This is not the country we grew up in together, the necessity of secularism drummed into us. The venality and cynicism of politicians was ordinary, normal, an unworrying aspect of how politics was done in our part of the world. It was still a country in which parents were more likely to teach you about morality and manners, not sheer human survival.

What can you do as an ordinary citizen trying to survive in a country run by criminal gangs? Mafias on a scale so large that they seem to exist beyond anyone's reach. Mafias so clever at manipulating belief that millions believe their every lie? What can you do when you see your

protectors turn into killers? And what can you possibly do as a solitary writer?

Everyone in wartime is not a soldier, nor can everyone in times such as these be a lawyer or activist. Masons, plumbers, teachers, doctors are still needed; there are still houses to be built, children to be taught, leaking taps to be fixed. For a long time I told myself my usefulness lay in doing my own work. Is this true or is it merely a way of legitimising my desire to somehow carry on living only as I know how to? I don't have the answer.

Other writers say much the same: that the work of the writer is to write books that make people think, which alter their world even if for the few days they are reading that book. Writers are not investigative journalists, and for a writer of novels it is especially difficult to respond to events that are current, volatile. "It's dangerous for novelists to point a plot at a moving target," says Lionel Shriver. It is also true now that novelists are more usually valued when they write novels that are overtly political. They have always to bear the burden of being literary activists—how else, in this kind of country, can a writer remain relevant? Is it possible to construct perfect paragraphs while your house is burning?

In my small hill-town I teach spoken English to a girl of nine. She is a goatherd. She goes to a government school which teaches her quite little. She dreams of being an actor. After school, in the evening she sets off to bring back her family's grazing cattle, waving a switch, walking into the deep forest with nothing but two dogs for protection. I walk with her for a part of the way and we talk, she in halting English, I correcting her pronunciation and tenses. Then I turn back and she carries on alone. Our town is safe, we say. She has only wildlife to fear.

Anuradha Roy's fourth novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* will be published in June. This article was originally published on April 13, 2018 in *The Wire*, an online news website based in India.



The brutal gang rape and murder of eight-year-old Asifa Bano has sparked outrage across India. Her body was found in a forest on January 17 near Kathua city of Indian-administered Kashmir.

PHOTO: PTI

policeman. Kashmir's lawmakers then marched to save the policemen from being charged with rape. Women too marched to defend the rapists: because they are Hindu and the child who was gang-raped and killed was the daughter of a Muslim goatherd. It is impossible, when this level of mental sickness and brutality coalesce, to do anything more than fall into the silence of absolute despair.

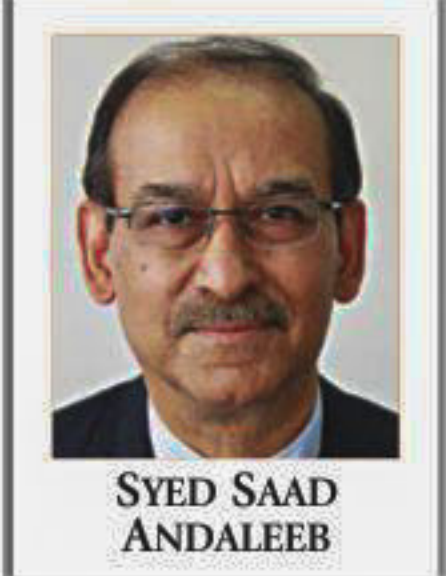
and tortured for a week before her head was battered with a stone.

A long-ago poem by Auden came back to me, sounding curiously anaemic now.

"Everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster ...  
and the expensive delicate ship that must  
have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

# Whither law enforcers?



SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

ONCE again, a headline in *The Daily Star* grated: "Fifth-grader 'raped' by headmaster." Another headline literally stung: "RMC worker gang-raped in moving bus." Violence against women continues

inexorably and with inexplicable regularity, reflecting the unconscionable disregard and disrespect that is held today for the helpless victims. Where does such abjectness come from? Is there something in the male ethos, some sense of entitlement? Is it patriarchal values? One wonders how long this will continue, especially when there are appropriate agencies of the government empowered and entrusted to bring an end to such vile acts.

A recent report points out that rape conviction rates are as low as 2 percent of all cases filed. The message sexual predators get is that they need not fear any consequences. There is also no known study in the country estimating the percentage of the total rape violations that is filed as cases. The reasons why cases are not filed or why conviction rate is so low include: outside court settlements; victims have to prove rape allegations, which is often quite difficult; victims undergo a humiliating process during investigation,

medical tests and trial; victim's lack of awareness about immediate steps after rape; and police ignorance and negligence of duties.

It is important to examine the role of the appropriate authorities in the matter of curbing violence against women. For some reason they have simply failed to instil fear and respect for the law. In a study conducted by BRAC University on sexual harassment of women in public transportation, there were many complaints from female commuters regarding the role of law enforcement personnel. According to them, law enforcers show a serious lack of concern on complaints about harassment. A working woman grieved, "To whom should I go... the police? I looked for help after being harassed and they ended up laughing and said that I should not make a big deal out of this silly little thing." She further added, "It's not good for a woman to go to a male police officer for such issues... they simply cannot comprehend our pain [and loss of dignity]. We need female police officers everywhere to help us."

A larger group of women, sexually harassed in public transportation, were asked whether they had reported their experience to the authorities. The majority of respondents (46 percent) felt no need to do so, suggesting that they had probably become inured to the situation that "men will be men" and that they will not get any justice.

Many working women have taken to using public transportation for their daily commute in quest of a better livelihood. As they step out of the safety of their homes, what awaits them is unabashed nastiness, incomprehensible ugliness, and plain violence. In the crowded spaces of public transportation, "things happen"—but the women have nowhere to turn. The consequence is quite disconcerting: among many women, there appears to be a growing acceptance that "such things" will happen. Some may justify that a nudge or a push may be unavoidable in close quarters.

Unfortunately, matters often get worse: from groping and staring lewdly to far worse. What recourse do the women have in such circumstances? The study found that a large proportion of them (80 percent) remain silent or simply walk away. As for reporting to the authorities, 18 percent feared further harassment, 6 percent feared for their dignity, 3.36 percent felt it was no use complaining, and another 3.36 percent indicated that they did not need any more trouble.

Respondents were also asked if they felt the law-enforcers were women-friendly. A great number of them (72 percent) "strongly disagreed." Only about 7 percent felt the authorities were friendly, while 11 percent remained neutral. What the women seem to be saying is that law enforcers "must" do their job better and be much

more proactive in protecting them. A seeming lack of trust in their demeanour is unmistakable.

It is indeed important to investigate further why law-enforcers are disinclined to protect women in public spaces and what needs to be done to change their perceptions, attitudes and behaviours to enable women to function with dignity and respect in the public sphere. It is also important to investigate whether there is a class of perpetrators the law enforcers are simply unwilling to confront.

The "brand-image" of law enforcement authorities is certainly not a healthy one and requires sustained pressure and imagination to turn around. Serious public discourse must be initiated on the measures needed to address the scourge of violence against women and the role of the authorities to bring change.

The role of the media can be vital in this matter, especially in "following up" on every reported case of violence to its ultimate conclusion. The public must know what consequences were faced by the perpetrators of violence: very often this matter is ignored, leaving the public wondering.

Training and capacity building is a third line of engagement: a special force may be developed for immersion into the system to deter the vile acts—under cover, if need be. The need for more and better quality public transportation has been underscored in

numerous studies. Why that has not happened remains an enigma.

Deep-rooted cultural (patriarchal) values must also begin to be addressed from an early age. This means that schooling should play a larger change-agent role, early on, to shape appropriate behaviours of boys and girls as they transition to becoming men and women.

Finally, it is important to conduct more public opinion surveys on the state of violence against women where women are allowed to speak up. Such surveys can set benchmarks against which the state of law enforcement is continuously held up to public scrutiny. The high command within the law enforcement system must be held accountable in the main. When the opinion polls reflect positive results, the higher-ups must be publicly recognised and commended. When the polls go the other way, measures for incompetence must be visibly implemented. Women have endured, and continue to endure, a high level of violence. This ought to be unacceptable to any society. It is time for change—visible and palpable change.

Syed Saad Andaleeb is Vice Chancellor of BRAC University, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Pennsylvania State University, and principal investigator of the study on women in public transportation, supported by the BRAC Road Safety Program and aided by the BRAC Gender Justice and Diversity Program.

## ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



April 16, 1917

### LENIN RETURNS TO RUSSIA FROM EXILE

Vladimir Lenin, leader of the revolutionary Bolshevik Party, returns to Petrograd after a decade of exile to take the reins of the Russian Revolution.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Multipart crime
  - 7 Phone downloads
  - 11 Slow tempo
  - 12 Schnitzel base
  - 13 Hot bar drink
  - 15 Dry cleaner's target
  - 16 Physics amount
  - 18 Mishandle
  - 21 Food writer
  - 22 Campaign tactics
  - 24 Boxing great
  - 25 Put down
  - 26 Auto
  - 27 Said no to
  - 29 Precious stones
  - 30 Capital of Italia
  - 31 Fill completely
  - 32 Expose to intense heat
  - 34 Cold bar drink
  - 40 Rocker Clapton
  - 41 Cry of discovery
  - 42 Slender
  - 43 Gushed
- DOWN**
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  - 2 Wedding words
  - 3 Whale group
  - 4 Tennis star
  - Andre
  - 5 Breath
  - fresheners
  - 6 Luke's teacher
  - 7 City way
  - 8 For every
  - 9 Golf goal
  - 10 Crafty
  - 14 Pry
  - 16 Distance runner
  - 17--acids
  - 19 Diamond side
  - 20 Painting holder
  - 21 Fuming
  - 22 Feeling down
  - 23 Fourth-yr. students
  - 25 Get smart
  - 28 Return announcement
  - 29 In abundance
  - 31 Crunch's cousin
  - 33 Jonson works
  - 34 Hair goo
  - 35 Lyricist
  - Gershwin
  - 36 Writer Anais
  - 37 Fresh
  - 38 Mamie's man
  - 39 Heel

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## YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

C A R L A P S A L M  
A D I O S R A D I I  
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G R E E N B A Y  
L O C H S T O R E S  
O D O R S A G O R A  
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G O O D B Y E S  
B A T W O R E  
S E E M E R R O R  
S E U P A R E N A  
T A M P A M A V E N

## BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



## BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to [dsoption@gmail.com](mailto:dsoption@gmail.com).