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Intersection of Sexual Violence against Women and Sectarian Agendas in India

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Abstract

Using thematic analysis techniques, this research examines how gang rape is used in sectarian agendas in India. It demonstrates that the responses of government, the main opposition political party, and prominent leaders of Hindu nationalist forces to rape cannot be separated from the intersection of gender, misogynist culture and politics. Findings indicated that violated women's bodies became a space for political debates between a conservative, opposition political party's claims about Indian traditions and the government of India. These findings have important implications if we want to challenge rape myths that obscure the need for social and political transformation to stop rape. The highly publicised rape of Pandey marked a turning point for the anti-rape movement in India.

Keywords: rape-myths, misogynist-culture, sectarian agenda, India, political debate

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Abstract

Usando técnicas de análisis temático, esta investigación examina cómo la violencia grupal es abordada en las agendas sectarias en India. Demuestra que las respuestas del gobierno, el principal partido político de la oposición y los líderes prominentes de las fuerzas nacionalistas hindúes respecto a las violaciones no pueden separarse de la intersección de género, la cultura misógina y la política. Los hallazgos indicaron que los cuerpos de las mujeres violadas se convirtieron en un espacio para los debates políticos entre las declaraciones de un partido político opositor y conservador sobre las tradiciones indias y el gobierno de la India. Estos hallazgos tienen implicaciones importantes si queremos desafiar los mitos de la violación que dificultan la necesidad de una transformación social y política para detener las violaciones. El caso de la violación altamente publicitada de Pandey marcó un punto de inflexión para el movimiento contra la violación en la India.

Keywords: mitos de la violación, cultura misógina, agenda sectaria, India, debate político.

On December 16, 2012, Jyoti Pandey (Pandey), a student, was gang raped on a private bus by six male assailants in Delhi, India, including an underage boy ([The Hindu, 2012a](#)). She was coming home with a male friend after watching a movie. Her friend was also assaulted by the attackers. The assailants threw the victims' bodies on the street; the victims were taken to the hospital. Although her friend survived, Pandey died 13 days after the attack. The public took to the streets of India demanding justice for Pandey, which prompted a speedy trial and rape law reforms in February 2013. On September 13, 2013, the four convicted men received the death penalty ([The Hindu, 2013a](#)). The underage assailant received three years in a reform facility ([The Hindu, 2013b](#)).

This research analyses the narratives of the rape of Pandey by the government of India led by the Indian National Congress (the Congress) in 2012, the leaders of the Bharatya Janata Party (BJP), the main opposition political party of India in 2012, and prominent leaders of Hindu nationalist forces who were closely aligned with the BJP. Using an English online national newspaper of India called *The Hindu*, I examine how the narratives and counter narratives reproduce rape myths and, at the same time, give new meanings to rape. I explain how the government attempted to diffuse tension among the public by using rape myths to defend its legitimacy. I explain how the BJP politicised the highly publicised rape of Pandey to prove that the Congress was incompetent and used religious and gender ideologies to project the gang rape of Pandey to advance their political objectives. I examine how Pandey's rape is used in sectarian agendas in India. I demonstrate that government and the BJP responses to rape cannot be separated from the intersection of gender, culture and politics.

This article does not address the history of the conflict between the Congress and the main opposition political party of India, the BJP. This article briefly addresses the conflict between the Congress and the BJP to foreground the narratives of the rape of Pandey.

Conceptualising Gang Rape, Rape Myth and Hegemonic Masculinity

Gang rape refers to rape that is committed by two or more offenders. Earlier researchers perceived rape as sex crime. Rape had been conflated with sex crimes. Perceiving rape as a sex crime minimises the power differential between the victim and the perpetrator ([Baxi, 2012](#); [Parashar, 2013](#)). When

rape is perceived as a sex crime, the perpetrators are depicted as deviants acting out of their pathological sexual desire. This classification led to individualised solutions to rape, such as the death penalty. This view obscures the need for social and political transformation to stop rape. A rape myth is defined as a stereotype about rape victims, perpetrators, and rape itself (Brownmiller, 1975). Rape myths are false cultural beliefs that shift blame from rapists to victims. It is a mechanism that denies that rape ever occurred. Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1995) noted that rape myths cause women to minimise their personal vulnerability to rape and help men justify rape. Rape myths are widely accepted by the public, and more men than women believe them (Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1995).

Sexual violence against women is perpetrated by men with hegemonic, masculine traits (Connell, 2000). These traits are often achieved and reinforced by the sexual, physical, and emotional degradation of women. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) defined hegemonic masculinity as “the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue” (p. 832). Hegemonic masculinity is the idealised form of masculinity that subordinates women. Other types of masculinities are measured against hegemonic masculine ideals. Men who do not have these hegemonic qualities are marginalised, and they typically belong to exploited groups.

Intersection of Sexual Violence against Women and Sectarian and Political Agendas

Feminist scholars have produced considerable literature on sexual violence against women. They identified the prevalence, causes and consequences of sexual violence (Ryan, 2011; Brownmiller, 1975; Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1995). A less developed area of inquiry – but notably growing – is sexual violence toward marginalized women, such as women of colour. As a result, when experiences of marginalized women are studied, researchers take an essentialist approach by universalizing experiences of women victims of violence. They exclude one social groups to the primacy of another. This approach proclaims that violence against women cuts across race, ethnicity, class and other dimensions of life and affects all women similarly, which essentially represents White women’s experiences of violence. This

approach fails to recognize the complexity of marginalized women's experiences of violence, where gendered violence comprises only one aspect of different types of oppressions these women face (Crenshaw, 1991).

Researchers are critical of scholarship that emphasizes diversity of gender but homogenized race, ethnicity, social class, religion, age, ability, sexuality and many other groups and situations. Collectively known as intersectional researchers, they noted that various dimensions of inequality add up to great disadvantages for some categories of women. They explain how various systems of oppression, domination, and privilege and multiple overlapping identities of people create the structure of oppression and privilege. Crenshaw (1991) argues, for example, that violence toward women of colour is an intersection of racism and sexism. Multiple forms of identities and systems of oppression do not act independently of each other. Instead, these forms of privilege/oppression are experienced differently by people who belong to different social categories in different political, social, and cultural contexts. A less developed area of analysis is the interaction of violence toward women and sectarian and political agendas of developing societies characterized by diverse social groups, such as India, where political parties routinely use sexual violence against women to advance their own political objectives. Using an intersectional approach, this article explores the intersection of sexual violence against women and sectarian and political agendas of India.

There is a paucity of scholarly research on rape and rape myths in countries other than the United States (Barn and Powers, 2018). There is not enough scholarly research on rape in India. According to 2017 National Crime Records Bureau (2017), there were 38, 947 cases of female victims of rape in India in 2016 alone. While these are the reported cases of victimization, actual number of rape in India may be much higher than reported because of the stigmatization of rape victims. The existence of rape myths may not encourage women to report their victimization. There is a growing body of research on rape in India after the 2012 high-profile rape and murder of Pandey (Simon-Kumar, 2014). But this research hardly explores the intersection of sexual violence against women and sectarian and political agendas of India. This study makes an important contribution to the literature by exploring the intersection of sexual violence against women and sectarian and political agendas of India.

Sexual Violence against Women and Hindu Religious Radical Right Parties

Researchers have argued that sexual assault against minority women in India are propagated by right wing religious parties (Baxi, 2012; Adawy, 2014; Robinson, 2010; Basu, 1999). These parties promote an exclusive Hindu state (Anand, 2007; Robinson, 2010; Khanna, 2008). A coalition of various religious parties, including the BJP, collectively known as Sangh Parivar, frames Islam and Christianity as foreign entities and promotes assertive Hindu identity politics based on the superiority of the Hindu religion (Anand, 2007). Scholars have noted that religious radical right parties use the rhetoric of religious superiority to undermine the enforcement of laws against sexual violence against women in other religious communities (Anand, 2007; Robinson, 2010). Researchers have noted how the image of Hindu women has been manipulated by the religious rights movement and political parties (Basu, 1999). Adawy (2014) noted that, historically, the anti-colonialist movement and contemporary Hindu nationalism of India used Hindu women's bodies as a symbol of culture. The Hindu nationalist movement promotes the belief that traditional Hindu women are, in Basu's (1998, p. 3) words, the "repositories of religious beliefs and the keepers of the purity and integrity" of the community. According to Robinson (2010), Hindu rights parties try to "purify" the Hindu community by controlling women's behaviour (p. 365). These parties politicize violence against women to assert the superiority of one religion over others (Adawy, 2014). They successfully mobilised Hindu women to endorse violence against women of other religious communities. For example, in 1992, when violent communal riots broke out in India after the destruction of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, right wing political parties, such as the BJP, and Hindu radical movements, such as Rashtrya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), successfully evoked and amplified the emotions of Hindu women by using images of Hindus being attacked by Muslims during religious riots. Hindus were portrayed as culturally superior to Muslims. As a result, Hindu nationalist women readily supported violence against religious minority women (Robinson, 2010). A point neglected by researchers is how Hindu women derived significant compensatory benefits from their relationships with the men in their families and the communities by what Schwalbe et al. (2000, p.

426) had called “trading power for patronage”. Researchers noted that right-wing Hindu parties propagated the mass rape of women from minority religious communities during incidents of communal violence (Adawy, 2014; Anand, 2007). While the Hindu national movement has regularly evoked the emotions of Hindu women by portraying them as the victims of violent Muslim lust (Adawy, 2014), it is possible that Hindu women who allowed violence against minority women during riots were encouraged by Hindu nationalist men. Although these women may not have achieved a high status similar to that of Hindu nationalist men, they nevertheless may have gained socio-economic and political benefits of patronage for themselves by accepting a subordinate status (Schwalbe et al, 2000), a topic that needs further research.

The narratives of leaders of Hindu nationalist forces demonstrate that they attempted to hyper-politicise sexual violence against women to redraw communal boundaries. These leaders used the gang rape of Pandey to further the Indian Hindu nationalist agenda by constructing the differences between traditional India and the West. Indian traditional values were connected to Indian women’s bodies and sexuality and were glamourised. Shandilya (2015, p. 465) explained why Pandey’s brutalised body became “a normative symbol of Indian womanhood”. She argued that Pandey was represented by conservative political forces as a Hindu upper-caste, middle-class woman who was used for larger political mobilisation.

Aim of the Study: Research Questions

1. How the narratives of rape reproduce rape myths?
2. How the counter-narratives of rape give new meanings to rape?
3. How the government attempts to diffuse tension among the public by using rape myths to defend its legitimacy?
4. How the BJP politicises the highly publicised rape of Pandey to prove that the Congress is incompetent?
5. How the BJP uses religious and gender ideologies to project the gang rape of Pandey to advance its political objectives?
6. How Pandey’s rape is used in sectarian agendas in India?
7. Can the responses of the government and the BJP to rape be separated from the intersection of gender, culture and politics?

8. What are the impacts of the socio-cultural context on the production and reproduction of rape myths?
9. How Hindu nationalist forces use rape myth and politicise of rape?

Method

This research is based on a content analysis of reports of Pandey's rape in an on-line newspaper, The Hindu, from December 17, 2012 to January 24, 2013 to understand the discourses of gang rape. I focused on how the government, the BJP and a few prominent leaders among Hindu nationalists interpreted the gang rape of Pandey. I examine the discursive frames embedded in the narratives of the gang rape in India.

Media coverage of rape is primarily biased coverage that is based on reporters' subjective evaluations of the newsworthiness of rape cases (Meyers, 1997). To reduce the biasness in the stories reported in The Hindu, I cross-checked these reports with reports published in the online versions of The Times of India, The Daily Mail, and YouTube. I accessed all on-line newspapers using the LexisNexis newspaper database.

Sample

I collected and coded the reports of the gang rape of Pandey that were published in The Hindu. According to the [Indian Readership Survey \(IRS\) \(2014\)](#), The Hindu is the third most popular English daily newspaper. I identified the reports of Pandey's rape by reading the entire newspaper page by page searching for such reports. There were hundreds of reports on the Pandey gang rape in The Hindu from December 17, 2012 to January 24, 2013.

I distinguished the narratives of rape by the government officials, the BJP politicians and prominent leaders of Hindu nationalist forces from the narratives of others. I categorised stories as reported by the above individuals by examining the positions of those who expressed their views about rape, claims that they made, political parties to which they belonged, and the positions of the leaders of Hindu nationalist organisations.

The Times of India is the most popular daily English newspaper in India ([IRS, 2014](#)). For reports published in The Times of India, The Daily

Mail, and YouTube clips, I used a keyword search. Using the LexisNexis newspaper database system and using a keyword search from December 17, 2012 to January 24, 2013, I found 1,130 reports with the keywords “Delhi gang rape” in The Times of India and The Daily Mail. I cross-checked these reports with the reports published in The Hindu. Eighty-five reports published in The Hindu matched the stories reported in The Times of India and The Daily Mail. From these 85 reports, I randomly selected 25 narratives by government officials, BJP politicians, and the leaders of Hindu nationalist forces. I also selected 10 counter narratives by the activists who challenged the government, politicians and Hindu nationalist forces. I selected 15 other narratives from The Times of India and The Daily Mail because more detailed information was provided by the reporters of these newspapers compared to The Hindu. The reason of using only English newspapers is reports of Pandey’s rape were most consistently and extensively covered by these three newspapers that are available on-line. Moreover, these newspapers are among a few influential media of India that covered the discourses of rape in India from late 2012 until the end of January 2013.

Using “Delhi gang rape” for the keyword search, I reviewed YouTube video clips available online from December 2012 to December 2013. I found hundreds of documentaries about Pandey’s rape. From the documentaries, I selected interviews with politicians, members of the Indian parliament, and spiritual leaders who were closely associated with the BJP who spoke to news reporters about their views of the rape. This produced three video clips that are closely related to the research question.

Data analysis

First, I read all 50 stories published in the newspapers and 3 YouTube video clips without coding to gain in-depth knowledge of the data. Then, using NVivo Version 10 software, I analysed the data using thematic analysis techniques. I focused my attention on key phrases and thick descriptions of the reports in analysing the stories published in the newspaper. Each key phrase and thick description was then labelled using codes. I used these codes to identify the broader patterns of meaning of rape that the government officials, BJP politicians and leaders of Hindu nationalist forces closely connected to the BJP attached to their responses. I then sorted these

codes into themes, categories and subcategories. Each report was categorised into narratives of the a) government and b) BJP politicians and leaders of Hindu nationalist forces. I looked for major themes in each narrative. Major theme(s) in each narrative that emerged upon analysis of the data include (1) Government: de-politicisation of rape and use of rape myths and (2) BJP politicians and leaders of Hindu nationalist forces: politicisation of rape and use of rape myths.

Results

The Government: Use of Rape Myths and De-politicization of Rape

It is important to understand the socio-cultural context that causes rape myths and the impacts of these myths on society at large (Suarez and Gadalla, 2010). The Congress was in power of the central government of India for forty-nine years, since 1947. Congress endorses socially liberal policies and emphasises secularism. The character of Indian politics has been changed as an effect of Hindu nationalist mobilisation in contemporary India (Van der Veer, 1996). The Congress party experienced serious challenges from right-wing Hindu nationalist political parties from the 1990s (Basu, 1999). Religious rights movements and the BJP, the single largest political party (Basu, 1999) and the political front for Hindu nationalist movements, appealed to public emotion by pointing out the weaknesses of the Congress-led central government. Hindu religious rights forces used Hindu nationalist ideology to garner public support (Kumar, 2001). These forces successfully mobilised Hindus across castes to wage a holy war against Muslims to protect Hindus (Khanna, 2008). These forces became a powerful opposition to the Congress government in the 1990s. The BJP won a majority of votes in the 1996 and 1998 parliamentary elections. The BJP's major goal has always been to attain political power (Basu, 1999). The BJP was the main opposition party in 2012 when the central government was represented by a coalition of parties led by the Congress and when Pandey was gang raped. The responses of the government and the BJP to the gang rape of Pandey must be understood in this light because the BJP used the weakness of the Congress government to question its legitimacy and garner public support on its behalf.

The narratives of government officials demonstrate that rape myths were used to normalise and depoliticise sexual violence against Pandey. Accepting the occurrence of rape challenges the legitimacy of the government on the civil society, which empowers the BJP. Many government officials argued that Pandey should not have been out at night to watch a movie. The Chief Minister of Delhi and the police commissioner stated that rape is largely caused by women dressing provocatively and because women venture out late at night without an escort. The Chief Minister's statement implies that it is the responsibility of women to control the sexual desire of rapists. The rape of women is the consequence of their behaviour. She noted that women should be protected by men; thereby, she denied women's agency to challenge the misogynistic culture of India. The Chairperson of the Chhattisgarh State Women Commission, Rao, also stated that women are equally responsible for rape. She dismissed the power differential between the rapists and the victim and indicated that Indian women's provocative display of their body is responsible for rape ([The Hindu, 2013c](#)). According to government officials, a woman's desire to have sex with a man is misinterpreted as an invitation to rape. According to them, the problem of sexual violence is the fault of women who are willing to have sex ([MacAskill, 2013](#)). They reformulated rape as sex, thus diminishing the real meaning of rape as a violent crime. Moreover, they failed to consider rape as a crime against a woman's bodily integrity, as emphasised by [Bennice and Resick \(2003\)](#). Since Pandey's rape was considered to be her desire to have sex with the perpetrators, the accused pleaded not guilty of Pandey's rape ([The Daily Mail, 2013](#)). Rao explained that the ignorance of Hindu epics that teach values, the breakdown of joint families, and exposure to Western culture in the television and the internet are responsible for sexual assault on women ([The Hindu, 2013c](#)). Although Rao was a member of the BJP, she used Hindu epics to defend her position as the Chairperson of the Chhattisgarh State Women Commission. She failed to explain how epics often help to perpetuate sexual assault on women. She also failed to explain rape of minority tribal women of Chhattisgarh who had no access to television and internet and exposure to the Western culture.

Government officials tried to depoliticise Pandey's rape. A member of the parliament (MP), the son of the President of India, referring to the protestors, stated, "Those who claim to be students – I can see many beautiful women among them ...I have grave doubts whether they are

students” ([The Times of India, 2012](#)). Implicit in his statement is his attempt to dismiss the gang rape as a violent crime against women. His comments also reflect his belief that the protestors were not genuinely concerned for Pandey.

The responses of the government led to the counter-narratives by Pandey’s father. As a challenge to India’s law that forbids the release of the name of a rape victim to the media, Pandey’s father disclosed her identity to the media by stating that he wanted the world to know who Pandey really was so that other rape survivors would be encouraged to report their victimisation and seek justice. According to [Indian Penal Code Section 228\(A\)](#), the disclosure of the name of a rape victim is criminal offense, unless the family of the victim agrees to release the name. Pandey’s parents challenged this law and said that Pandey did nothing wrong. Her mother stated that Pandey never invited rape, so why should her name not be released? ([The Times of India, 2015](#)).

Activists connected the responses of the government to larger societal attitudes in India, which they felt needed to be addressed to stop violence against women. For example, referring to a study conducted on the responses of police officials in Delhi, an activist mentioned that 90 percent of these officials reproduced rape myths ([The Hindu, 2012b](#)). Reporters also provided traumatic testimonies regarding Pandey. The description of Pandey’s mutilated body in news reports became the lynchpin of mass mobilisation ([The Hindu, December 19, 2012 to January 24, 2013](#)). The newspaper published articles written by activists who explained the culture of shaming the victims who report their rape and discourages them from reporting their victimisation ([The Hindu, 2013d](#)). Another report traces gruesome rapes in Delhi dating back to 2001 ([The Hindu, 2012c](#)).

The protestors took to the street after Pandey’s rape and participated in a demonstration in front of the Delhi police station for hours ([The Hindu, 2012d](#)). Students staged demonstrations demanding that the police and the government make the country safe for women ([The Hindu, 2012e](#)). In response, the government attempted to crack down on the protestors by deploying an emergency police force, imposing curfew in parts of Delhi and using tear gas and water hoses on the protestors ([The Hindu, 2012f](#)). These actions led to a massive protest in the country.

Rape myths were also found in the Criminal Law (Amendment) Ordinance passed by the government in April 2013. After Pandey's rape, a committee was empowered to recommend government action against similar incidents. The committee reported that failure of the government and police was the main reason for gender-related sexual assaults (The Hindu, 2013e). The report recommended severe penalties against "rape" but opposed the death penalty. The government introduced a Presidential Ordinance that instituted capital punishment for the perpetrators of certain aggravated sexual assaults. The Ordinance rejected the report's recommendation to reform political, law enforcement, and military institutions as correctives to the existing rape law. Activists argued that the new rape law omitted the recommendation to criminalise marital rape, sexual intercourse by a person in authority, and sexual violence against women by the military. They argued that by rejecting the report's recommendation for the reform of the political, legal and military institutions, the government allowed men from these male-dominated institutions to sexually violate women with impunity. For example, activists have noted that conflict-prone areas of India are characterised by large-scale sexual assault against women with impunity by the military (The Hindu, 2012g). By dismissing the committee's recommendations, the government has played an important role in sustaining patriarchal values in legal discourse.

The government responses were challenged by activists, BJP politicians, and the public. The BJP politicians blamed the government for making the country unsafe for women. Men and women took to the street in many cities in India after Pandey's rape. The Pink Underwear Campaign, a non-violent protest movement, the Slut-Walk marches, and Take Back the Night were organised. The public accused a non-receptive government for propagating rape culture. Pandey's rape marked a turning point for the anti-rape movement in India. Challenges were also found in the counter-narratives of activists. According to Baxi (2012, p. 2), "Surely if the Chief Minister, who gets elected year after year, dismisses the mass scale of sexual violence as a figment of imagination, this generates...a new national rape culture". Such counter-narratives challenged sexist indifference to the issue of rape by the government and brought sexual violence against women into political reckoning. Following a public protest against the statement of the Chief Minister of Delhi, who mentioned that rape is largely caused by

women dressing provocatively, the Chief Minister of Delhi admitted that Delhi is the rape capital ([The Hindu, 2012h](#)).

To summarise, the government responses to rape cannot be separated from the intersection of gender, culture and politics. To defend its legitimacy, the government attempted to diffuse tension among the public by using rape myths. The discourse of the government failure helped transform the categorisation of sexual assault against women as a sex crime into a political issue. Sexual Assault Helplines were launched to encourage women to report their victimisation ([The Hindu, 2013f](#)). Nationwide protests against the gang rape of Pandey placed the issue of sexual assault on the policy agenda.

BJP and Leaders of Hindu Nationalist Forces: Use of Rape Myth and Politicisation of Rape

It is important to understand how the BJP politicised the highly publicised rape of Pandey to prove that the Congress was incompetent and out of touch with the real-life experiences of people. This section demonstrates how the BJP and a few prominent leaders of Hindu nationalist forces who are closely associated with the BJP used religious and gender ideologies to project the gang rape of Pandey to advance their political objectives.

A wealthy spiritual leader, Babu — who is closely connected to the BJP and has millions of followers — noted that Pandey was equally responsible for being raped. Babu stated, “She [Pandey] should have taken Swarasswati’s [Hindu Goddess] name and could have held the hand of one of the men [rapists] and said to the other two ‘Brother I am helpless, you are ... my religious brother...then, the misconduct [gang rape] would not have occurred” ([The Times of India, 2013](#)). He claimed that protests against Pandey’s gang rape has led to an anti-men campaign. Referring to the possibility of the introduction to a new law against sexual violence against women, he claimed that this law could be misused against men, such as the Dowry Prohibition Act ([The Times of India, 2013](#)) that was introduced in 1961; conservatives claimed that this possible law would help disgruntled wives bring false cases against their husbands. Similarly, opposition to the anti-rape law was rationalised by Babu to protect men’s interests: the right to protect men is the right of men to rape. His narrative demonstrates that

religious leaders play a central role in the production of masculinity and reproduction of violence against women. He presented the Hindu normative order as the correct ordering of public life and a moral crusade against sexual aggression.

The leaders of Hindu nationalist forces attempted to redraw communal boundaries and argued how Western popular culture has influenced India and destroyed traditional feminine modesty, thus creating a rape-prone environment against women. For example, after Pandey's rape, Mohan Bhagwat, a leader of the Hindu rights organisation RSS, stated, "Such crimes hardly occur in Bharat, but they frequently occur in India. You go to villages and forests and there will be no such incidence" ([The Hindu](#), 2013g). He portrayed the village of Bharat (India) as a safe place for Hindu women where Indian traditions are valued and women are respected, while modern India is depicted as a dangerous place for women because it is polluted by Western values. He stated, "in the Bharatiya tradition, we have great respect for women, and if we go away from the Bhartiya tradition of respecting women, one will end up in indulging in such criminal acts" ([YouTube](#), 2013). This view reconstructs rape as cultural deviation and not as a gender-based political struggle that intersects with class, caste, sexuality, religion, space and other structural dimensions of society. The non-Hindu West is imagined as foreign, violent, hypersexualised and untrustworthy. Thus, a strategy to control Hindu women's sexuality is the utilisation of Hindu nationalist myths. This strategy is an attempt to reproduce the moral superiority of Hinduism by producing anxiety and portraying non-Hindus as deviants who must be confronted and is a social construction of gender in religious terms ([Basu](#), 1998). Anand's (2007, p. 257) research on Indian Hindu nationalist activists illuminates that "anxiety, masculinity and sexuality are crucial ingredients in their identity politics". Hindu rights parties foster identity politics among Hindus that is closely connected to sexuality and violence against women. In this sense, the gang rape of Pandey has become the discourse of cultural otherness, which blames modern Indian culture that has been adapted by those who are excluded rather than people who follow the Hindu traditions of India. Such attempts of religious rights parties to connect religion and gendered violence are meant to oppose the Indian National Congress that advocates for secularism and pluralism. This illuminates strategies that these parties use to create an

identity based on religion and to mobilise public support against the Congress.

BJP politicians used Pandey's rape to demonstrate the incompetency of the Congress. For example, Swaraj, the leader of the BJP in the Indian parliament, accused the Chief Minister of Delhi of failing to arrest all the accused perpetrators of Pandey and blamed the Congress for failing to make India safe for women. Swaraj called Pandey a "living corpse" while she was in the hospital (YouTube, 2012a). Swaraj demanded the death penalty for the perpetrators, which feminist activists opposed. Like many BJP leaders, she failed to acknowledge the multitude of gang rapes of women from minority communities.

Many female members of the Delhi BJP also staged demonstrations in public places in Delhi and demanded the death penalty for Pandey's assailants (The Hindu, 2012i). BJP leader Modi (the present Prime Minister, who is an avid follower of a Hindu spiritual leader) blamed the Congress and mentioned that "dirty politics" is responsible for Pandey's rape (YouTube, 2012b). When Modi was challenged by the Congress, he dismissed the role of his government of Gujarat and Hindu nationalist forces in the anti-Muslim riots of 2002 when hundreds of Muslim women were gang raped in public (Anand, 2007). Modi was the state Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2002.

To summarise, violated women's bodies became a space for political debates between conservative, opposition political parties' claims about Indian traditions and the Congress. Opposition political parties attempted to mobilise men and women of various classes, castes, and genders by blaming the government for failing to make India safe for women. Scrutiny of the narratives of BJP politicians and the leaders of Hindu nationalist forces reflected that rape myths are widely believed by them. They identified the forces of rape that normalised it by reproducing rape myths.

Conclusion

In this research, I used reports published in an online newspaper from December 17, 2012 to January 24, 2013. Based on the feminist scholarship on rape, I examined the discursive frames embedded in the coverage of rape of Pandey. These discourses reproduced rape myths and provided new meanings for rape that challenged rape myths. Rape myths create an

environment that leads to widespread sexual violence against women in India. Religious rights parties, elected officials, and government have identified the forces of rape that normalise it.

The narratives of government officials demonstrate that rape myths were used to normalise and depoliticise sexual violence against Pandey. For example, a Congress spokesperson from Haryana was challenged by the BJP for the increase of gang rapes in Haryana. In response, he used a rape myth and said, “I don’t feel any hesitation in saying that 90 percent of the girls want to have sex intentionally, but they don’t know that they would be gang raped” ([The Hindustan Times, 2012a](#)).

Accepting the occurrence of rape challenges the legitimacy of the government on the civil society, which empowers the BJP. Therefore, the BJP politicised the rape of Pandey to prove that the Congress was incompetent and advanced its own political objectives. After the Congress MP expressed his doubt about the protesters (mentioned above), BJP politicians did not lose any time in defaming the Congress. Referring to the comment of the Congress MP, Irani — the BJP head of the women’s section and the member of parliament who was nominated from the state of Gujarat, where hundreds of Muslim women were gang raped by the Hindu extremists during the riot in 2002 — said, “This is exactly the mind-set that the youth is fighting against” ([India Today, 2012a, December 27](#)). Irani failed to acknowledge the complicity of the BJP government of Gujarat in the riot of 2002. BJP leaders failed to acknowledge the multitude of gang rapes of women from minority communities. According to a BBC reporter (2011), “I analysed the rape figures for 2007, and I found that 90 percent of the victims were Dalits [untouchables] and 85 percent of Dalit rape victims were underage girls”. Similarly, referring to the gang rape of an impoverished sixteen-year-old Dalit girl by six men, a reporter of [The New York Times \(2012a\)](#) noted that most of these men were from a higher caste and had substantial economic and political power in the northern state of Haryana. The rape of lower caste women is regularly ignored.

Rape myths were found in the narratives of BJP politicians. Referring to Pandey’s rape, a BJP politician and the Industry Minister of the state of Madhya Pradesh reconstituted the rape myth that “women ask for it”. He recounted the story of the Hindu epic Ramayana and the abduction of Rama’s wife, Sita, by the demon god Ravana. According to Ramayana, Rama, Sita, and Rama’s brother, Lakshmana, were living in a forest. When

Rama was not home and Lakshmana needed to leave home, Lakshmana wanted to ensure that Sita would be protected from harm while the brothers not home. He drew a line (Lakshmana Rekha) around Sita, which would protect Sita as long as she did not cross the line. While both brothers were not home, Ravana came to Sita in the guise of a beggar and asked her for food. To give Ravana food, Sita crossed the Lakshmana line and was abducted and taken away by Ravana. The Industry Minister mentioned that the Lakshmana line represents the moral boundary not to be crossed by women. He stated, “One has to abide by certain moral limits. If you cross this limit, you will be punished” ([The India Week, 2013a](#)). He further argued that India should be renamed Bharat because Bharat is the real identity of India and the name Bharat reflects the true culture and spirituality of India. Interestingly, his attempt to politicize religion, women, culture and sexual violence against women is reflected in his further comments. Referring to the possibility of building a “Ram temple” in the controversial Ayodhya, he stated, “The Parliament has to and will be forced to take a decision on constructing a Ram Temple at Ayodhya” ([The India Week, 2013a](#)). A BJP politician and member of the state of Rajasthan’s Legislative Assembly demanded a ban on wearing skirts at school, which he argued would safeguard women’s modesty. Another BJP politician blamed women’s clothing, fashion and nudity for inviting rape ([The India Week, 2013b](#)).

The use of rape myth by the government officials and politicians led to a massive protest in the country. To defend their legitimacy, government officials connected the intersection of gender, class, and the migrant status of men as being predictive of gang rape. For example, the Chief Minister of Delhi connected the influx of poor rural migrant workers to Delhi and high rates of sexual violence against women in Delhi ([India Today, 2012b](#)). The Prime Minister of India noted the necessity of absorbing migrants in the process of India’s economic growth to stop them from committing sex crimes ([The Hindustan Times, 2012b](#)). Sexual assaults have become the discourse of controlling poor immigrants who are portrayed as foreign, savage attackers of Indian women that are un-trustworthy and hyper-sexual. Anti-immigrant discourses, and not the failure of the government to stop sexual assaults and misogynist culture, are connected to sexual violence in India. This poverty-rape nexus was challenged by others, who argued that rape occurs across all classes ([Simon-Kumar, 2014](#)).

A massive protest in the country following Pandey's rape forced the Prime Minister to respond to the demand that the government make the country safe for women. The responses of the Prime Minister to the mass protest came too late to appease the protestors. In a televised speech, seven days after the rape, he stated that the government is determined to ensure the safety of women. However, after his last sentence, he inadvertently said, "Is that okay?" which reflected his attempt to defend his government ([The New York Times, 2012b](#)). His comments unleashed further protest in the country.

Conservative Hindu Rights groups have claimed that non-Hindu culture has destroyed traditional Indian feminine modesty, thereby creating a rape-prone environment. The narratives of leaders of Hindu nationalist forces demonstrate that they attempted to hyper-politicise sexual violence against women to redraw communal boundaries and the boundary between eastern and western cultures. Asokh Singhal, a leader of Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a conservative party that is closely connected to the BJP, blamed western culture for sexual assault on women. "This Western model is alarming. What is occurring is we have imbibed the US. We have lost all the values in the cities". Referring to the period before the British colonisation of India, he said, "Virginity was preserved. However, the purity has been totally disturbed now. We are losing it" ([India Today, 2013](#)). Conservative Hindu Rights groups' use of the Hindu religion for political purposes facilitates sexual assault on women. The raped bodies of women have become a space for political debates between conservative claims about Indian traditions and the government who have attempted to mobilise men and women of various classes, castes, genders, ages, and religious groups. These debates need to be recognised and challenged to establish the fact that a woman's right not to be violated is a woman's basic human right.

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