

## 'INDIA'S DAUGHTER': DE-COLONIZING OUR MINDS

**Jawhar Sircar**

"Hindustan Times" 17th March 2015

(English Version)

This is likely to annoy a lot of my friends but one has a right to speak on what one considers as unfair about the British public broadcaster's recent documentary on 'India's Daughter': that has earned much more than its money's worth. I was sure during the 37 years that I served different legitimately elected regimes as a 'government servant', that I had no 'voice' according to the rather-strict Service Rules, but I assume that as a 'public servant', which is my current status, I am entitled to some breathing space.

I am genetically programmed against any concept of 'censorship', but I would still like to question a few assumptions that are floating around. My faith in the plurality of voices and expressions is not available for negotiation, whatever be the discourse of the hour, and it is this same compulsion of plurality that leads me now to question the present angst among my urban elite, on what is believed to be gagging of a soul-searching documentary. In spite of an obsession in the belief that it is best to "live and let live" and not get rattled by any cranky extreme posturing, I would still place a few worrisome facts in the public domain about this whole episode.

My first question is whether we really need periodic lessons in civility from our former colonial masters? One has been bombarded with the virtues of this documentary film made on the pitiable state in India with hagiographic descriptions of BBC's production, which comes out so well in this video's excellence. There are raptures about the balanced, all-embracing narrative on such a difficult subject that has been tackled so well by the producer. It is said that since

the parents of the victim cooperated and received renewed world-wide publicity three years after their traumatic loss, one should not question BBC's intentions.

The 'Nirbhaya' gang rape of December 16 did arouse a billion people against rampant sexual offences in India and the sheer brutality of the perpetrators. But, was it necessary to agitate even the most placid humans with the unrepentant statement of one of the convicted rapists which has now spread all over the world, that Indian rapists are thus? "A decent girl won't roam around at 9.00 pm" and "when being raped, she shouldn't fight back. She should be silent and allow the rape!" Such a vile view can only be contained by either the death penalty or by chemical castration, so that such animals do not become serial predators.

But my question is did we really need the BBC to tell us what is wrong, or is it that every time a West-inspired controversy breaks out, many Indians are compelled to take the sides in a delicious debate? The same BBC had brought out a detailed report on 31st January 2014 on the state of "Rape in the UK" and had stated rather sadly that "recorded rape figures show up to one third of cases dropped". It went on to quote Katie Russell of 'Rape Crisis England and Wales' who said the figures seemed to "suggest there has been little change or improvement". One did not see BBC coming out with this report in the form of a sensational documentary about the sorry state of affairs at home.

The annual 'rape rate' in India has increased from 1.9 to 2.0 per 10 thousand people over the period 2008 to 2012, and this compares to a reported lower rate of 1.2 per 10 thousand in Japan. But there are far higher rates like 24.1 in the United Kingdom, 28.6 in the United States, 66.5 in Sweden and the world's highest rate of 114.9 rapes per 10 thousand in South Africa. UK, thus, confesses to 12 times more rape cases than India, and this report also quotes British official statements, that "increase in the number of rapes being recorded may mean that victims feel more

confident in reporting what happened to them; or decrease may mean the victims are losing confidence in the authorities to treat them sensitively”.

Interestingly, just a few days ago while a few TV channels in India were so preoccupied with the deplorable state here, the 'Telegraph' in the UK reported that on the 9th of this month “the shocking rape of an 18 year old girl, who was caught on CCTV as she was dragged from a bus stop and into a garden, where she was smashed over the head" after “being repeatedly battered” by “a large stone over the head 20 times”. Would BBC be interested in a documentary on her as 'Britain's Daughter'?

This is not about whether “you rape more or we rape less”, because it is such an unpardonable heinous offence that needs to be dealt with more sternly than for any other offence: for it destroys much more than most males can normally understand. My question is whether the BBC really needed to come and muddy the waters here, leaving behind a lot of heat and so little light? As a public broadcaster, I am not even suggesting to my dear colleagues that they might like to do a similar film in the U.K., because their country is their business. After all, British citizens, who paid some Rs.14,000 per person per year to maintain the BBC (none in India would ever dream of such impositions) can certainly decide for themselves. Our India’s broadcaster would not venture to Vilayat to produce such a documentary and then leave behind a trail of innuendos, reprimands through sub-texts and homilies on how 'natives' need to be sensitised to such horrendous crimes. After all, BBC spends over 70% of its enviably-big budget for building good content, while poor souls in India have to do with a bland Prasar Bharati and Doordarshan, who can barely afford to spend between 8% and 13% of their far-lesser fund on 'content production'. This is what the Sam Pitroda Committee on Prasar Bharati analysed and thus quality on DD is obviously at stake. This Committee also discovered that while India’s broadcaster earned about 40% of its  
Published:<http://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/merchants-of-black-imagery/article1-1327094.aspx>

upkeep through its own sweat and revenues, BBC's equivalent figure was then just around 20%.

It gives me some amount of pleasure to turn the tables from being a hunted civil servant to that of a quasi hunter, where a particularly attractive English TV news channel in India is concerned. Let us get our facts clear. The total viewership of all English News TV channels put together is just 0.1% of India's total gross TV watching. I have lived through a lot of pompous posturing in the last four decades within the governmental system, and it is good to see such swagger is now visible beyond the corridors of erstwhile power.

Was there really any 'ham-handed censorship' of BBC's viral-video on the infamous rape of 16 December 2012? As 'The Hindu' of the 10th of March put it, it is a 'The Ban That Actually Isn't'. It then reports about an FIR being filed by an inspector of police on which the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate "has been pleased to pass a restraint order till further orders". Agitation against such clamp down can always be taken by the righteous in the courts of law, for there are several higher layers than the one under discussion. One is not sure whether the same candle that lit up the nation during darker political times or for poor Jessica Lal is now fully relevant in the present context. It certainly calls for more action and the sternest of legal retribution rather than TRP-driven provocation and sensationalisation.

The BBC's alleged refusal to listen to a word of request (if what is reported is true) to stop the screening may look so charmingly valiant but then as the 'South Asia Analysis', which is available on the web, put it rather bluntly that it is a maxim to "reveal your minor truths to conceal your major lies!" I certainly do not prescribe to such a harsh view: though as a pluralist, I simply admit its existence.

I am not sure if the broadcaster created as many waves when reporting on a Tory MP's half-brother, who was known as 'Rapier Napier'. He ran a paedophile

information exchange and committed hundreds of sex assaults on young boys. A week ago, a British newspaper reported how 'Thatcher's Government Covered Up a VIP paedophile'. I am sure a public broadcaster could pick up this story as well.

The annoyance that runs through this entire article is more about whether India needs to be repeatedly stereo-typed in a negative bracket. Within days of this documentary, collateral damage has started devastating. It was reported that Indian males are being excluded from a premier educational institution in the UK because a teacher thought they were rather dangerous. And, why not? After all, we strain to paint our face in 50 shades of black.

If withholding the documentary is such a great encroachment on neutrality, one could always seek to know what happened to the BBC's own production on its former children's TV host, Jimmy Savile. Innumerable women came to recount their horrible childhood sexual abuse at his hands, that left them scarred for life. BBC's own producers took the trouble to locate many of the women who had been sexually assaulted by one of its own heads, but Time magazine says "the Program was never aired and the BBC went ahead with glowing tribute specials of Savile instead".

As Culture Secretary, it was one of my duties to arrange for VVIP visits to India's famous monuments and museums. What I found terribly annoying was that while all the bonhomie and picture Ops were taking place at the level of the political heads of nations, the spouses of Western leaders would invariably make a beeline for an event that focussed on India's poor or most deprived children. This was easily accomplished with the help of hyper-active Indian compradors who can go to any length. The VVIP spouses would then proceed to hug or endear these delighted kids before the world's TV cameras to confirm the hardened prejudice that all was certainly not well in this ambitious country. Can we imagine our

leaders make such performances in New York's slums in Harlem or in the darkest pockets of depravity and deprivation in London? Do we really need such re-assertions of the colonial narrative or are we not conscious at all that one thirds of our people are really poor?

My submission is that we need to break free from the vicious grip of the merchants of the black imagery who earn their fortunes by marketing globally some of our weakest chinks. One of them is poverty, that is highlighted mainly by Indian-American 'tenure professors' who usually fly to India during the harsh winter months of the West, to lecture us on how much calories our poor need, while drawing salaries of nearly three crore Indian rupees, in dollars. Another is the vexatiously slow or ineffective enforcement of our law on sexual offences, for which some of us espouse lightning fast courts and nothing short of chemical castration. But then, where the projection of the image of a new and vibrant India is concerned, let us not let it be tarred periodically by those who could start considering "beginning their charity at home".