

CONSENT IS ALWAYS ESSENTIAL

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Women - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

The recent interviews of actor Bhavana on her ordeal during her kidnap and sexual assault and life post that are an indication of this maturity.

Strangely, the world has taken forever to understand one word: consent. And if the media is the legendary microcosm that it is, then it took as long to imbibe the entirety of that word. 'No' actually means no, for a sexual act, or an interview. While transgressions still occur with stunning regularity, it is safe to say that the bulk of the media — mainstream and digital — handles rape in a much more mature manner than it used to.

The recent interviews of actor Bhavana on her ordeal during her kidnap and sexual assault and life post that are an indication of this maturity. Having remained officially anonymous through the encounter, she decided to speak out to the media, partly as an offer of thanks to the community that stood by her, but also because she thought it was time to tell her side of the story. If a woman with the profile of Bhavana was forced to live in the shadows as a result of what had happened to her, then imagine the lives of ordinary people jolted out of their humdrum existence by something as violent as sexual assault and then, thanks to the media, being subjected to excruciating re-runs of the very incident they would like to forget.

The media learns, over time, and follows the laws of the land (it is illegal to name the survivor of a rape unless she or he consents to be identified, in writing). But it would be fair to say that it arrives through gross violations. It also took a long while to shift the narrative from victim mode to survivor.

The Nirbhaya story probed the conscience of the nation, and galvanised the state to at least immediate action, but extreme acts of violence against women, which are unmindful of her station in life, qualifications, or independence, continue because of the patriarchal constructs we live in. But if the woman is poor and/or uneducated, the trials and tribulations are harsher and she finds it extremely difficult to navigate the system.

Unlike now, there were often no consequences earlier for violations by the media, no rap on the knuckles, no outrage on social media. Not in one case though, many years ago, in a small village in Thiruvallur district of Tamil Nadu. The story was one that media organisations fought to scoop: young girls of the village, it was said, were pledged to the local goddess Mathamma whenever the family or village, beset by a crisis (mostly health-related or death), prayed for her benevolence. These girl children would then grow up, deified, but also become, in every sense of the term, the 'property' of the village.

The times had changed and the villagers claimed that while children were still beknighted Mathammas, they were not subject to any kind of sexual abuse. They still lived in the temple. They were denied the chance to get an education. Besides, the villages still lacked even basic healthcare facilities. There was a certain case to be made for deprivation-induced subjugation of girl children, but one had to coax the villagers closer to the truth.

But as bridges were being built slowly, there came the unmistakable sound of a camera clicking, and the whirring that follows. A photographer thought it was okay to shoot a picture without asking if he could. Whatever strained bonhomie was established melted in a second. The villagers were incensed by this one act, done without permission. What followed that evening,

which stretched into a very long night, was a chase. We were forced to take shelter in a sturdy ambassador car as it rained stones outside. We spent a few hours on a rickety bench in a deserted police station, made calls to higher authorities, and finally, reached a compromise of sorts, before release.

What an unasked question can do, to both sides of the story, can fill volumes. Consent is not optional, it has always been essential.

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