

# Culture and Rape: The Intersections in Varanasi City

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## Abstract

Varanasi city is described to be a city with a fast-growing economy and increasing indicators of human development. However, in recent years (2012-2016), there has been a growing concern of increased reporting of rape cases in the city which seems to contradict the first description. The objective of the study is to access a deeper understanding of some of the underlying factors of increased reporting of rape cases in the city. This research paper draws on a qualitative desk study with a compilation of data from DCRB. The paper illustrated that increase of rape cases can be correlated with the pace of economic growth and as how society has changed in the traditional and cultural city like Varanasi. Transition in societies often tends to uproot and challenge traditional norms and values in favour of more modern ways that can result in backlash such as, frustration or harassment performed on people. Study has found that urban women who use to work outside the home have increased their access to economic resources and resultant to that they become empowered but in the same time these women become victims of violence such as rape, due to challenging conventional gender roles and male dominance.

**Keywords:** Gender, Rape, Traditional society, Varanasi, Victim, Culture, Intersections

## 1. Introduction

Although precisely defining the 'rape' is a matter of dispute. Generally, rape understood as an act to involve in sexual penetration of a person by any means of muscular power and/or without the consent of that person (Brownmiller, 1975). Rape is committed overwhelmingly by male figures, usually against women and girls, and sometimes against other male figures too. By and large, this entry will assume male perpetrators and female victims (Archer, 1991; Sommers, 2000). The configuration of power and the construction of space affect men and women differently (Kofman, 2008). Rape relates itself to space in such a sense that it does not only affect negatively to individual rape victims, but it

produces a culture of fear where some spaces are deemed off-limits for women (Jaffee & Straus, 1987; Staeheli & Martin, 2000; Johnston, 2005). This hits the scale of the body insofar as female bodily autonomy is constrained, and women's rights to equality like participation in the public sphere equally are infringed upon (Bitsch, 2010). Many feminist geographers have demonstrated this in their work where they have mapped and traced "the geography of fear," that reveals that women, contrary to public belief, are using some coping mechanisms to protect themselves from these assault like avoiding certain places (Bourke, 2007; Staeheli & Martin, 2000). Hence, women's inhibited use of space can be understood as a spatial expression of patriarchy (Jagger, 1983; Jaffee & Straus, 1987; Valentine, 1989).

## 1.2 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework has been illustrated for analysing how established theories and feminist geopolitics about rape can cast light on the production and negotiation of the geographical space and talks about rape discourse. A particular mode of power has been referred by bio-geopolitics where the control over sexuality and bodies associated with space (Staeheli & Martin, 2000; Bitsch, 2010). Although politics is geographically rooted at the scale of the state level, it is also constituted on more excellent scales, considering that of the racialised and gendered civilian society (Foucault, 1976; 1980; Hyndman, 2001; 2003). The concept of bio-geopolitics and govern-mentality provide a useful theoretical frame for analyzing rape because the underlining of sexuality, in general, and women, in particular, inform public discourse and the formation of national group identity (Sanday, 1981; Spivak, 1988; Peterson, 2000). Socio-biologists argue that

nature shapes human behaviour and not the other way around.

Rape has defined as producing the most significant amount of fittest offspring possible (Wilson, 1975; Thornhill & Palmer, 1999; Jones, 1999) or a strategy for transmitting genes (Dawkins, 1976). Theories about hormones suggest that there is a causal relationship between a high level of testosterone, which increases male aggression, and sexual desire. "Modern synthesis" theory rejects the deterministic one-way model where biology is considered to permeate social gender (Rodabaugh & Austin, 1981; Scully, 1990; Bitsch, 2010). Prevention strategies derived from socio-biology are directed at reducing risk through educational programs in which women are taught to dress less provocatively, and men are taught to control sexual desire, for example (Scully, 1990; Bitsch, 2010).

Socio-biological theories have been criticised for being unhistorical and for failing to take human agency into account. A range of overlapping feminist and conflicting perspectives on rape has been illustrated. These perspectives present the multiplicity of angles and locations from which rape can be assessed. Masculinity studies and poststructuralist feminism have attracted to our attention to the interest of examining the cultural production of discourses that penetrate society through media, ideology and the legal system. Masculinity studies have challenged two system patriarchy theories (Millett, 1970; Staeheli & Martin, 2000). Scholars have shown that it is necessary to closely examine hierarchies between men (Kimmel 1994; 1996; 2005; Kaufman, 2000; Connell, 1995; 2000). Once developing effective rape prevention policies being succeeded, the modern construction of masculinity and how it reinforces relations of power and emotion that feed the cultural and economic environment in which rape takes place must be addressed (Bacchi, 1999). One cannot entirely dismiss that sex drive is a motivational factor behind some forms of rape and that hormones influence brain function, and, therefore, aggression (Bitsch, 2010). A more comprehensive theory of rape could be derived by studying how evolution and environment co-exist and mutually reinforce one another, and further, how this relationship has changed across time and place. Historical perspectives on rape and knowledge about perpetrators support such a viable and comprehensive analysis. What is at stake here is an improved understanding of how rape is perpetrated and experienced. Multiple perspectives should be pursued to understand, diagnose, and remedy the problem effectively (Bitsch, 2010).

### 1.3 The Relevance of the Study

Rape against women is a serious and prevalent problem worldwide, in all religions and social classes. Studies have shown that rape is more widespread in societies where women's rights are lacking and are neglected (Koenig et al., 2006:132; Kimuna et al., 2012:773). It not only harm an individual woman but also damages physically and psychologically the well-being of concerned families. The physical damage might be translated into an unwanted pregnancy and infected with HIV/AIDS like sexually transmitted diseases; mentally, it can further lead to post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (WHO, 2010:3; Johnsson-Latham, 2010:3; Bitsch, 2010).

Furthermore, other effects are, that it can hamper development in societies if either man or woman is kept subordinated and not given the full potential to exercise the capabilities that a person has. An example of this is that it constrains women's participation in development projects carried out by for example NGOs (Sen, 1998:7). Thus, stopping this kind of crime against women is of the utmost importance when working towards poverty reduction and human security. Hence it is highly relevant both as a peace and development problem (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2010:5). After all, to eradicate the crime is realistically not possible, though knowing more about the underlying factors on why it occurs and about the increases in reports is significant to decrease it (Sen, 1998; Bitsch, 2010).

### 1.4 Objective of the Study

The prime objective of the paper is to gain a deeper understanding of some of the underlying factors of increased reporting of rape cases in the city. In this paper, we also tried to understand in what way the 'modernisation' process possibly could be put in relation to this.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Literatures explored the linkages between the ever-increasing rate of rape cases and the prevailing culture of Varanasi City. District Crime Record Bureau (DCRB) 2015 data has been used for understanding the spatial pattern of rape cases in the city. Along with that, we also used the Head Wise Crime Report for 2017 for the analysis purposes. This report contained the crime record of the city from 2012 to 2016 and published in 2017. Simple statistical techniques have been employed to get the desired results. Graphs and map have used to

represent the statistical and spatial data of crime for the study area.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework will help to understand some of the underlying factors for the ever-increasing rate of heinous crime like rape in the city. The framework tries to look both at the household level and the societal level. Therefore, the household and societal level will be interlinked as they are at interplay and affect each other. Society influences the household. The concept of tradition can be described as ‘the handing down of beliefs, customs and information from generation to generation’ while modernity can be viewed as the opposite of tradition, and usually the transition from old to new (Kumari, 1995). Culture exists in ‘traditional’ societies as well as ‘modern’ both which explain the link between those boxes. The wide concept of culture is narrowed down to look more specifically at patriarchy (Mosse, 1996; Henderson, 2007). The next concept is the power which is closely associated with rape. Here the concept of power is narrowed down and consist of three boxes.

1. ‘Women’s power over their bodies according to the laws’
2. ‘Men’s control of women’
3. ‘Gendered power inequalities’

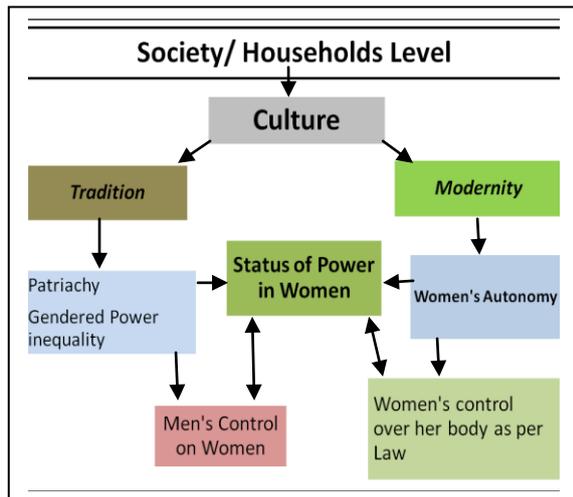


Figure 1: Conceptual framework (unbalanced social power and rape)

‘Employment for women’ and ‘Education for women’ is linked to the theme of socio-economic development. This influence the women's status through engaging in education and employment leading to increased awareness and which can lead to

social transition such as reduced fertility and child mortality rates and in the long run, lead to women’s emancipation. These indicators are often put about ‘modernity’ hence, the linkages between the boxes (Henderson, 2007).

The results showed that the patriarchy, educational and employment status of women and the inequalities in gendered power are in a complex interplay. Therefore, further, it has been seen as ‘traditional’ norms and values clashed with ‘modernity’ and caused these factors for the increased reporting of rape in the city.

#### 3.2 Culture and Rape: The Intersections in the City

An individual has shaped by the culture that he or she is born in and lives through, acquiring cultural values, attitudes, and behaviours. An important role has been played by culture as for how certain sects of population and societies view, perceive, and process sexual acts like rape (Burt, 1980; Briere & Malamuth, 1983). Across cultures, attitudes toward gender are likely to affect how male-female relationships are viewed, and subsequently how the incidences of rape and the victims are viewed. Burt (1980) described rape as the psychological extension of a dominant-submissive sex-role stereotyped culture.

Table 1: The gap between media and police records, 2015

Ward name	Media record for Rape cases	Police record for Rape cases
Shivpur	27	15
Pahadia	17	11
Nevada	14	11
Sigra	13	8
Raja Bazar	14	10
Rajghat	8	4
Chetganj	8	6
Nariya	5	Not Reported
Luxa	4	3
Dashashwamedh	15	11
Tarna	3	Not Reported
Lahartara	3	Not Reported
Pandeypur	2	Not Reported

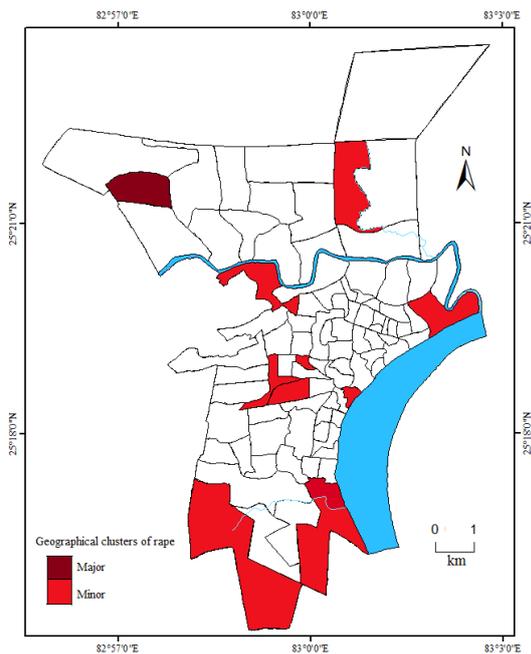
Source: Newspaper reporting, Head wise crime report in Varanasi City, 2015

Cultural aspects of rape can be understood in the city like Varanasi from observations and difference in media reporting and various police stations of the city and its environs. Higher rates of rape are expected to be more prevalent in cultures that encourage the objectification of women, thus making them appear inferior to men (Daley, 2001). All cases are not reported to the respective authorities, and

many cases of rape go unreported (Table 1) due to the sensitivity of the issue, thereby making it difficult to gather exact figures and a true sense of the problem.

### 3.3 Police Records based Geographical Clusters of Rape in the City

Map 1 illustrated the incidence of rape in selected geographical clusters in Varanasi city as per the recorded by the police department (*Calculated from head wise crime reports of Varanasi, 2016*).



Map 1: Geographical clusters of rape in the city as reflected in police records

**Note:** Major clusters represent 3 or more than 3 cases of rape per 1000 female population whereas minor clusters represent 1-2 cases of rape per 1000 female population

In selected ten clusters, Shivpur has the highest incidence of rape, i.e. more than two rapes per thousand female populations, while Nagwa and Luxa wards have reported lowest incidence and which is below to one per 1000 of the female population. Remaining seven clusters from different sections (namely *Narayanpur, Raja Bazar, Raj Ghat, Dashwashwamedh Ghat, Chetganj, Sigra and Nevada*) of Varanasi city has a mild rate of (1-2 incidence per thousand female populations) police reported rapes.

The geographical clustering of rape incidence shows that maximum of the rapes was reported in the peripheral region of the city, especially ghats and market areas. These sects are multicultural population concentric region of the city. There was a significant difference in reported cases of rapes among media, self-reported by respondent and case

filed and considered in respective police stations of the individual locality (Table 1).

These differences may be the resultant of many social and cultural constructs like a girl who exposed towards the rape has considered as stigmatized, and hence, the victim's family also denied to file the cases in the police station or published it. Another predictable reason was the cases that go to the police station may be under-reported or manipulated due to political or power based influences to police personals.

### 3.4 Trends and Pattern of Rape cases in the City

Figure 2 has illustrated the rising trends of rape cases recorded by the police stations of Varanasi city from 2012 to 2016 (*Head wise crime report of Varanasi, 2016*).

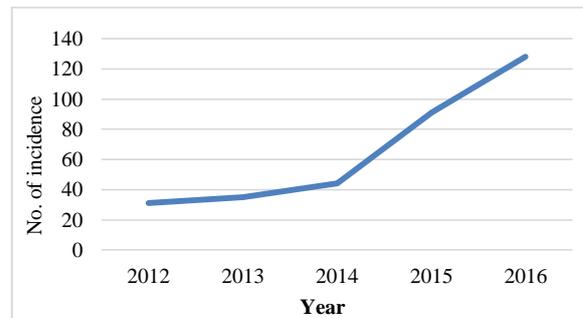


Figure 2: Trend of rape cases in recent years

Figure 2 clearly illustrates the rising trends of rape cases in the city, and there is a sudden increase occurred after 2014 onwards. From 2012 to 2014 there was only a slight increase recorded in the rape cases, i.e. from about 30 cases to 42, but after 2014 within two years the cases went up to 42 to 125 which more than three folds. Although it is difficult to predict the exact causes of sudden increment of rape cases in the Varanasi city earlier all mentioned causes for the crime against women are collectively responsible for such increment of rape cases.

From 2012 to 2016, within four years the cases of rape have been increased by four about times which show the multiple increments of crime against women. Till 2015, the increment in rape cases was not so rapid, but in 2016 it becomes just double to the rape cases of the previous year. Again in 2017, the total number of rape cases that occurred in 2013 has added to the cases of 2016, and about 400% per cent increment reported from 2013 to 2017. This might be either due to higher reporting of rape cases compared to earlier time caused by the awareness and women empowerment or may the social and cultural transition of urbanism in a classical city of Varanasi.

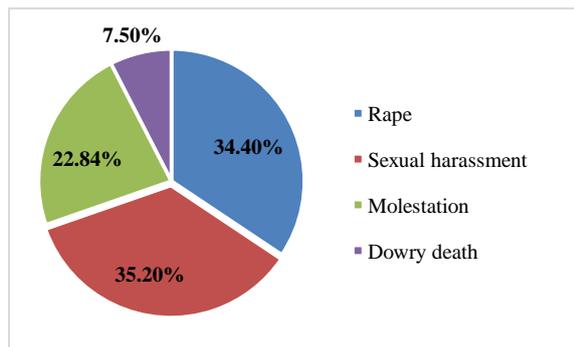


Figure 3: Percentage share of rape to total crimes against women recorded in the police stations of Varanasi city

Figure 3 has shown the individual kinds of crimes against women and their percentage share to the total (*Head Wise Crime Report, 2017*). The figure depicted that about 70% of crimes against women comes under rape and sexual harassment. The lowest share of percentage (about 8 per cent) of crime was the dowry death. Although it was lowest in all crimes much able to attract the attention and non-ignorable because it is related to sensitization and killing of the bride for the sake of a social evil of dowry. Among all the crime against women, rape itself accounted for one-third share in all. Here rape is highly emphasized because in Indian cultural system rape victim never gets sympathy and respectful life and it challenges mentally to the victim's life as a slow death. Therefore, this much high share of rape in all crimes against women was subjected to underline.

## 4. Conclusions

The discussion mentioned above indicates that the issue of rape has remained largely ignored until now in the city. It, thus, becomes crucial to acknowledge the real magnitude of problems related to the heinous crime like rape otherwise it may continue to grow. The causes of rape are complex, and it cannot be completely understood and explained by a single factor; culture is one of the many factors that may be important in our understanding of sexual crimes like rape in the city. The gap between media reporting and police records indicates that how some cases were not recorded in rape or cases closed after investigation due to political influences, unprofessional behaviour of police and recorded as either sexual assault or molestation in connivance with police. The discussions with respondents revealed that almost 70% of rape perpetrators are either family members or acquaintances. However, more often than not rape cases go unnoticed. This is mainly because rape victims lack the courage to come and speak out. Even if these victims desire to take steps against the rape perpetrators, their families are not willing to. Societal bounds and the sense of

shame act as a barrier. So, there is an immediate need to educate the girls about their safety and encourage them to speak out.

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