

Haunted by Gujarat

I can't sleep. In the darkness of the night certain images have come to haunt me. I try to push them away but they continue to linger till I give up all efforts of sleeping and start pacing up and down once again.

The Gujarat carnage has already been consigned to history, the images of those hunted down are by now fading and the situation is "normal". So why should I be still haunted? I, who was not in Gujarat and was not in any overt way threatened by the carnage. Instead far away in a metro I was 'safely' ensconced.

Then why is it that I can hear the screams of a little Salma and wailing of another? Why is it that desolation pervades my whole being? Why can't I, like others, feel lucky at being out of harm's way? After all I am safe.

No I am not safe or I am just as safe as little Salma was. Till a frenzied mob decides to brutally rape, disfigure, torture and burn me alive, I am safe.

How protected is my life anyway? I feel I am raped everyday, visually. I have felt naked on the streets, in the office and even at home. Lustful, lascivious stares and obscene comments follow me on streets; in the office my breasts are more important than my brain. At home, faint childhood memories of tortured nights recur as a never-ending nightmare in the form of a husband who irrespective of my wishes, proceeds to fulfill his desire.

Readers' Forum

I have felt the groping disembodied hand in the bus that knows exactly where its target is. In the cinema hall the person next to me has exposed himself. My 'rates' have been asked, and threats of 'showing me my place' are hurled at me every now and then.

Everyday some confrontation occurs which makes me feel violated, diminished, and nauseated. Why shouldn't the cries of Salma haunt me then? Just like her, on my body is ascribed the pain, helplessness and torment of being a woman. The difference is one of degree and not of kind.

I find myself fighting the imagined enemy all the time. I am neurotic and I see a villain in every man. I feel vulnerable and threatened. Seething

with anger, I suffer in silence. For there is no person, no institution, no agency that is likely to pay heed to my anguish. Little Salma's family helplessly heard her wails; the police turned its face away, and the government feigned innocence.

The ferocity of attacks and grotesque violence points towards a deeper malignancy. They are merely virulent forms of mundane violence and abuse that form the everyday experience of many women like me. The violence endorsed in everyday life has paved way for the brutality during riots. Women don't become victims over night.

Salma had yet to know what being a woman meant. She still played with her doll and when she married her off she imagined a blissful life for her. She was innocent, as innocent as an eleven year old can be. They did not spare her, though she could not have in any way been a threat to them. Why will they then spare me? They are biding their time and soon, very soon, I will be pursued by a fanatical mob.

Everyday of my life seems to be a preparation for this inevitable end. No wonder I can't sleep, not yet...

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