

The Curse of Vigilante Justice: Killings of Rape Suspects in India and Its Impact on the Discourse on Sexual Violence

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Abstract : The cultural prevalence of vigilante justice is sustained through the social sanction for foregoing a judicial trial to determine guilt. Precisely due to its roots in social sanction, it has repercussions as more than just being symptomatic of cultural values that condone violence. In the long term, the practice of vigilante justice as a response to incidents of sexual violence, while veiled in civic discontent over the standards of women's security in society, can adversely affect the discourse on sexual violence. To illustrate the impact that acts of vigilante justice can have in prematurely ending a budding discourse on sexual violence, the paper reviews three cases of heinous crimes committed against women in India that gained popular attention in the discursive spaces. The 2012 Nirbhaya rape and murder case in Delhi demonstrates how the criminal justice system can spur a social movement and can result in legislative changes and a discourse that challenged a wide range of socio-cultural issues of women's security and treatment. The paper compares it with two incidents of sexual violence in India that ended with the suspects being killed in the name of vigilante justice that had wide social sanction. The two cases are the 2019 extrajudicial killing of Priyanka Reddy rape and murder case suspects in Hyderabad and the 2015 mob lynching of an accused in a rape case in Dimapur. The paper explains why the absence of judicial trials in sexual violence cases results in ending any likelihood of the instances inspiring civic engagement with the discourse on sexual violence.

Keywords : sexual violence, vigilante justice, extrajudicial killing, cultural values of violence, Nirbhaya rape case, mob violence

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