



आईना - Mirror - আয়না

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Aim: My art manifestation, as a Hindu Brahmin woman, is with the aim to hold up a mirror of reality in the face of the millions who refuse to acknowledge that ever since 2014, India has taken a quantum leap towards degradation. This is not limited to economics, but has much to do with the socio-cultural as well as the politico-economic degradation initiated by a people-elected far-right government with no better agenda than to enforce traditional norms. – These norms are not only archaic and dangerous for the society and culture of modern post-colonial India, but are also dangerous for women in India.

Background: In 2018, Thomson Reuters Foundation has ranked India as the world's most dangerous country for women, ahead of Afghanistan, Syria and Saudi Arabia. The current far-right Indian government, along with many women from privileged socio-economic strata, were quick to question the Reuters survey. However, India has no reason to sneer. The official crime statistics for 2016 shows that every 13 minutes a woman was raped; six women were gang-raped every day; a bride was murdered for dowry every 69 minutes; and 19 women were attacked with acid every month. Add to that thousands of reported cases of sexual harassment, stalking, voyeurism, domestic violence and trafficking of women and children.

India is my country of origin, and I had the privilege to be born as a Hindu Brahmin in a very well-to-do Bengali family. I am aware that upper socio-economic class of Indian women enjoy tremendous freedom. But the question is: for how long will this last? Also, what about women from lower socio-economic strata? Here are some facts that Indians need to analyse and understand:

- India has been compared with war-torn Afghanistan and Syria. Why? India is not a war-zone yet women and children are raped, murdered and trafficked.
- India has been compared with Saudi Arabia; where women could be jailed simply for driving. Why? The simple fact that as far as Islamic states go, women are punished for not following a religion; but in India, women are punished with death / neglect / rejection / assault the moment the sex of a foetus is determined to be female (that's even before a female is born).

And now, there are far-right moral police (female politicians) who slap Hindu girls in public for having tea with their Muslim friends. Thus enforcing a stronger divide. Statistics regarding violence against women, selling and trafficking of girl-child, honour and dowry killings are over and beyond that of any war-zone. Sadly, unlike in war-zones, where the perpetrators are terrorists / enemies / army, most of the war on women in India comes from family members and people these women grew up to trust or know or even elect. Which makes this situation against women in India even more dangerous.

So yes it matters, when a horrific fact, – that India is the world's most dangerous country for women – is being muted by the current Hinduist far-right government; supported by rich well-to-do Indian women (note: they never took public transport in India but have that galls to compare a-one-time mobbing in Paris public transport to the extent of violence against women in India). This kind of nationalistic and jingoistic mentality, along with their false friend – i.e. said tradition of women as domestic creatures who remain validated only through their male relations as a daughter, sister, mother (and sometimes wife) – is nothing but a residue of post-colonialism: orthodox Christian and/or Muslim point-of-view regarding women. Ignorance fires far-right mentality. And the far right are ignorant of India's post-colonial identity crisis, which strengthens gender disparity in India.

We can either come to term with this fact and build a better tomorrow. Or be annoyed by the hard truth. Whatever we do, I can promise you this, – as a person who has the privilege and support from her family to travel and live far and wide, around the world, **alone** – I do not feel safe when I come home to India.



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Project: I want to stand, vulnerable and nude, in a public space (Rathausbrücke, Zürich) for 30 minutes, with the words – “**why do I feel safe and comfortable while standing naked in Switzerland – but fear death, rape, physical and verbal assault if I do the same in India?**” written in black paint all over my body.

Later modified to: “**Why do I feel comfortable being naked here (front) but fear, death, rape and physical verbal assault in India (back)**”.

In these 30 minutes, although I am limited to my pedestal of performance, I embody all 50 million and more women who went missing in India due to various forms of violence against women. In these 30 minutes I embody the entire societal stigma that starts with female foetus, and continues to haunt mothers of daughters, women with strong-voice, independent women, women with short or long hair, women with fair or dark complexion, tall or short women, fat or thin women, female body in general – including its biological function of menstruation, and the list goes on! In my nudity, I stand as a **mirror** to every virgin-whore dichotomy that society inflicts on us. And humbly and guiltily I stand, for the innumerable number of women born in lower socio-economic strata in India whose voices are being muted by men and women from the same socio-economic-religious class as mine. I stand to point out that the privileged need to recognise their privilege and stop nullifying cries of millions; – just because they don't face these issues themselves, or are too blinded by the comfort of their privileged bubble – does not mean that those issues are invalid and/or will automatically go away. In those 30 minutes, I may seem vulnerable due to my nude body, but inside I embody *Kali* – the goddess, – symbolic of darkness, of time, of ultimate reality, and liberation.