

## THIS WALK CAN TALK TOO

*Srila Roy says slutwalk in india will serve a purpose, even if it appeals only to one class*

**Srila Roy**

Slutwalk has travelled to India, and with it, has travelled the controversies and divides. Is India ready for a SlutWalk, *The New York Times* asks. Some will say that it is more than ready, having recently emerged as one of the five worst places in the world for women. New Delhi, where SlutWalk is slated to take place, is known for a high rate of street sexual harassment, rape and violence against women. Public spaces, like the streets, are sites of normalized and ritualized modes of exercising male power and control over women's bodies. In public consciousness, such everyday forms of violence are encapsulated in the misnomer 'eve-teasing'. The latter positions women as actual or potential instigators of sexual desire; temptresses that incite sexualized responses, even harassment and violence from male audiences. The responsibility of a wider rape culture is squarely placed at the feet of women; male violence is normalized if not legitimized.



Illustration: Tim Tim Rose

Delhi has also been the seat of visible public protests against gender and sexualized violence, an important corrective to overestimations of the newness of SlutWalk-type protests. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, which marked the first explicitly feminist phase of the Indian women's movement, women's groups coalesced around the issue of violence against women and staged marches and performed streetplays to raise consciousness and ask for legal interventions into dowry-related murders and rapes. New Delhi-based NGOs, like Jagori, have carried on the mantle, working with the police to make the city safer. More recently, the urban, cyberfeminist Blank Noise project created online and offline campaigns to tackle the sexual harassment of women, reclaiming public spaces and redefining the meaning of eve-teasing.

It is in this context that SlutWalk and the conversations or criticisms around it enter. Some of these are already familiar to those who have been following SlutWalk's journey from Canada, where it was first started to protest a Toronto police officer's advice to women to 'avoid dressing like sluts' in order not to be raped. Why slut? Is it possible to reclaim a word that is so rooted in the patriarchal imagining of women's sexuality? Is the politics of dress and clothing what feminism is all about? In more aggressive criticisms of SlutWalk in the Indian press, rape culture's tendency to blame women for rape is reinforced in suggesting that if women sexualize their environments by dressing a certain way, there will be consequences. As in all discourses of sexual violence, the good or 'modestly dressed' woman is pitted against the bad woman who is the bearer of (ir)responsible conduct and deportment. What this means for sex workers whose profession already places them outside of codes of respectability and protection is not even up for consideration.

SlutWalking in India also gets complicated by issues of class and authenticity. The two often go together in the Indian context. If its elite, it is invariably Western and therefore culturally 'other' and irrelevant to most of the country. In India, as in many post-colonies, feminism has had to battle hard against dismissal on the grounds of Westernization, repeatedly having to prove its indigenous roots and/or its relevance to Indian women's lives and struggles. 'Indian woman' here stands in for the poor, the unprivileged, who have always been the true and rightful subjects of Indian feminism. SlutWalk is even more prone to anxieties around authenticity and elitism in having non-Indian origins and deploying words (slut) that have little meaning to non-English speaking Indians.

In many ways, SlutWalk evokes the Pink Chaddi campaign of 2009, which began as a Facebook campaign against the rightwing, violent attack on a group of women drinking in a pub in Mangalore. The campaign which asked women to send their panties or *chaddis* to the leader of the group who had instigated the violent attack had the same playful, performative, slightly cheeky quality that SlutWalk does, and was fairly unprecedented in a long history of Indian feminist struggles around gender violence. It was condemned in similar terms – as urban, elitist and irrelevant, except to the needs of a small minority of upper-class, alcohol-drinking women. In both cases, dismissals on the grounds of elitism amount to very little in terms of concrete concerns or critiques. More problematically, they set up a hierarchy of feminist concerns *together* with their appropriate subjects. Poor, working-class women are almost exclusively associated with material concerns of survival, whilst middle-class women have cultural ones of violence, safety, dress, and so on. But, on the ground things are a lot more complicated. The public space of the city is inhabited by all sorts of women, no less vulnerable to harsh social judgement or forms of regulation and control because of varying forms of economic privilege and deprivation.

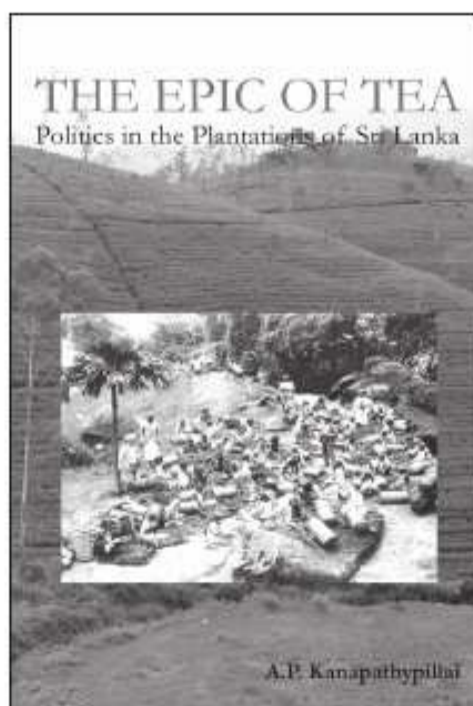
Even if we were to accept that such newer forms of protest were of relevance only to the educated upper-class (and they

will no doubt dominate the actual walk), does it take away from the value of the protest? Part of the problem is with the manner in which feminist debates in India in trying to prove their relevance to the majority have rendered middle-class subjectivity and status less real and of less importance in a (false) hierarchy of feminist issues and priorities. In this manner, the material and the cultural come to be sharply divided, and there is little room to seriously consider how class-caste and gender together determine all, and not some, (underprivileged, ordinary, real) women's lives. It is in these intersectional spaces and identities that the potential for a truly feminist engagement with violence against women lies. Indian feminists have been at the forefront of shifting our understandings in these directions. But, their activism has been less sustained, and it has taken something of a panty to reinvigorate it in recent times, drawing in younger voices and not from the usual NGO-activist circles. New Delhi's SlutWalk might do the same, and it might never get off the ground. But, its mere anticipation in the press has reinforced its urgent need, where overwhelmingly the idea persists that if a woman dresses a certain way, she is asking for it. In violently repudiating the potential to reclaim the word slut, these commentaries reproduce patriarchy's tendency to divide women into those who deserve protection and those who do not. They tell women to stop leaving themselves open to rape, while taking it as given that India's flourishing rape culture is not the fault of individual women. ■

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