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Fighting for Safe Passage on Indian Streets

By NILANJANA S. ROY AUG. 3, 2010

Photo



Members of the Gulabi Gang, a women's rights group, gathered in Allahabad in July.

Credit

Jitendra Prakash/Reuters

NEW DELHI — On blogs, Facebook and Twitter last month, hundreds of women across [India](#) shared their experiences as “Action Heroes” — facing up to sexual harassment on this country's sometimes terrifying streets. The event organized by Blank Noise, a community art project that fights the abuse of women in public spaces, focused fresh attention on “eve teasing” — the common euphemism for the hostility and violence women experience on the streets in large parts of India, especially in the more patriarchal north.

In 2006, the then-fledgling Blank Noise, run by Jasmeen Patheja, a young artist, had invited Indian women to emulate the Take Back the Night marches women have staged in other parts of the world to assert their right to walk in public areas without fear. A Reclaim the Night march had been held in 1978 in Bombay, now known as Mumbai, in protest of the rape of a woman on the street, but not repeated. And so, 28 years later, here in the Indian capital, a small group of women went out for a walk at 10 p.m.

Two police vans stood by to ensure their safety, for this was not a “normal” thing to do. In northern India, women don’t step out of their homes for a stroll once it gets dark. It’s not safe. It could get one harassed or molested or raped.

“Blank Noise started as an art project,” Ms. Patheja said recently. “I was experiencing street sexual violence every day, and if not every day it was the threat of it that kept me on guard, hyper and alert. Moreover, it wasn’t being taken seriously by those around me — ‘It happens,’ ‘There’s nothing you can do about it,’ ‘It’s only teasing.’”

Since that early, tentative action in 2006, Blank Noise has grown, drawing in women from across India. From Mangalore, where in 2009 a rightist Hindu party attacked “loose” women for daring to go out to pubs; from Mumbai, rocked in 2007 by a mob assault on two women who had talked back to a group of men who were harassing them; from smaller cities like Lucknow and Patna, where “eve teasing” is a way of reinforcing the message that women are not meant to be in public spaces.

Ms. Patheja’s primary weapon is her blog. In a more rural part of northern India, another woman picked up the humble jhadu, the broom found in every Indian household.

Sampath Pal Devi grew up in Bundelkhand in Uttar Pradesh and, like many of the women in her community, married young — at 12. She witnessed violence against women as an everyday part of life. It was unsafe for women to go to the outdoor bathrooms at night for fear of assault. Domestic violence and beatings were common. At the age of 20, Ms. Sampath Pal fought back, organizing a few women armed with brooms to thrash a notorious wife-beater.

Now in her 40s, she runs the Gulabi Gang. “This country is ruled by men,” she said in her asthma-roughened voice. “No use asking them for help. We women must fight our own battles ourselves.”

Gulabi means “pink” and refers to the color of the saris Ms. Sampath Pal and her band of women wear. The movement has grown from that tiny core of four concerned women to a movement that covers much of rural Uttar Pradesh, one of the most conservative states in India. The brooms have evolved into canes. The Gulabi Gang has thrashed recalcitrant officials and police officers who wouldn’t register cases of domestic violence. It also runs vocational centers that offer practical ways of employment and empowerment for women.

If pink was simply a personal preference of Ms. Sampath Pal, the color was a more pointed choice for Nisha Susan, a journalist in her 30s who started the Pink Chaddi movement. Last year, after Sri Ram Sene, a rightist Hindu party, attacked women in pubs, Ms. Susan began a Facebook group, and the Pink Chaddi movement was born.

Chaddi is slang for underwear, but also for rightist hard-liners. Ms. Susan invited women to send Pramod Muthalik, the head of Sri Ram Sene, pink underwear in protest of his party’s actions and its plans to hold rallies on Valentine’s Day, which it condemns as a foreign holiday that encourages men and women to express their affection in an openly “un-Indian” fashion.

Chaddis poured in from across the country, a deluge of underwear in fuchsia, mauve and rose that forced the hard-liners to cancel their rallies and stop the attacks on women. Something familiar emerges in the stories the women share, regardless of their ages or class backgrounds. All have experienced fear on the streets, fear when traveling alone. Few use the term “eve teasing” when discussing their own experiences; nothing about sexual harassment has ever felt like “teasing” to them.

This autumn, one of India’s most respected photographers, Gauri Gill, will coordinate an exhibit and Web site called “Transportraits: Women and Mobility in the City.” Working with Jagori, an organization that has drawn up maps of Delhi

and other cities marking areas that are safe or dangerous for women, Ms. Gill is asking both men and women to send in photographs and testimonies of their experiences on the streets. Like most women who have traveled extensively in India, Ms. Gill has experienced her fair share of harassment, even assault. “We just bury our experiences, we learn how to deal,” she said. “When they asked me to curate this, I thought, I don’t want to be too didactic.”

Instead, she is looking for a more interesting way to tell these collective stories.

“Whatever we’ve gone through, we are relatively privileged because we can speak about it,” she said. “There are so many who don’t have the confidence, or the ability, to even register protest or speak out.”

For Ms. Patheja, the artist behind Blank Noise, breaking the silence has been healing, even empowering.

“Today I think I am far less angry, or aggressive towards the issue, yet am unapologetic about my presence on the street,” she said.

In India, thousands of women like her are becoming Action Heroes. We may not yet be ready to take back the night. But we are making a start on taking back the street.

Correction: August 5, 2010

An earlier version of this column misstated the location in India of an attack on women who dared to go to pubs. It was in Mangalore, not Bangalore.

Nilanjana Roy: 'Fighting for safe passage on Indian Streets', NYT, 2010