

Rape of Delhi woman sparks protests in India

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The gang rape of a young woman in New Delhi earlier this month has become a major political issue in India, sparking protests, police reprisals and calls for beefing up the powers of the state.

The 23-year-old physiotherapy student, still hospitalized with extensive internal injuries she received during her ordeal in a moving bus on December 16, narrated the experience to the police from her hospital bed last Friday.

She said that she and her companion, a 28-year-old software engineer, entered what they thought was a public passenger bus. When they saw the bus had deviated from its route and its doors were shut, her friend objected. He was assaulted and the girl was brutally raped. They both fell unconscious and after about 30 minutes' ride, they were thrown off the bus.

The revelation of the crime sparked public protests in downtown Delhi as well as in several universities in Delhi and throughout India. Thousands of people attended a silent march in Kolkata, and hundreds of protesters marched in Bangalore.

Demanding swift action against the attackers, protesters have shouted slogans against the Delhi police, Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit from the ruling Congress Party, Congress President Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul Gandhi, who is seen as a likely heir to the top party post. In response to the protests, police arrested all six alleged attackers over the last week. They were sent before the courts and into police custody, having reportedly pled guilty.

The protests reflect broadly-felt horror at the terrible account given by the victim. To the extent that the case is separated from an examination of the explosive social context of contemporary India and presented purely as a problem of "law and order," however, right-wing forces exploit them to push simply for further strengthening of the police and the state's repressive powers.

Several figures with close ties to right-wing politics and the state, including yoga promoter Baba Ramdev and former Indian Army Chief of Staff Vijay Kumar Singh, attended protests over the rape and clashed with police. Together with the opposition Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), they are pushing for the death penalty in the case and calling for tougher policing.

The call for increasing the power of the state has nothing to do with defending the rights of ordinary Indians. Rather it is motivated at beefing up a repressive apparatus that will be directed against social opposition.

The reactionary character of such an appeal was made clear by the repression unleashed against the protests themselves. The state invariably responds to any sign of social discontent through police action.

Last Saturday police attacked demonstrators outside the secretariat building and president's house with water cannons, tear gas and bamboo sticks. Protesters clashed with police near the India Gate monument on the same day.

The next day, in an attempt to prevent more people from joining the protests, police closed nearby metro stations, curtailed bus service and blocked traffic. Protesters who had camped out overnight were forcibly evacuated and a law prohibiting gatherings of more than four people was imposed. There were day-long clashes between protesters and police, leading to injuries to 35 protesters and 37 police officers. Dozens who had camped overnight were arrested.

Several of those arrested were initially charged with attempted murder, citing injuries to a policeman during the clash. After the policeman succumbed to his injuries on Tuesday, police announced that they would bring murder charges against the eight detainees.

The response of the political establishment in India—including both the Congress government and the

opposition—is premised on the attempt to separate the regular violence inflicted against women from the broader social crisis in India, for which the ruling class as a whole is responsible.

In India, 70 percent of the population lives below \$2 a day, in conditions of poverty that have intensified over two decades of free-market economic reforms since the collapse of the USSR. The combination of rural backwardness and super-exploitative capitalism has produced a society dominated by a small, super-rich elite that enjoys virtual impunity in social life. There is widespread anger over the corrupt ties between this layer and public authorities.

The contempt of the ruling class for ordinary toilers and working people in India was clearly expressed in recent remarks by Delhi Chief Minister Dikshit, who claimed that 600 Indian rupees (\$US11) per month is sufficient to feed a family of five.

These issues are being swept aside, as reactionary forces such as the BJP now push for the death penalty for rape convicts. The BJP's Sushma Swaraj, the leader of the opposition in the lower house of parliament, called Prime Minister Manmohan Singh demanding a special parliamentary session to consider capital punishment for heinous crimes against women and new "law and order" measures. She said Singh had agreed to consider it.

Having been silent over the issue for days, Congress leaders have come out with "assurances" of justice for the victims of the December 16 incident, trying to contain growing protests. Sunday morning Sonia Gandhi and top Congress officials met with a delegation of protesters at her residence. According to Singh, "We had told them that there is a need to maintain calm and the government is committed to take all steps."

While attacking protesters in the streets, it is issuing appeals to wind down the protests under a cynical guise of negotiations. In a statement issued Monday, Singh appealed "to all concerned citizens to maintain peace and calm", adding: "I assure you that we will make all possible efforts to ensure security and safety to all women in this country. I seek the cooperation of all sections of the society to help us in this endeavor and maintain peace."

On Sunday the Congress government agreed to institute "fast track investigations" of sexual offences,

increase police deployments, including plain clothes officers, and also to expand police patrols and CCTV camera networks in the city. Those measures, brought in the name of fighting crimes, will be directed to the further suppression of basic democratic rights of workers and youths.

Legal experts are also proposing special courts for rape cases. Such courts would set dangerous precedents in which defendants' rights to a fair trial would be trampled in the name of expedited justice. Special courts under draconian "anti-terrorism" laws are notorious for suppressing defendants' basic legal rights.

The Indian police are notorious for abusing suspects and using torture to extract false confessions in both political cases and petty crimes. Indian courts are also known for corruption and failure to convict privileged and powerful people, such as businessmen and leading politicians.



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