

# Why Does Our Government Need a Graphic Depiction of Violence Against Women to Act?

[thewire.in/women/manipur-sexual-violence-bjp-apathy-patriarchy](https://thewire.in/women/manipur-sexual-violence-bjp-apathy-patriarchy)



After a [harrowing video](#) of two Kuki women being paraded naked in Manipur's Kangkopi went viral on social media platforms, state functionaries, local politicians, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi were all almost compelled to break their silence. But this came after almost [80 days of apathetic silence](#) on the ethnic violence across the state and the North East.

The anger from state officials and the Bharatiya Janata Party's narrative-management agency so far has been directed more at the fact on how the news of violence came out – or how the opposition doesn't address issues of violence against women in their own states – as against resolving the current crisis in Manipur for which the home minister, the chief minister and his government can be held directly responsible.

Unsurprisingly, in his [speech](#) outside the parliament, the prime minister not only strategically avoided taking accountability, or accepting responsibility for what has happened over the last two months, he left his remarks on calling the incident 'shameful'. Jahnvi Sen and Soumashree Sarkar [recently wrote](#) for *The Wire* on what else Prime Minister Modi failed to acknowledge or address in what he spoke.

In his remarks, what was worse to see is Modi adopting the role of a patronising patriarch mentioning what happened to the 'daughters' of Manipur can never be forgiven.

Our team [Swabhimaan](#), on behalf of the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES) at O.P. Jindal Global University, provided a [critique of nine years of Modi-BJP rule](#) and its performance on various indicators such as women safety, economic participation for women, and social opportunities for women (healthcare and food security). The article

was written after the women wrestlers were manhandled on the streets of Delhi while protesting against BJP MP Brij Bhushan, against whom seven women wrestlers, including a minor, have made allegations of sexual harassment.

The court granted him bail, saying that the Delhi Police neither supported nor denied the bail application.

### **A widening gap between ‘promises’ and ‘reality’**

It appears that the Mhatsya-Nyaya (majoritarian justice) outlook of the Modi-led BJP government remains tightly secured by a rule anchored by Shakti Ki Gita (rule by law) and not one that safeguards or practises any rule of law. It protects those in power no matter what.

It goes without saying how the Modi government has failed miserably in various areas of economic performance ranging from safety, law and order to access to nutrition, reproductive rights, etc.

There is a marked difference in this government’s *kathni* (words) and *karni* (actions). The ever-widening gulf between ‘promises’ and ‘reality’, when it comes to its own poll promises (in its manifesto) – is scarring the republic that was to be.

Manipur’s conflict and reported instances of violence against women – amid everything else – also reflect a state of permanence in the regression of moral and public institutional functioning that operates in the dark while observing a culture of apathetic silence. This is the unfortunate reality of ‘New India’ where no one’s pain and experience of suffering really matters to those in power.

It doesn’t matter how well India is positioned in terms of its foreign policy, or how well the nation does in terms of trade, or in terms of the bilateral meetings Modi is seen celebrating, when its own domestic terrain remains marred by daily attacks against its citizens, especially women and children. Additionally, these issues are coupled with the failure of the regimes to do anything purposeful to resolve these crises, as against spending more resources and state-capacity to manage or control the “narrative”.

### **Hindutva’s patriarchal-patronising position on Indian women**

In a nation where ‘Bharat Mata’ is pictorially represented as a flesh-and-blood sari-clad Indian woman, a naked parade is what ignites a revolution. When women strip the generationally constructed idea of femininity and chastity, the body that has been the site for the exertion of patriarchal power transforms.

This is not an isolated incident as casually remarked by Manipur chief minister Biren Singh – who asked the people to not listen to the allegations but to look at the ground reality, for “hundreds of similar incidents” have taken place.

The women in Manipur have been facing the brute of structural violence since pre-independence, but the government has focussed solely on the 'security issue' of the state and prioritised excessive securitisation that has historically led to women's bodies transforming into sights of violence and their rights being pushed far behind the agendas of the government in power.

The survivors of the incident are termed as 'daughters' only because they are under the control of the patriarch, which in this case is the state. There is an attempt to link the violation of their bodies to the violation of the state and hence there is an outrage and call for their honour and morality to be restored. The women are denied agency and are never seen as their people.

[Also read: Manipur Video: What Connects 3 Kuki Women Stripped, Paraded Naked to Manorama and Bilkis Bano?](#)

### **Long lineage of structural violence**

One of the biggest anxieties of India's Brahmanical patriarchal society is found in the idea that where motherhood is a biological fact, fatherhood is a sociological fiction.

This leads to stringent regulation of women's sexuality to maintain the existing hegemonies. The concept of structural violence was brought about by Johan Galtung in 1969, who referred to a type of violence where a social structure or social organisation may cause harm to people by preventing them from satisfying their basic needs.

Undoubtedly, women and gender-variant persons are the ones who have historically faced double marginalisation from the state that takes the role of the patriarch, and the patriarchal structures that exist within their communities.

The language of rights is predominantly masculine in Manipur, as it primarily emphasises security-related rights. Instead of focusing on individual lives, the masculine state views security as safeguarding the country and its borders from outside threats or internal conflicts. This leads to the invisibilisation of women in the state who have been harbingers of change.

Whether one talks about the movement of women known as 'Nupi Lan' – which were demonstrations against the direct colonial rule and policies that affected their economic standpoint in 1939 – or the naked protest of 12 *imas* (mothers) in front of the headquarters of Assam Rifles against the rape and murder of a 32-year-old woman, Manorama Thangjam, committed by the paramilitary soldiers, women have been at the forefront of violence and protest.

Despite that, as Shreema Ningombam rightfully puts forth, in Manipur, there are many instances of women's issues being consumed by the flames of nationalist politics, under the premise that the resolution of the conflict and ethnic tensions is more important.

Key issues of concern to women include domestic violence, marital rape, sexual abuse, suicide, murder, and widows' plight within the family, as well as reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, property rights, legal rights, medical rights, media and cultural representation, women trafficking, the issue of taboos and stigmas, moral policing, female foeticide. These, together with the issues of education, health, and governance in Manipur, have been subsumed by the political tussle between the armed opposition and the state, as well as the politicisation of ethnicity.

[Also read: The Many Inversions of Justice and Accountability in Manipur](#)

### **The impact of intersectionality**

Intersectionality is a crucial analytical tool for acknowledging that each person has interconnected identities and experiences, and is one of the first steps toward effectively understanding the layers of marginalisation and discrimination.

The term 'intersectionality' can be traced back to Crenshaw (1991), who saw it as a method for addressing tendencies of identity politics to disregard and homogenise intragroup differences.

When analysing violence against women, which she claimed was "often shaped by other dimensions of identities, such as race and class," Crenshaw considered this to be particularly problematic since it not only obscures the causes and experiences of violence against women but also makes the politicisation of violence more challenging.

Similarly, Bharat H. Desai and Balraj K. Sidhu noted that pre-existing exclusions and prejudice that are typical of women's status in many countries exacerbate the battle to provide justice for women victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). In turn, it has a compounding impact that worsens gender vulnerability in societies that have experienced conflict.

In such conflict-driven areas, women are subjected to various sorts of violence as their bodies are viewed as "instruments of war."

In Manipur, the second-class gender identities of women disproportionately intersect with their ethnic identities, which leaves them as the gatekeepers of honour of their ethnic group and an accessible avenue of violation for the other group.

Deconstructing the act of parading women of the 'other' ethnic group naked onto open fields by a group of bystanders clarifies that it is not an isolated incident of aggravated agony. Women's subjugation is a result of the patriarchal structure and ideology, crimes against women are not committed merely by an individual, but are driven by the intersectional framework in place.



Women leaders hold a demonstration against the assault on women in Manipur, in New Delhi, on July 20, 2023.

### Hindutva's paternalistic lens and patriarchy

As argued in length [here](#), the campaign '*Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*' (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) launched in 2015 was aimed at preventing gender-biased sex selective elimination, ensuring survival and protection of the girl child, and ensuring education and participation of the girl child.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development explicitly states that this campaign focuses on "challenging mindsets and deep-rooted patriarchy in the societal system."

In the same year, Modi strongly endorsed a small grassroots campaign that started in Haryana, called [#SelfieWithDaughter](#), where fathers were asked to tweet photos with their daughters and upload them to the Foundation website. This received widespread media coverage nationally and internationally.

As [argued](#) by Amrita Chhachhi in a recent paper, "These campaigns aimed to present a progressive modernity which strategically feeds into the Hindutva project of India being recognised as a global player and garners acceptability and recognition by international development organisations. Modi mentioned the campaign when he addressed the CEOs in Silicon Valley and in Wembley and the *Time Magazine* reported this as a personal crusade for gender equality the prime minister had started since he came to power."

Scholar Hussain (2015) notes that this functions as 'face work' in 'impression management' which creates a social image that 'aligns with the Indian's aspirational economic image of a neoliberal powerhouse.' In addition, "the personalised alignment of Modi with these campaigns and other social policies fosters a new 'paternalist' contract.

[Also read: Six \(Of Many\) Reasons Why PM Modi's Words on Democracy in the White House Ring Hollow](#)

### **Collateral damage: alienation and the diminishing agency of Manipuri women**

There is a need for a serious inquiry into the lack of accountability and inability to take action by the institutions of the country that parades its ideals of 'democracy' in the numerous G20 conferences and events.

Reports have showcased that the National Commission for Women (NCW) had ignored a complaint filed on June 12 that had described other instances of sexual violence. However, the NCW chairperson took more than a month to take suo motu cognisance on the matter, and that too only after the video went viral.

The question is, why exactly does this country and the state machineries need a graphic depiction of violence against women to act?

Not only that, the continuous circulation of the videos and images, blurred or otherwise by outlets and people alike, is also a form of violence against the women whose autonomy and dignity were violated.

It is commendable that the Supreme Court has asked the government to act immediately but it should not be forgotten that the same apex body had declined to hear the urgent petitions challenging the internet shutdown as the high court was already looking into it earlier in June.

It should also be noted that despite the recommendations by the Supreme Court collegium, the Manipur high court has not seen a Chief Justice since February 6, 2023.

One of the two survivors of the violence issued a statement saying that the Manipur police were present when the violence was being inflicted upon the women, as seen in the video, but they did not do anything to help them.

For a state that has imposed curfews, internet restrictions, and heavy militarisation, the violence has curiously not even shown signs of declining, and it is time to discard the apathy and complicity and acknowledge the perpetual violence in Manipur.

*This article is part of a series of field-based reports, spotlighting lesser-known cross-cutting humanitarian issues that are emanating from the ongoing conflict in Manipur. In addition to understanding the socio-economic impact of the conflict, the series also seeks to map out instances of resilience, local innovations in humanitarian action, and examples of community peace-building in the context.*

*The Mapping Humanitarianism Initiative (MHI) is being undertaken by the CNES in close collaboration with Peace Centre Nagaland, located in Chümoukedima.*

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