

## **LAYERS OF OPPRESSION: REMEMBERING DR MOUMITA DEBNATH AND THE INTERSECTIONAL FIGHT AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

On the night of 8<sup>th</sup> August 2024, a 31-year-old Indian female doctor, Moumita Debnath, was done with her night shift and decided to rest after being exhausted from the long hours. There being no designated sleeping area, she settled down in the seminar room, a makeshift refuge for those who work so hard through the night. Unbeknownst to her, this would be the last time she closed her eyes with a sense of routine comfort.

The next morning, August 9<sup>th</sup>, Dwaipayan Biswas, the Assistant Superintendent informed Dr Moumita Debnath's family that her doctor had committed suicide and when the grieving family arrived at the hospital, they still had to wait for three long hours before they were attended to. As if this was not enough, they were denied access to their daughter's body.

When her family was finally allowed to view the body, they were confronted with a disheartening sight. Her body lay bare. Her legs were positioned at a right angle, suggesting severe trauma to her pelvic girdle. It is so disturbing considering the fact that her body was not found in the seminar room where she had settled down to rest, but in the room across the hallway where construction work was happening.

The preliminary autopsy revealed harrowing details. There was an alarming 150 mg of semen in her body, keeping in mind that the average male produces 15 grams. Her eyes were severely wounded, the lenses of her glasses shattered and embedded in her eyes, causing a lot of bleeding. Her lips were battered and bruised, she had a broken head, broken leg bone, 113 bites on the body, among other signs of a violent struggle. The evidence suggested that her death occurred between 3AM and 5AM on 9<sup>th</sup> August. These findings unequivocally pointed to a horrendous sexual assault, leaving the family to grapple with unimaginable sorrow.

This brutal gang rape and murder can be said to have shocked the conscience of India and the world as a whole, and it is definitely a stark reminder of the oppression that women in India face daily. As an organization committed to intersectional feminism, we recognize that this crime is not just an attack on a woman's body, but an attack on her identity, her dignity, and her right to exist safely in the world and more so in her place of work. The men who raped and killed her were not just attacking her as a woman, but as a woman who dared to occupy a professional space, challenging the power structures that seek to keep women in submissive roles. In India, gender-based violence cannot be understood in isolation. It is interconnected with caste discrimination, economic inequality and deeply embedded patriarchal norms that devalue women's lives. Dr Moumita Debnath, like many women before her, was not only a victim of her attackers, but a victim of a society that failed to protect her.

Her identity as a woman made her an easy target for those who view women as expendable and the fact that this happened while she was at work opens our eyes more on the pervasive nature of gender-based violence which clearly infiltrates even the presumably secure environments. It is not enough to focus on gender alone; we must also consider how social factors influence the experience of women in India, where women overall have the lower status in the society. India has one of the lowest female to male population ratios in the world because of sex-selective abortion

and female infanticide. For poor families, the need to pay a marriage dowry can make daughters a burden.

Additionally, gender based violence is seen as deserved. A report by UNICEF in 2012 showed that 57% of Indian boys and 53% of Indian girls between the ages of 15 and 19 unfortunately believe that wife beating is normal. Anuradha Gupta, former mission director for India's National Rural Health Mission was quoted as saying that it is true that when a boy grows up seeing his father assault his mother, he starts to accept this behaviour and repeats it. As an organisation, we similarly believe that when a girl grows up seeing her mother being assaulted by her father, she starts to accept this behaviour and expect it.

In the *India's Daughter* documentary in 2012, where a similar thing happened, the attitudes of the rapists was shocking. One of them (Mukesh Singh) blamed the victim, Jyoti, saying that it takes two hands to clap, a decent girl won't roam around at night, a girl is far more responsible for rape than a boy, boys and girls are not equal, housework and housekeeping are for girls, not roaming in discos and bars at night doing wrong things wearing wrong clothes. He also blamed Jyoti for her death saying, "When being raped, she shouldn't fight back. She should just be silent and allow the rape. Then they'd have dropped her off after 'doing her' and only hit the boy. As if this wasn't enough, one of the lawyers defending the rapists stated that in India they have the best culture, where there is no place for women, and added that a woman means immediate sex. But even with this reasoning, nothing justifies violence against women. Moumita Debnath was not roaming around at night. She was not wearing wrong clothes. She was at her place of work. Regardless, this is not to say that '*wearing the right clothes*' and '*not roaming around at night*' would prevent rape. Rape happens because rapists rape.

We reject these oppressive narratives and we focus on how gender and class intersect to compound the vulnerabilities women face. The fight against gender based violence must go beyond addressing individual acts of violence to dismantle the structures that perpetuate misogyny. It requires challenging the cultural norms that condone gender based violence and rape, and demanding accountability from legal and social institutions that fail to protect women.

Globally, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the UN provide a foundation for challenging such misogyny. CEDAW obliges states to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all areas of life, including the eradication of gender-based violence. It recognises that violence against women is a form of discrimination that severely inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men. Article 5 states that State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or stereotypes roles for men and women. The 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women clearly states that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men. In India, the legal framework addressing violence against women include the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) and the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act (2013) which expanded the

definition of rape and introduced stricter penalties for sexual violence. Despite these laws, enforcement remains inconsistent, and societal attitudes often undermine their effectiveness. Victims of such tragic acts often go through re-traumatization within the legal system, furthering their trauma and hindering their access to justice.

We unequivocally condemn the rape and murder of Dr Moumita Debnath. We recommend the initiation of nationwide campaigns to challenge the deep-seated patriarchal norms that normalize violence against women, and the campaigns should be intersectional, addressing how class and gender intersect to further vulnerability to violence. Existing laws should be strengthened and new measures put in place to protect women, and this includes ensuring that judicial officers are trained to handle cases of gender-based violence with sensitivity and without bias. In Dr Moumita Debnath's case, the police were either unwilling or unable to intervene, when 7000 people were mobilized, whether through orchestration or negligence, to obliterate all evidence and destroy crucial proof. Furthermore, programs that engage men and boys in the fight against gender based violence should be developed, to aim at deconstructing toxic masculinity and promote gender equality as a social norm. There should also be periodic reviews of India's compliance with international standards on women's rights and gender based violence contained in the CEDAW.

We believe that ending gender based violence in India requires a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of misogyny, recognizes the intersecting oppressions that compound women's vulnerabilities and demands accountability from both the society and the state. By standing together, we can create a future where all women, regardless of their social identity are free to live without fear of violence.