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OPINION

Murder in the Media

Murder, immorality and deviance are aberrations, not the new trend

ABRAHAM Maslow once said that if the only tool in your kit is a hammer, every issue will appear to be a nail. In the context of the Indian media today, the only measure of newsworthiness is bad news, nailed down with the hammering approach, which labels shocking aberrations or one-off episodes as trends. Fourteen-year-old Aarushi Talwar died in tragic circumstances. No one really knows how. The police, as police will, blundered. The first suspect, it turned out, was also a victim. To cover up, the police produced a new suspect, a motive for the crime and the circumstances of the murder. While the story has holes large enough to parade an elephant through it, it hasn't stopped the press from going on a frenzied overdrive. TV channels followed by newspapers have made a craze out of the murder. 'Erosion of family values.' 'Lust rules, love is dead.' 'This is happening in civilised middle class, not marginal working class people.' 'Increasing number of people now think nothing of killing family for selfish reasons.'

SORIT

The media has turned this tragic case into a psychological, legal, detective, sociological, sensationalist, filmi drama. One channel actually has anchors dressed as sleuths; another goes into a tizzy quizzing every available mental health professional from Nimhans in Bangalore to Vimhans in Delhi. Invite a jury of sociologists, journalists, advocates and SJs (sab jaantewalas) to first hyperventilate, then mourn the death of Indian family values and hey presto, you have a "if it bleeds, it leads" debate.

Botox, blue eyeshadow, size zero, IPL and now murder—everything is a trend. If Aarushi's father killed his teenage daughter, allegedly angry over her disapproval of his affair, we are supposed to discuss its alarming nature exactly like the 'shocking' popularity of plastic surgery. Doesn't it worry you, ask channel anchors, that a normal urban family man can be a heinous killer? Exactly as they ask: Aren't you worried that girls are now under pressure to look sexy and what was once taboo is now a trend? One treated like the other. The predictable insight that TV offers little reflection has become even more true today. With advertising as the only source of revenue and advertising rates under pressure, editorial time is squeezed to about 20 minutes in a half-hour slot. Anchors, therefore, have little time to reflect before taking an ad break, with no need for statistical research that can define or question a trend. Ideas become cliches and arguments become sound bites. And soon, the sound bite becomes an infectious form of communication among viewers who are led by this enforced wisdom.

What of the police's credibility? On live national TV, in a press conference, the chief of police of Meerut division gets Aarushi's name wrong thrice. Then, while retailing his version of the story, comes up with an interpretation that Aarushi was seen in an "objectionable but not compromising" situation with her manservant. The police's blundering ways are a defence counsel's dream case. And more fodder for the media, which then interprets 'objectionable closeness' in ten different ways, reducing the culpability of the murderer. Honour killing becomes a buzzword. Wrongly used in this case, it was dropped soon but not before a section of the media had asked some feminists for quotes on wrongs against women in India 2008. The extended logic being that to be eye-catching, every trend must have to do with women. But this is murder. Not a new yoga technique to lose weight in fifteen days.

Fortunately, on the evening that Dr Rajesh Talwar was arrested, every participant on TV debates debunked the idea of the breakdown of the Indian family. This is a deviant, violent act. To be treated as an aberration. Five or ten murders over a period of a few years do not cancel out millions of Indian families devoted to keeping values in place. Or lakhs of urban parents juggling time and tension, to rise to the new needs of parenting. Even Aarushi's apparent disapproval of her father's relationship out of marriage and now the mother's staunch support of the father is a testimony to family values, hardly the lack of them.

This reminds me of an old ad line. "Traditions ain't what they used to be. And thank God for that." Family values have changed in modern India, there is little doubt about that. But some values were rooted in conservatism, patriarchy and tyranny. They are incompatible with today's realities. They have rightly been gathered to God. But that cannot be used to suggest that family values have been replaced by immorality and deviance. A father killing a daughter—if it is true—is an exception, not a trend. ◘

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