SHEFALEE VASUDEV
OPINION

Tomorrow Never Comes

Let's fold back our freedom rant and run for safety

LET'S first get the stock arguments out of the way. Yet another girl has been brutally raped in Delhi; left to battle the demons of shame and humiliation—if she survives that is—and we are still belting out the same tune of outrage. Not that these angry tirades about sensitising our policemen, urgent judicial interventions, high-decibel debates between death penalty vs castration aren't important. They may be sound, long-term measures (and my vote is for castration), but at the moment they sound like empty rants without a sliver of hope. So a shrill war cry is in order as desperate situations seek desperate measures. Why don't we drop our feminist defences for now and tell women that if you want to be safe, if you want to stop being victims of crimes, run for your lives? Suspect everyone out there on the streets, err on the side of fear whether you are young and pretty or frumpy and grey-haired. Whether you are turning back from a place of worship, trudging home after a hard day's work or just heading back after a party, avoid the dark like the plague, every day, at all costs. Run, for there are men out there who will hurt you if you as much as smile. Run, even at the momentary cost of personal freedoms. Without ideologically succumbing to the moral police, find paranoid ways to safeguard your bodies and mental health. Dress prudently, not prudishly. There may be an evolving (new) social discourse on how to raise boys but how ironical is the need to raise girls with an (old) set of rules. Because in 2012, instead of raising our daughters to be free and fiery, empowered and independent, we may have to rewind to the conversations of India of the '80s and tell them to be afraid. Once again.

What this agonising churn of crimes against women in Delhi or any other city has also done is to put the clock back on the women's movement. Thousands of us who made sand castles inside our minds while loving immensely the touch and feel of liberation now feel deceptively let down. Those short-lived (or were they illusory?) freedoms have been snatched back and we are losing the distinction between feminine privileges and feminist rights. The sky will be ours, we were promised. Men, said our mothers and mentors, will respect us tomorrow; society will stop harassing us with its moral harangue tomorrow; India is free, we are free, tomorrow we will be equal.

Tomorrow never came. And this girl is dying because she has been so severely violated in a country that promised equality tomorrow. All doors to deeply realised aspects of feminism that could have only come from safety and value have been shut in our faces. Our pubbing and clubbing liberties, our little or big black dress tirades and our sexual choices seem like jokes when contrasted with the violence that doesn't stop chasing us. In the big picture, the word 'free' barely applies to Indian women, even well-educated ones in cities, like this paramedical student. It's an urban myth, a flaky decoration, not even a war medal because we may have won some battles but have sadly lost the war.

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Now we are damn confused about what to do with this disabled freedom. Should we wear dupattas to look suitably modest since even saris now come with sexy cholis? Is it okay to whistle while watching a play in Kamani Auditorium in New Delhi or should we wait till we get to a private drawing room in Kochi? Should we allow a male friend to escort us home or will that endanger his life as well? Is it okay to say 'boob-tube' or should we rephrase it as a "fashionable garment for the upper part of the female body" lest it's mistaken as lewd, inviting talk? Is it cool being female and single, or is it hot? Please, someone, help us negotiate this enslaving maze of liberation.

So I have decided not to sign any petition, join any candlelight vigil or march for women's rights. Instead, I will run from all this as my new (old) choice for safety. Till, tomorrow comes. ◘