

Documentary Review

Trapped: Stories from Puppets of Patriarchy (Documentary) Produced and Directed by Nairruti Jani, Florida Gulf Coast University, 2012, 34 minutes (Color)

–Brij Mohan¹

Books, monographs, journals and posters have been usual channels of academic displays and expressions of inquiry and research. Professor Nairruti Jani has taken a more powerful didactic tool. She unfolds a problem and its complex dimensions through the lens of her camera and power of her imagination with uncanny abilities; she vividly unfolds a darker side of hideous human conditions. In the background of a disingenuous ‘publish or perish’ academic culture, it’s heartening to review an original work of a solo and serious intellectual with impeccable effect on the students and policy makers. This is exactly what ‘social praxeology’ (Mohan, 1988: 9) means.

“A girl is born to become a prostitute,” laments one of Nairruti Jani’s subjects. This documentary unravels dehumanization of India’s women who are degraded and exploited in the abominable red light areas of Mumbai and beyond.

Simon de Beauvoir famously wrote: “A woman is not born; she becomes one” (1949). Nairruti Jani’s first hand depiction validates this dictum, its historicity and politics. Hypocrisies of a classic patriarchy in a post-feudal society in the throes of transition are in the focus of this heart-breaking documentary.

Puppets of Patriarchy unfolds the layers of time revealing the age-old story of women—our sisters, wives and daughters—who are forced into prostitution in a predatory social system.

“Vultures on the dead,” I wrote four decades ago in my first book (Mohan, 1972: 18). Those were depressing times. Have things changed? Yes, both positively and negatively. India is a leading democratic world power on the world stage. Regretfully, poverty and injustice continue to be her endemic social cancers that corrode her body and soul. India’s “arrested development” is abysmally poor on woman’s rights which “threatens to stunt its economic growth” (Kolhatkar, 2013: 6).

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Dr. Nairruti Jani, a hybrid of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and University of Texas at Arlington, travels to her native land from Rajasthan to Andhra Pradesh to Gujarat and Maharashtra in search of inconvenient truth about the state of women in the world's largest democracy. Her findings are shocking to say the least.

A village in Rajasthan, the home of Kalbelia tribe, is found to be the only place where the birth of a female child is celebrated with a hideous joy. Here a girl is born to be a cashable human commodity as a prostitute. Elsewhere, the religious cult of prostitution brings back Devdasi culture of southern Hindu temples as the new puppets in the modern bars, restaurants and hotels of Mumbai where they eke out a living under the illusion of a better life. When irony and tragedy are mixed, a new nihilism tends to benumb consciousness. It's the opposite of that "Aha" moment; it breeds despair.

Suketu Mehta's bargirl cuts her wrist in his *Maximum City* (2004). "The city [in heat] is humid with sex" (Mehta, 2004: 264). In *Transcendence of Ego*, Sartre portrayed a Parisian woman who looks out of her window and feels like becoming a whore. The human puppets of Kamthipura, Jani shows, do not have the luxury of this manifested alienation. They live in a 'hell on earth,' selling their bodies to soulless strangers who treat them as feckless objects for their transient carnal needs.

Malcolm Potts and Thomas Hayden (2008) studiously report an innate connection between *Sex and War*. In a Bollywood movie on Indo-Pak border a Pakistani-Punjabi soldier speaks of a permanent solution: "Give Madhuri Dixit and take your Kashmir²!"

Human-male-creatureliness is at its zenith in the three family models of prostitution that are displayed in this film³. The young ones are easy prey for the men in the power regardless of age; virgins are most vulnerable. In a recent Hindi film, *Maya*, the pundits and leaders of a village perform a purifying gang-rape-ritual on a 12-year girl following her menstruation. This happens at the holy alter of the temple as a communal celebration. An anthropological psychiatrist, like Norman Brown, would find this practice both puzzling and intriguing. Continued, unabated, global human traffic especially encouraged by sex tourists and profiteers represent the same primitive trappings.

R.D. Lang once wrote: "We are all prostitutes and murderers." In

2 Madhuri Dixit is a Bollywood icon of sexual appeal, beauty and grace.

3 Sexual abuse and torture of children in Catholic churches continues as "all in the family" at the expense of a civil society independent of the predatory hierarchy of priests.

between the two, there is a third party, i.e., the pimps who run a billion dollar sex industry. Predatory cultures thrive on the weaker gender exposed to socio-economic vulnerabilities. Abstractly, every woman, in South Asia, is a potential prostitute. She lives only a crisis away from gloom and doom.

The writer-director of this documentary ably demonstrates how women even in the middle class urban families dread the hegemonic power of male chauvinism. Her interview with her grandmother is touching. So are other encounters with victims of old habits in new colors. When she travels to her native Gujarat, she takes on the Hindu fundamentalist rulers who unleashed a terror on Muslim women in a politically generated communal holocaust. The victim of an 8-year-old girl narrates the horrors of an insane society. Guru Dutt's soul would turn in his grave if he were to re-make *Pyassa* (a world classic on India's brothels) in the smoldering ashes of Godhara.

The documentary is demonstrably formulative and descriptive. What can be done to mitigate this gendered violence and brutality is, by implication, left to the mind and power of the people themselves. A rural, conservative, and reactionary class of people rules India. Their backlash against the young student who succumbed to a gang rape in New Delhi is shocking. The government of Maharashtra recently distributed 25000 knives to workingwomen to safeguard their dignity. Not to mention the symbolic irony of the weapon, its similarity to the rapacious US gun industry—the sale of assault weapons has sky rocketed after the Sandy Hook School mayhem in Connecticut—is maddening. At issue is the dignity and survival of children⁴ and women in a civil society. *Stories from Puppets of Patriarchy* speaks volumes about the plight and destiny of India's *third class* citizens.

Jani's film is an authentic document about the inanity of governmental interventions and near breakdown of moral framework of a society in transition. When basic social institutions—like family, marriage, Church, temples, banks, and schools—break down, we witness a cultural meltdown with unimaginable consequences. There is however a silver lining. What is currently happening in New Delhi after following the fatal gang rape of a young college student demonstrates how public outrage can

4 Pope Benedict XVI made a stunning announcement of his resignation.

“The child abuse scandals hounded most of his papacy.” This news sent shockwaves throughout the Church. <http://news.yahoo.com/pope-resigns-saying-no-longer-strength-fulfill-ministry-112923467.html>; retrieved February 11, 2013)

demolish centuries of institutional corruption. However, in an increasingly therapeutic profession like ours, there is no such possibility. We contend with band-aids, feel-good fads of questionable credence in the name of “practice” that demean victims as “clients”. Both social work and social development could better.

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