

Insensitive

How news outlets threw ethics to the winds by naming a rape victim

After two months of silence, the nun who was raped and paraded naked by a frenetic mob of Hindu rightwingers in Kandhamal in Orissa, chose to speak about her horrifying experience at a press conference in New Delhi on October 24, 2008. She narrated her ordeal, and issued a signed statement. Many news outlets reported the heart-wrenching tale. But there were others who threw elementary media ethics to the winds and went overboard—they named the victim. Though two-thirds of the news stories that were tracked by **NewsWatch** desisted from identifying the nun by name, a substantial one-thirds did.

If this proportion was not alarming enough, when the researchers narrowed down the number of news items tracked for the study to distinct and original stories, it was found that slightly more than half of the news establishments which reported the press conference were guilty of naming the victim.

The fact that deciding to speak to the press was the nun's own choice, the signed statement was not a *fait accompli* for news outlets to mention her by name in the reports about the press meet. That two-thirds of the news establishments refrained from doing so, showed that they were sensitive in reporting about sexual violence. In spite of a Supreme Court advisory about not naming victims of sexual violence, the ones who made the most of the "sensational" story did so with their callous handling of a sensitive subject.

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Masthead photo: Reuters / Vijay Mathur



The nun is assisted by social activist John Dayal, right, and an unidentified person as she leaves after the press conference in New Delhi. (AP Photo/Gurinder Osan)

■ You call that journalism?

I wish I was present at the press conference where the Kandhamal gangrape victim had come, a very brave effort by a woman battered into a step she would not have ever dreamt of in her wildest nightmare. What prompted her to attend a press conference? What were her hopes when she went there, the wimple adding on a veil?

Obviously, she felt that if she were to talk to the media she would make her anguished voice heard in the presence of the hallowed Fourth Estate. Yes, her voice was heard. Yes, the media covered her. But how? Have we the members of the Fourth Estate taken leave of

our senses, forgotten all norms and code of conduct? We, as fledgling journalists, learnt through style books and the unwritten journalistic code of ethics that among several other instances, the press should not mention names of the victim, especially of rape.

But, what did a major section of this exalted tribe do? In all self-righteousness, as many as one-third of the news establishments scream the name of the victim out in black and white! My eyes read the news items with horror, a sense of shame. How could we rape the victim again and again?

— Executive Editor of a New Delhi-based publication

Table 1: News outlets that mentioned the raped Orissa nun by name — 22 stories / 20 outlets

News outlet	Date published	Credits	Headline
Indian newspapers: 8 stories / 6 outlets			
Deccan Herald	October 25	Anon	Nun recounts Orissa horror
Hindu, The	October 25	Press Trust of India	Orissa: Nun demands CBI probe
Hindu, The	October 25	Special Correspondent	I don't want to be victimised by Orissa police, says XXXXXXXXXX
Indian Express, The	October 24	Agencies	Orissa police friendly with attackers, says 'raped' nun
Morning Express	October 25	Reuters	'Shameful Crime Against Humanity'
Morning Express	October 25	XXXXXXX (statement)	"Do you know what will be the consequences"
Sakaal Times	October 24	Press Trust of India	Orissa nun demands CBI probe, says police failed to protect her
Telegraph, The	October 25	Cithara Paul	India's Mukhtaran Mai: Nun speaks up in fight for justice
News portals (both Indian and India-centric foreign sites): 10 stories / 10 outlets			
AsiaNews.it	October 24	Nirmala Carvalho	Sister raped in Orissa accuses police of being "friendly" toward rapists
Catholic Online	October 25	Nirmala Carvalho	Sister Raped in Orissa Accuses Police of Being 'friendly' toward Rapists
daijiworld.com	October 24	Rediff.com	Raped Orissa Nun Surfaces, Recounts Horror
India Today Digital	October 24	Bhavna Vij-Aurora	Orissa Police 'very friendly' with attackers, says 'raped' nun
Kalinga Times	October 24	Correspondent	Rape victim nun slams police, seeks CBI probe
Latest News	October 24	Agencies	Raped nun demands CBI probe, says police failed to protect her
Media Newsline	October 24	Max Digital Media Newswire	"I lost my trust in Orissa Police" XXXXXXXXXX
NewsBlaze.com	October 24	Madhu Chandra, All India Christian Council	Civil Society Disappointed at Supreme Court Refusal to Order CBI Enquiry
OdishaToday.com	October 24	Anon	Orissa police friendly with attackers, says 'raped' nun
SahilOnline	October 25	Press Trust of India	Orissa: Nun demands CBI probe
Foreign newspapers and TV channels (with own staffers or Indian news agencies): 2 stories / 2 outlets			
Gulf Daily News	October 25	Anon	Nun recounts rape ordeal
Times, The	October 25	Jeremy Page and Rhys Blakely	Nun XXXXXXXXXX tells of brutal rape by Hindu mob in India
International news agencies: 2 stories / 2 outlets			
Agence France-Presse	October 25	Anon	Indian nun recounts rape ordeal, demands investigation
Reuters	October 24	Matthias Williams	Nun accuses police of complicity in attack

The name and the description

This **NewsWatch** study tracked down 164 stories about the Orissa nun's press conference. For the primary analysis, 58 stories were shortlisted (see The methodology). Items of international news agencies carried on websites of foreign newspapers/portals etc were counted, but not shortlisted for analysis—there were 106 such

(see Table 1). The rest 36 stories which did not name the victim came from 27 news outlets (see Table 2).

Of the 106 stories carried on websites of foreign newspapers and television channels and generic news portals, an overwhelming 90 were an Associated Press (AP) story. Three of these sites were Canadian, while one each were from Singapore, South Africa and Taiwan. US sites accounted for 84. The Reuters story was carried by 10 news sites (seven in Australia, and one each from the UK, Pakistan and Croatia). There were four stories from Agence France-Presse (AFP), one a syndication of the *Times* article, and the last a rehashed version of multiple creeds.

The secondary analysis narrowed down the 58 items further in terms of distinctness—by eliminating duplicate agency creeds and syndicated articles, and leaving out the copies of the statement issued by the nun. The number of distinct and original stories was brought down to 35. This time, it was found, more than half the stories (n=18) were seen to have mentioned the victim by name.

There were insensitivities in other areas too:

- A story by Indo-Asian News Service was carried by two news portals headlined 'Raped Orissa nun speaks about her sordid tale'. Only Sify.com edited out the word 'sordid'.
- The *Telegraph* even hailed her as the Indian incarnation of Pakistan's Mukhtaran Mai.
- The *Times* (London) carried the most graphic description of the rape: One of the mob raped her, while two more held her down, and then a fourth tried to rape her again, before they paraded the priest and her, minus her blouse and underwear, along a road, she said.



Photo courtesy: The Hindu

stories in all. Slightly more than 37 per cent of the stories (n=22) carried on 20 websites mentioned the Orissa rape victim by name

Table 2: News outlets that did not mention the raped Orissa nun by name — 36 stories / 27 outlets

News outlet	Date published	Credits	Headline
Indian newspapers: 11 stories / 9 outlets			
Daily News & Analysis	October 24	Vineeta Pandey	Orissa nun recounts ordeal before media
Economic Times	October 25	ET Bureau	Orissa cops friendly with attackers, says raped nun
Hindu, The	October 24	Press Trust of India	Nun demands CBI probe, claims Orissa police is biased
Hindustan Times	October 24	Correspondent	Raped Orissa nun speaks out
Hindustan Times	October 25	Correspondent	I don't trust Orissa Police: raped nun
Indian Express, The	October 25	XXXXXXXXXX (statement)	'I was raped, and now I don't want to be victimised by the Orissa police'
Indian Express, The	October 25	Maneesh Chhibber	No faith in Orissa Police, let CBI investigate: nun
New Indian Express, The	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	Raped Orissa nun narrates her trauma
Sakaal Times	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	'Where is that sister...Come let us rape her, the crowd shouted'
Statesman, The	October 25	Anon	Rape victim wants CBI probe
Times of India, The	October 25	Times News Network	Nun breaks silence: Orissa cops failed me
Indian TV channels: 5 stories / 3 outlets			
CNN-IBN	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	Raped Orissa nun blames cops for her ordeal
CNN-IBN	October 24	Rupashree Nanda	Orissa nun breaks silence, narrates her horrific tale
NDTV	October 24	Press Trust of India (statement)	First person account of the nun
NDTV	October 24	Correspondent	Mob tried to kill me: Kandhmal nun
Zee News	October 24	Bureau	Orissa nun demands CBI probe, doesn't trust police
News portals (both Indian and India-centric foreign sites): 16 stories / 11 outlets			
BombayNews.net	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	On live TV raped Orissa nun relates horror tale
India Today Digital	October 24	Anon	Orissa Police failed to protect me, says nun
Latest News	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	'Where is that sister...Come let us rape her, the crowd shouted'
Latest News	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	Raped Orissa nun speaks out her sordid tale
Latest News	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	On live TV raped Orissa nun relates horror tale
MSN India	October 24	Press Trust of India	Nun urges CBI probe, says cops biased
MSN India	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	Raped nun narrates her sordid tale
OdishaToday.com	October 24	Anon	Orissa nun narrates horror tale at New Delhi
Religious Intelligence	October 24	Vishal Arora	Raped nun in India blames police for not protecting her
SahilOnline	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	'Where is that sister...Come let us rape her, the crowd shouted'
Sify.com	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	Raped Orissa nun narrates her tale
SmashHits.com	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	On live TV raped Orissa nun relates horror tale
Sindh Today	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	On live TV raped Orissa nun relates horror tale
Thaindian News	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	'Where is that sister...Come let us rape her, the crowd shouted'
Thaindian News	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	Raped Orissa nun speaks out her sordid tale
Thaindian News	October 24	Indo-Asian News Service	On live TV raped Orissa nun relates horror tale
Foreign newspapers and TV channels (with own staffers or Indian news agencies): 2 stories / 2 outlets			
BBC News	October 24	Anon	Raped Indian nun denounces police
Peninsula, The	October 25	Indo-Asian News Service	Abused nun narrates Orissa ordeal on TV
International news agencies: 2 stories / 2 outlets			
Associated Press	October 25	Gavin Rabinowitz	Nun accusing India mob of rape slams police
Canadian Press	October 25	Anon	Nun urges India's government to investigate mob rape allegation

The methodology

This study looked at how the media covered the press conference in New Delhi on October 24, 2008 when the Orissa nun, who had been gangraped by Hindu rightwingers in the state, spoke to the Press about her ordeal. The tracking of stories was done by monitoring news aggregators Google News and Yahoo News on October 24-25. Altogether 165 items on the press meet were tracked down. For the primary analysis, 58 stories were shortlisted on basis of the following criteria:

- items carried on Indian newspaper websites
- items carried on Indian television channel websites
- items carried on news portals of Indian origin
- items carried on India-centric/India-focused foreign website
- items carried on foreign newspapers and TV channels websites (with own staffers or Indian news agencies)
- items creeded by international news agencies with an Indian story origin.

Items of international news agencies carried on websites of foreign newspapers/portals etc were counted, but not shortlisted for analysis—there were 106 such stories in all. The study did not look at print editions of newspapers or monitor news bulletins of television channels.



■ Naming the Victims of Rape — Why it Hurts, What Can Help

By Migael Scherer

After all the loud debate about "public good" and "right to know," it is time to say the words that are best said quietly. The most important reason to refrain from publishing the names of women (and children and men) who report the crime of rape is a simple one: it hurts.

First, it hurts victims. After I was raped 15 years ago, my immediate need was for compassion and protection, not scrutiny and exposure. The aftershock — the numb fear, the nightmares and flashbacks — lasted for months. What I did not have to deal with additionally, thank god, was the publication of my name and all the invasion that represents. Instead, I could choose who to tell and who not to tell. And each time I made this decision, small as it may seem, I reclaimed a little bit of what the rapist had taken from me: a sense of control.

Publishing the victim's name at the time of a trial is equally hurtful, even if the trial occurs long after the assault itself. Under the best of circumstances (steady support, respectful police and prosecutors — which I was lucky to have) a trial is a second assault that disrupts any healing that has taken place and reawakens the initial trauma. The risk of an acquittal or plea-bargain is high, as is the fear that the rapist will retaliate. What is to be gained that is worth adding to our already considerable burden?

Second, it hurts the community. The 1992 Rape in America study found that women stated they would be "far more likely to report" if their names were made public. Given the long-range impact of rape on society, what's seen by some journalists as a cop-out should instead be viewed as necessary to making the community safer from sexual violence.

I agree that speaking out can help erase the stigma of rape. But bear in mind that the stigma is not borne directly by the media or the general public, but by those of us who have been sexually assaulted. We are the ones who hear the responses that hurt, however inadvertently; responses that blame ("Why didn't you scream?") or minimize our trauma ("I read about a woman who was raped by two guys!") or even punish ("You're never going out alone again!"). The choice to speak out—if, when and how—belongs most rightfully to us.

Nevertheless, I am heartened by the willingness of the press to pay serious attention to the crime of rape, and its desire to change the way it is perceived. But before exposing and inevitably hurting victims, it should consider and act on the following suggestions:

■ **Educate reporters.** In a profession where information is the product, it is critical that journalists learn about rape. Rape is NOT "just another crime" and must not be covered as such. It is intensely personal, its violence inescapably intimate. By forcefully penetrating my body, the rapist robbed me of myself. Reporters should understand this.

In Seattle, police, prosecutors, hospital emergency room

personnel and victim advocates receive specialized training for dealing with rape victims. They learn how to approach without confronting, how to phrase questions without blaming, and how to strengthen rather than victimize. The press wouldn't think of sending an uninformed reporter to cover a major league football game. Does it make sense to do so covering a rape story, where the potential for harm is so great?

■ **Educate the Public.** Covering an occasional high-profile case is not enough. The public needs help breaking down its own misinformation about this crime. For example, for every stranger rape story, three acquaintance rapes should also be covered in order to reflect reality and destroy stereotypes. Topics for in-depth reporting are endless: How many rapes occur each month, and where? Why are most rapes not reported to police? Why are most of these not prosecuted? Why are conviction rates low? What is being done to reduce the incidence of rape, and what positions do public officials take on this issue? What strategies have women used to survive a sexual assault or escape altogether?

Agencies that work with victims can be supported by covering their fund-raising events and interviewing their directors and advocates. Feature articles are needed that explain how to respond when a friend or loved one is raped. What will help her through a trial, if there is one? Trials themselves should be covered in a manner that does not blame the victim or make excuses for the accused. The press in this country does an outstanding job with AIDS coverage. It can do the same with rape.

■ **Empower the victims of rape.** More of us will speak out if we believe we will be treated with respect by the press. Our trust must be earned by respecting our privacy and describing us and our ordeals sensitively. We deserve support; community safety often depends on women who, against all odds and without guarantee of prosecution or conviction, willingly endure the painful processes of the criminal justice system.

And the press can stop worrying about protecting the accused. He is already protected by the Constitution, assured of due process. It should never be forgotten that his victim is not represented by counsel (the prosecutor represents the state), is not warned that anything she says when and after she reports the crime may be used against her at trial (which it is), and, when the rapist is an acquaintance, she is often not even presumed innocent.

The media has the power to dispel the myths about rape, heighten awareness, and mobilize men and women to take action. A comprehensive approach, though slower and certainly less sensational, can do much good without re-traumatizing victims.

(Reproduced from the Dart Centre website.)

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