Kolkata horror

UTRAGE over the gruesome rape and murder of a young female medic in a Kolkata hospital is swelling across India. The victim's disfigured body was discovered nearly a week ago. Enraged women have taken to the streets under the banner of 'Women, Reclaim the Night: The Night is Ours', with doctors calling for a countrywide shutdown. While the gory incident serves as a reminder of the 2012 tragedy — a girl was brutalised and killed in a Delhi bus — this time the collective focus is on India's persistent epidemic of violence against women, and safety for its doctors. What aggravates matters is the fact that the episode is shrouded in allegations of a cover-up on the part of the West Bengal government, led by the country's sole woman chief minister, the police and the hospital administration.

India seems to be collapsing under the weight of its shame: its figures for crimes against women have alarmed the world for years, translating into a deep-seated repulsion for females. In 2022, the daily tally of reported rapes was 90. Activists maintain that predators have become increasingly emboldened under Prime Minister Narendra Modi due to a climate of political protection and lax law enforcement. Besides, India's National Crime Records Bureau reports a poor conviction rate for sexual violence - 27pc to 28pc from 2018 to 2022. The tragedy is not without lessons for Pakistan: prejudice, victim-shaming and the rampant 'rape versus rape' whataboutery consolidates misogyny, brutalises society and normalises rape. Hence, only unity against inequality and rigid patriarchal structures can ensure enforcement of laws, and raise conviction rates with solid evidence collection. As for India, abject poverty, communalism and an exploitative caste matrix have guaranteed impunity for crimes of power and control. In parts such as Uttar Pradesh, where many violators are linked to the BJP, the offence is an act of militant bigotry. India must restore empathy.

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