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## **Crossing Boundaries - Bras, Lingerie and Rape Myths: A Postcolonial Urban Middle-class Indian Context**

### **Abstract**

With the processes of modernization, urbanization and the entry of women in the formal labour market in Indian metropolitan spaces, this paper examines how the modern middle-class woman's sartorial choices become enmeshed in popular rape myths (false beliefs) that serve to blame her for the wearing of western clothing. The paper articulates the ways in which middle-class women's social realities are shaped by historical, colonial and nationalist ideologies of modernization, constructed and mediated through moral codes of dressing. By drawing upon original and contemporary empirical narratives from the urban spaces of Delhi and Mumbai, we emphasise how everyday sartorial choices, in relation to particularly the bra and lingerie, can reveal the nuanced ways in which Urban Indian Professional Women (UIPW) seek to understand, negotiate, and resist patriarchal power. Our findings shed light on conflicting and contradictory spatial experiences, where some women internalize and negotiate moral codes of dressing, out of fear, and others who transgress are subject to sanctions. Given the paucity of scholarly literature in this area, the paper makes an important theoretical and empirical contribution with its focus on postcoloniality and everyday discursive material spaces of gendered and sexualized dress practices. It argues for the consciousness raising of everyday urban geographies of dress that reveal complicated structures of power that are often deemed hidden.

**Keywords:** rape myths, lingerie, India, Postcoloniality, public, urban

## **Introduction**

Scholarly literature on rape identifies the significance of myths and stereotypes that generate hostility toward rape victims. Such myths and stereotypes are “defined as prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (Burt, 1980, 217). Crucially, such widely held false beliefs are said to trivialize, deny, and even justify sexual violence against women (Franiuk, Seefeldt, Ceyress, & Vandello, 2008; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). Popular rape myths focus on victim’s clothing, alcohol consumption, and so forth, and serve to portray the victim as socially transgressive, personally responsible, promiscuous, and a liar. It has been argued that rape myths can create cultural norms that may perpetuate and justify sexual violence against women (Burt, 1980). A new study into student views about rape in India shows that it was not uncommon for respondents to hold false beliefs which held women to be personally responsible for their so called “skimpy” and “slutty” clothing (Barn & Powers, 2018). Scholarly research has helped promote our understanding of such thinking within the context of attribution theory where women who transgress traditional gender norms by wearing provocative clothes are regarded as worthy of punishment (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Such views serve to restrict women’s sense of agency, autonomy, and freedom and result in victim blaming. This paper examines how the modern middle-class woman’s sartorial choices become enmeshed in popular rape myths that serve to blame her for the wearing of western clothing. The paper articulates the ways in which middle-class women’s social realities are shaped by historical, colonial and nationalist ideologies of modernization, constructed and mediated through moral codes of dressing.

With the processes of globalization, urbanization and neo-liberalism, and as an increasing number of Indian women enter public urban spaces, their presence in the workplace and in spaces of leisure is being deemed as problematic where ‘western’ lifestyles are being equated with an invitation to rape (Butcher 2017). Indeed, the BBC documentary, *India’s Daughter*, testifies to this in the convict’s portrayal of Nirbhaya as ‘westernized’, and therefore worthy of rape as punishment for her transgression (Barn, Barn & Raimondi 2018; Barn and Powers, 2018).

Whilst there has been an exponential increase in reporting over the last several years, it is generally believed that rape often goes unreported in India, partly because of victim blaming (Barn and Kumari, 2015). Women who come forward are frequently blamed for going against traditional Indian cultural beliefs and enticing attackers by adopting non-traditional cultural ideals of wearing revealing western clothing such as ‘skimpy mini-skirts’, drinking alcohol or being outdoors after dark (Doshi 2016, 27). It is said that ‘the raped woman is responsible for the crime against her because either she crossed the *lakshman rekha* of time (going out after dark) or the *lakshman rekha* of respectability (dressing in an unconventional ways or by leaving the four walls of her home at all) (Menon: 2012, 113). Kurian (2018) reports that during the December 2012 anti-rape protests in India, a rights based social movement stressed gender equality and a stop to sexual violence through slogans such as ‘Don’t tell me how to dress, Tell him how not to rape’, ‘freedom not protection’ etc. Thus, wearing western clothing, frequenting bars after dark, and drinking alcohol are considered ‘modern’ or “westernized” behavior in Indian media debates and the rhetoric of Hindu cultural nationalism, including comments citing “western lifestyles” as contributing to rape in urban India (Butcher 2017, 4). These lifestyle choices are

mostly accessible to middle-class, urban, professional women with greater levels of economic freedom. This is somewhat different to rural Indian women, whose access to these spaces are limited. Arguably, a single category of a woman, or an Indian woman does not exist and it is crucial to recognize differences of caste, class, faith, etc. (Guru 1995; Rege 1998). Our article, however, focuses on the urban middle-class context only and unpacks the hidden geographies of clothing and their meanings, in this case ‘inherently western clothing’ namely the bra and lingerie. These items of clothing provide insight into how patriarchal surveillance and reproduction of gendering urban space plays out particularly for middle-class Indian women in India (Sangari and Vaid 1990). Moreover, we observe how these powers are embedded within historical nationalist anxieties and linked to a version of western colonial modernity mediated through global consumerism. This is important to understand within a context of mythical codes of dressing against rape (Rajan 2003). We point out that importance of studying the bra and and lingerie and the insights into how the problem of what to wear (Tarlo 1996; Jantzen et al 2006) as women enter the public sphere embodies larger social and cultural ethics and norms, uncovering powerful statements about myths related to sex, sexuality and identity-making. The bra and lingerie are used interchangeably, during the field research respondents used both terms interchangeably. A precise definition of what constitutes lingerie, or the bra is subjective to the wearer - underwear that one woman considers to be lingerie may be conceived as an everyday bra by another women ( Begum 2018).

### ***Materials and Methods***

The analysis in this article draws upon findings from a wider study that sought to deconstruct the power and postcolonial meanings of the lingerie for urban Indian professional women (UIPW). Ethnographic fieldwork involving qualitative interviews

was undertaken in the urban spaces of the metropolitan cities of Delhi and Mumbai between 2010-2015. These cities were chosen on the basis of having the highest number of middle-class professional working women and the highest number of visibly new public spaces for women, such as coffee shops, bars, western clothing, bra/lingerie retail spaces. This article extends beyond our study's initial remit on middle-class urban women and global marketing and here only focuses on the open-ended responses related to western clothing, bra, lingerie and rape myths. Open-ended responses were gathered as part of semi-structured surveys, interviews and focus groups. English-speaking, educated, middle-class and upper middle-class women, aged between 20-40 working in Delhi and Mumbai were recruited from shopping malls, coffee shops, restaurants, and food-courts. A total of 30 women from each city were surveyed, followed by 10 in-depth interviews and two focus groups (one in Delhi and one in Mumbai). Bras were not commonly worn by middle-class Indian women until the influence of non-traditional western fashions and the mass manufacturing of bras in India around 1953. The closest garment to a bra within the history of Indian's dress is the *choli* (sari blouse) (Begum 2018). Choli styles vary including modern, revealing and sexualising styles, however these styles are still perceived inherently Indian and within the confines of tradition, thus deemed modest and suitable for middle-class Indian society. With the bra and lingerie however, visibility and discussion of the garments in public still remains a taboo topic in India. This is due to the overt associations with progressive Westernness and non-traditional cultural ideals. Bra and lingerie adverts are predominately confined to the pages of women's lifestyle magazines aimed at middle-class Indian women aspiring to western fashions. Therefore, due to limited research on bras and lingerie in India and the sensitive nature of the topic linked to sexuality, a further 35 responses were collated

through secure online surveys. The semi-structured survey acted as an initial conversation starter leading to in-depth interview-like responses during individual and focus group discussions. This was particularly pertinent for the survey questions which asked respondents to comment on a series of global and local bra and lingerie adverts. Although the survey questions were not initially designed to explore rape myths attributed to bras and lingerie, the responses offered a deeper insight into how female sexuality and moral codes of dressing are constructed through victim-blaming narratives of shame and defiance of Indian tradition. Our own identities as second generation, professional, South Asian women, living in the urban city of London, to an extent, helped us unpack the responses, as we too understood the experience of switching between traditional Indian clothes and western fashions to manage our surroundings, and to go between traditional domestic settings, western work settings and public transport. Many characteristics worked in our favour, we were of a similar age range, in our thirties and forties, had friends and family in Delhi and Mumbai, and were able to speak and understand Hindi and could relate to references made to Indian media and Bengal history. During the course of the fieldwork, the high-profile December 2012 'Nirbhaya' Delhi rape case involving a middle-class Indian student led to the emergence of an explicit discourse on rape, victim blaming and clothing, linked to sexual harassment and 'eve-teasing'<sup>1</sup> in urban spaces such as public transport. Eve-teasing refers to the making of unwanted sexual remarks or advances by a man to a woman in a public place. Eve-teasing, as an offence, does not find a specific mention in the statute books of India. However, various sections of the Indian penal code related to outraging a women's modesty (section 354); verbal insults, sexual gestures intended to harass a woman (section 509); unwelcome physical or verbal sexual conduct (section 354a); voyeurism (section 354b) and stalking (354d)

broadly cover eve-teasing offences. Pseudonyms are employed in the discussion below, to maintain anonymity of respondents. For ethical sensitivity reasons, respondents were not asked to disclose their actual age during the conversations but were asked to confirm which age range they belonged to.

### **Gender, Clothing and Control in Modern Urban Spaces**

In rape trials, the female victim is frequently interrogated about her choice of clothing and whether it was socially and culturally appropriate and whether it played a role in enticing the attacker (Sterling 1995). The frequent reference made to sexualized western (interchangeable with modern) clothing such as lingerie and bras and ‘comparisons made to western women and their attitudes to and their supposed attitudes to sex can be found in formal judgements as well as in statements on rape by officials’ (Menon 2012, 116). This is not only directed at questioning the victim’s moral code of conduct and of crossing the *lakshman rekha* of respectability (Menon 2012, 113), but that of sartorial surveillance as a means to regulate women’s equal access to public spaces and modernization. In the Indian context this is closely linked to historical nationalist ideologies to retain middle-class Indian women’s roles as symbolic bearers of tradition and nationhood (Mani 2014; Tarlo 1996;) against western modernization (Radhakrishnan 2012). Women’s western clothing in particular becomes a visible marker of difference and otherness within the framework of nationalist thinking. Such ideology postulates that Indian women retain traditional dress as a symbol of nationhood and as a form of resistance to modernization equating to westernization.



This nationalist anxiety surrounding modernity is evident in the rise of Hindu-nationalist surveillance of acceptable and unacceptable dressing for middle-class Indian women in public spaces. In 2009, the Hindu right-wing group Sri Rama Sen (SRS) launched an attack on a group of women for attending a pub in Mangalore, South India. Forty SRS activists entered a pub and dragged out and beat up a group of young women, by claiming that they were bringing shame to Indian traditional values by engaging in public display of affection amongst couples, smoking, drinking alcohol and wearing western clothes (Subramanian 2015). As a response to this, a peaceful protest was launched. Clothing, namely underwear was appropriated to coin the name for the women's rights campaign *Pink Chaddis* (pink panties/knickers). A group of middle-class urban Indian women came together through the Facebook group named 'Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women', and urged women across India to send their pink panties through the letter boxes of SRS activists in time for Valentine's Day 2009. Over 2000 chaddis were said to have been couriered, making it a landmark protest against gendered space, and norms (Banerjee 2015; Menon 2012; Subramanian 2015). Similar resistance has been seen across India in anti-rape protests. During the 2011 Besharmi Morcha (Hindi for Shameless Rally) in Delhi, the demand for greater access to safe spaces was mediated through placards and posters demanding the freedom to choose what to wear. In an earlier march in Bhopal, an anti-rape poster campaign boldly stated, 'Clothes Don't Rape, People Do' (Mitra 2012, 256).

With the spectacular rise in Hindu nationalism across India (Anand 2016; Roy 2012), the surveillance and regulation of women's dressed bodies in public need to be scrutinized. Surveillance is more than a simple patriarchal need to control female

sexuality but coincides with religious fundamentalist response to the 1990s privatized media's consumerist rhetoric of the arrival of the 'modern' 'new women' (Mitra-Khan 2012; Oza 2001). Religious fundamentalist groups sought to control the new woman's greater access into public spaces, gained through and complicated by neoliberal modernization and globalization at that time (Bhattacharya 2015; Butcher 2017; Phadke 2013; Parikh 2017; Radhakrishnan 2012). One of the ways in which control was exercised was through the opposition to visibly western lifestyles for Indian women. Thus reflecting how the fear of globalization and 'the loss of economic changes is displaced onto the women's sexuality and bodies', therefore containment requires 'securing the female body and sexuality against transgression' (Oza 2001, 1079), included reinstating myths that displace blame upon bodies outside of this transgression (Butcher 2017; Menon 2012). This is explored through rape myths attached to non-traditional, perceived western and sexualized clothing items such as the bra and lingerie. Other items of clothing, for the lack of perceived intimacy, western heritage and proximity to the body and sexuality, do not lend the same depth of insight into the gendered body and its relation to power.

This can be seen in the public spaces of bra and lingerie advertising in India. In India both global and local brands are sold on the site of white western bodies (Begum 2018). Indian women are made absent from public spaces of lingerie advertising, in order to contain their roles to the private spaces and retain their roles as bearers of tradition, chastity and purity (Begum 2018). This leads to the double-colonization (Sangari and Vaid 1990; Roy 2012) of Indian women's sexuality and access to public space – clothing linked to modernity/transgression is sold on the site of westernized bodies, chastising the Indian woman's sexuality, yet if she is present, poses a threat to national borders. In order to understand how this double-bind perpetuates rape myths,

the sexualized meanings attached to western clothing provides an important insight into how middle-class female sexuality has historically been sartorially constructed along these cultural borders.

A significant proportion of the work on gender has been drawn out from the resistance to essentialising and privileged western views of feminism in contemporary middle-class India (Jayawardena 1986; Loomba and Lukose 2012; Menon 2012; Purkayastha et al 2003; Sangari and Vaid 1990; Roy 2012; Spivak 2014). Therefore, previous studies of dress and rape myths outside of the Indian context (Montemurro and Gillen 2013; Workman and Orr 1996) are not sufficient. Additionally, whilst 'feminist geographers have explored the spatialization of fear and how women navigate public space' (Parikh 2017), and although reference is made to how this fear is managed by women through dressing appropriately, modestly or in non-provocative ways; there is a paucity of academic scholarship that links this to postcolonial ideologies and geographies of dress. It can be said that rape myths and the formation of rape myths through dress culture and clothing is universal, but as Loomba and Lukose (2012, 3) have argued 'regarding how we understand South Asia, is that, of two pressing concerns, 'the first: historical recovery of the precolonial and colonial past, and second, the postcolonial formation of the nation-state'. Undoubtedly, rape and rape myths are embedded in a framework of power and patriarchy where control over women's sexuality is maintained through an ideology of victim blaming and social control.

### **Postcoloniality and Sartorial Boundaries of Public and Private Respectability**

Both the Mughal and British rule scrutinized and controlled middle-class Indian women's sexual identities and ways of dressing, by imposing rules of modest and virtuous dressing that confined their sexualities into the private sphere of the home (Begum 2018). However it is by focusing on the British colonial rule that we are able to understand how moral and sartorial codes were introduced by elite men to police middle-class Indian women's access to urban public spaces during periods of economic growth and modernization.

The British believed the only hope for moral redemption of Indian society was through its treatment of Indian women (Banerji 2008; Chatterjee 1989; Mani 1987). This led to various women's reform movements being started by westernized, middle-class and upper-class Hindu/*Brahmo* Bengali men. This became known as the Bengal Renaissance, a strong nationalist movement leading up to India's independence in 1947 (Tarlo 1996). It was during this Bengal renaissance that a strand of Bengali male intelligentsia decided to consciously engage with a European ideal femininity taken from the English memsahibs, otherwise known as the *bhadramahila* (the gentlewoman). This Hindu Bengali male intelligentsia and the Brahmoists led public campaigns in magazines, mostly available to upper class women, to inform middle-class Indian women of domestic roles and how to dress and behave in society (Bannerji 2001; Macmillan 2007).

The Brahmoists, unlike the Bengali male intelligentsia upheld strong beliefs against foreign goods and therefore traditional moral codes of dressing clashed with the British and Hindu Bengali male intelligentsia's rules of modern decorum and dressing influenced by Christian virtue (Bannerji 2001). This oscillation between middle-class

Hindu intelligentsia and Brahmo values demonstrate the continuous male surveillance and discursive powers of modernity and tradition on women's sexuality and identity at the time. It is within these ideological constructs of Hindu and Brahmo men that boundaries of public and private space for women were created and mediated through sartorial codes of moral dressing.

Hindu and Brahmo men postulated that women maintain a relationship between the *ghar* (home/inner) and *bahir* (world/outer) selves using dress as a moral signifier of her social role, her *samaj* (society) and her class (Chatterjee 1989). This included how a woman should cover and uncover and what styles and dress were morally and aesthetically suitable for middle-class society (Bannerji 2001; Karlekar 2005). Patriarchal views of *Samaj* influenced Indian women's view of their own identities. Middle-class women started to internalize patriarchal dictates and self-scrutinize their identities. The *bhadramahilas*' discussed how an urban woman should manage her body and her sexuality through respectable ways of dressing. Particular reference was made to how to manage modest, virtuous and non-sexual sartorial identities (Bannerji 2001). Yet, *Bhadramahilas* drew further attention to the female body and sexuality through explicit forms of prohibition. Therefore like the middle-class Hindu men and Brahmo men, *Bhadramahilas* through their regime of power and knowledge, took part in re-shaping Indian women's notions and aspirations of the concurrent themes of virtuosity (civility, decorum) and duality of *lajja* (shame) and *izzat* (honour) (Bannerji 2001; Begum 2018). Today it is this inner/outer distinction that continues to separate women's role in the home (*ghar*) and the male (*bahir*) role in the world (Chatterjee 1989). Furthermore, the home was reconstituted to sex and sexuality as a pure space of

Indian culture, uncontaminated by the colonial encounter (Banerjee 2015), symbolic of a pure and chaste space.

After Indian Independence (1947), essentialist views towards sexuality and westernization made Indian women subject to new forms of patriarchy. Both Indian men and women were expected to adapt to the external modern world of materiality; however Indian women were still expected to retain their inner spirituality, uphold tradition and became symbolic bearers of nationhood (Chatterjee 1989; Oza 2001). New conditions of patriarchy were evidenced in the way that Indian men and women adopted moral codes of behavior and western dress after Independence. While the greater entrance of Indian men into the urban workplace after Independence changed their food habits and dress (adopting public smoking, drinking and western dress), Indian women continued to be under the surveillance and control of patriarchal codes of shame and honour and ideologically confined to the private space of the home to uphold their roles as guardians of traditional Indian culture (Chatterjee 1989; Tarlo 1996; Banerjee and Miller 2003) (such as refraining from smoking, drinking and continuing to wear traditional clothes in public). These patriarchal moral attitudes also heightened the shamelessness and eroticization of dressed westernized bodies, reinforcing clothing as the porous boundary and frontier between the self and society (Crewe 2017), good and bad bodies (Parikh 2017; Butcher 2017).

Middle-class Indian women's status was further complicated as they entered the new spheres of public life such as the workforce in greater numbers during the 1970s (Sangari and Chakravati 1999; Oza 2006; Radhakrishnan 2012), and in the context of globalization and economic liberalization of the 1980s/1990s and expansion of the

consumer goods market. This change was most apparent in the urban middle-classes who aspired for social mobility and to join the global ranks (Oza 2006). Newspapers, magazines, advertisements, constructed the imagination of the new modern middle-classes (Mazzarella 2003; Thapan 2004). ‘The emergence of the “new liberal Indian woman” as the self-assured, independent rich, and fashionable woman during this time became the mimetic trope of the nation of in globalization’ (Oza 2006, 13). However, women’s status remained paradoxical, since women were encouraged to be modern but not ‘too modern’ (Oza 2006, 13). Women were expected to also retain their roles as bearers of tradition and abide by elite patriarchal codes of dressing and respectability recycled from the colonial and pre-colonial era. Parallel to this period of heightened global consumerism, the fact that a large number of middle-classes were upper-class and Hindu, meant Hindu nationalists gained power. Although separate developments, liberalization and nationalism gave way to competing visions of modernity – Indian modernity steeped in a modern version of Hinduism, and global modernity steeped in Nehruvian secularism and technological advancement. On the one hand, middle-class Indian women’s bodies became the symbol of global modernity for the Hindu nationalist movement led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1998. Who at the same time as launching the first nuclear test (suffused in masculinist rhetoric) to place India on the global stage also placed Indian women on the global stage to reflect modernity through the showcasing of their bodies for Miss World contests (Oza 2001). On the other hand, their modern bodies became representational sites where national culture is threatened. Miss India pageants were met with hostility by far-right Hindu groups who protested that western clothing like lingerie and swimsuits are symbols of western lifestyles and a threat to national identities and borders (Dewey 2008; Oza 2001). These competing ideologies manifest in gendered sartorial representations within popular

culture narratives (Mankekar 1999). Images of scantily clad heroines and heroes in both traditional Indian or Western dress engaging in seductive, dance numbers on film and television screens across the country are ubiquitous representational forms of a global, modern and territorialized India. Popular Bollywood sartorial styles from backless saree and lehenga (long skirt) blouses to mid-section revealing outfits are endorsed by middle-class viewers without any significant pushback from the Hindu right-wing groups. These media representations assume the conflict between tradition and modernity has been resolved for women. Yet in reality, the visibility of liberalized forms of female sexuality in physical public spaces are perceived to be ‘too modern’ and posing a threat to patriarchal cultural borders – as seen in the moral panic and backlash against middle-class women’s sartorial choices in the Mangalore attacks and the perpetual issue of western clothing, victim blaming and rape myths.

The distinctions between male and female spatial relations demonstrate the Indian nation’s boundaries and borders contested upon the site of the female body. The dichotomies are insightful and reveal the discourse surrounding western dress and rape myths as closely linked to the patriarchal nationalist struggle for the constant desire to carve out a masculine pure space, representative of an Indian version of cultural modernity (Oza 2001, Thapan 2004). In this instance, Hindu right sentiments reflected in the Mangalore attacks leading up to the Pink Chaddis campaign, are rooted in the Hindu nationalist stance of maintaining women’s role in the domestic sphere as occupying the ‘inner spiritual sphere...shielded from the influences of Western civilization’ (Oza: 2001, 1084). This includes shielding women from material signs of westernization, such as the wearing of western clothing and engagement with ‘impure’ and ‘sexualized’ urban public spaces such as city bars and pubs. What garments such



as the bra and lingerie demonstrate, that other revealing garments in India do not, is that economic modernity (represented in the sartorial forms of backless sari blouses, tight-fitting shalwar kameez) is welcome by nationalists, however cultural modernity – predominately understood as Western – is not (Oza 2006, 25). It is how these patriarchal anxieties around globalization, and how they are practiced, performed and displaced onto women’s bodies that perpetrate victim blaming on an everyday level that we analyse in the following sections.

## **Findings and Discussion**

In these findings, we reveal how new urban spaces offer UIPW a sense of agency afforded through employment, economic empowerment and seductive narratives of modern consumption. However, the ways in which this agency is controlled, negotiated and contested by respondents through sexualized dress practices on an everyday level in public spaces reveals a reality that is far from empowering. Social reality, being the perceived degree of freedom and sexual agency for UIPW, remains hindered by internalized patriarchal, historical, colonial, and nationalist tensions of women’s position within global modernity. These tensions are studied through respondents’ moral attitudes towards appropriate and respectable dressing against rape.

### ***Contesting a time and place***

The importance of generating a sense of physical and psychological control and security in certain places and times, through the wearing of a well-fitted bra, was a strong theme in the study. In this theme, respondents discussed how they fashioned a

sense of embodied security and self-control to avoid uncertainty in public spaces such as the workplace and on public transport. Choosing the right bra became a self-surveillance tool to manage established rules and routines of professional dressing within the backdrop of the rapidly changing and modernized workplace of Delhi and Mumbai. Here the need to avoid professional scrutiny was not related to making the right business decisions but with making respectable sartorial decisions. Beena, a middle-class (aged 35-44), single, senior manager in a global bank in the financial district of Gurgaon Delhi, working in an open plan office stated how:

It's easier to get away with not wearing a bra or an ill-fitting bra under salwar kameez, because you have the dupatta [scarf] to cover your chest, but nowadays most working women wear western clothes or even fitted kameezes'...with guys around, you just shouldn't have something [bra] which sticks out under your clothes, you can, but it's not professional.

Beena's anxiety of making sure she maintains a sense of professionalism in the workplace by wearing a well-fitted bra and avoiding embarrassing situations like a visible bra strap can be read as a well-fitting bra is necessary for comfort, yet she goes on to comment 'with guys around...', which reflects the ways in which wearing the right bra for comfort is complicated by the male gaze. For Beena, in her role as a senior manager, it was essential to negotiate both a respectable and professional identity which the modern office demands, as well as maintain respectable codes of dressing within a middle-class male dominated office. In sum, this reflects the ways 'women are being asked to rise to the imperatives of the market and to the call of the myth [in this case how revealing bra straps encourage eve-teasing] as it were' (Sangari and Chakravati 1999: xix). This was further illustrated through the

concurrent theme of the right fit, a code for the need to feel in control and secure, at the right time in the right place. Pooja, (aged 25-34), a student in Delhi expressed the opinion 'Because if we choose it right it makes us feel secure inside'. Rohini (aged 35-44), single, an urban planner from Delhi, stated that:

there is so much tension around female dress in India now, lots of blame on women wearing the wrong clothes, revealing clothes, tight clothes and western clothes, this is not something new, we just naturally think about making sure we wear the right bra to get respect and not get harassed on the streets. We need to make the public spaces safer and design them better in general.

Wearing the 'right clothing' is an attitude women adopt and internalise to control safety and protect themselves in public spaces when private transport is unavailable. Surma, (aged 25-34), in Mumbai compares her city to Delhi below. Although Delhi is perceived as having better transport links, she states that:

It's a problem in Delhi [too], most people have drivers, more women working, getting the bus, the metro, out there... still if you are getting the bus you need to feel secure, comfortable and good about being a woman.

These attitudes of dressing appropriately on public transport are closely linked to safety, as well as moral codes of dressing linked to maintaining family honour and respectability outside of the home. One of the interviewees Bhavini (aged between 35-44) a married working woman in Mumbai linked this to reputation:

We care about reputation, I don't want to bring problems for my family or for my daughters to be careless; it's important to think about all dress choices not just bra.

References made to public transport are particularly interesting, as eve-teasing and sexual harassment on public transport in India is commonplace as evidenced by recent research by Madan & Nalla (2016); Natarajan (2016); Parikh (2017) and Butcher (2017). According to Beena, Pooja, Rohini and Surma dressing to avoid sexual harassment and sexual tensions is a key factor in regulating appearance. This is validated by comments attached to the high importance placed on generating a sense of bodily control through ensuring a good fit in clothing. This was necessary to negotiate a sense of safety in urban public spaces. Greater visibility of women in public spaces makes women more vulnerable to frequent harassment by men in public spaces. Thus, the right underwear is required to create boundaries between the private space of the Indian woman's body and public space of the male gaze and what Phadke (2013) argues is a case of protesting the overarching narrative that cities are violent spaces and that women are better off not accessing them at all. This is reinforced by Surma's opinion of Delhi as an unsafe city compared to Mumbai, a city which requires middle-class women to have drivers to access public spaces safely. Surma's comments relating to Delhi being unsafe for women contradicts the fact that Mumbai is home to one of the most powerful Hindu right-wing political movements and parties, the Shiv Sena. This comment is further complicated by the fact that an increasing number of women in Mumbai wear western dress in the city compared to other metropolitan cities. When Surma is asked to respond to why she thinks Mumbai is safer, she states:

Mumbai is more crowded, if you are being attacked you can always run to people for help, Delhi there is hardly anyone on the streets...Delhi is full of macho bhaiyyas [brothers] Punjabi and Muslim .

Sangeeta (25-34), living with her partner and working for a global alcohol brand in Mumbai makes a passing comment about safety and rape in Delhi:

Your research is interesting, are you alone [reply: yes]...where are you going next [reply: Delhi, the malls in Delhi and markets]...Do you have a driver [reply: yes, organized by the family that I am staying with]...be careful nah, Delhi is not like Bombay, I've heard just last week there are cases of rape there every week, be careful who you approach nah, lingerie is still taboo, I live with my [male] partner so I can shop in lingerie boutiques like this, I don't feel comfortable going to those market and all eyes on you.

Sangeeta's concerns about researching a taboo subject such as lingerie and her connections to rape reinforce the ways in which clothing and rape narratives can manifest. For Sangeeta, researching lingerie, a subject closely linked to sexuality, immediately leads her to consider our safety. For Sangeeta, shopping in safe spaces such as in sexy lingerie boutiques with female assistants was more preferable to open markets with male assistants. Additionally, her comment about living with her partner reinforces the ways in which displays of sexuality are only legitimized when in a respectable relationship yet expressing sexuality outside of the private space of a home and in open environments under the male gaze places UIPW at risk of being eve-teased and vulnerable to rape.

Sangeeta's and Surma's comment reflects the ways in which middle-class women appropriate patriarchal codes of respectability, in the same frame as anti-Westernism,

anti-Islam and cultural invasion of national identity of far-right Hindu groups. Sangeeta's attitudes towards relationships and familial structures as a means to legitimise sexuality, reinscribes the double-edged sword of the new woman rhetoric, one which 'firmly inscribes women in the family while embracing the demands of contemporary consumer capitalism and global economic restructuring' (Sangari and Chakravati 1999: xviii). These micropolitics, reveal how myths are self-regulated, decentred and reinstated by the contradictions and disparities of the marketplace – in the case of rape myths and clothing these power dynamics, add weight to the reinvention of gendered myths along the lines of consuming pleasure outside the spaces of respectability and cultural/religious values.

### ***Contesting respectability, bodies of lajja and izzat***

The constant need to manage shame and decency reveals how historical and postcolonial concepts of lajja and izzat related to public and private identity still continue to shape the psychological and social identities of UIPW studied.

Historically concepts of lajja/izzat were shaped according to various dictates by male sages of feminine identity in Hindu scriptures (Sinha and Chauhan 2013). In contemporary India, these codes of shame and modesty are arguably recycled in the way that Indian women choose to manage tensions of modernity, for example in entering uncertain/new public spaces, choosing between traditional and western clothing (symbolic form of western modernity and globalization) and in negotiating dress codes dictated by elite male work cultures. These meanings mirror historical, patriarchal and colonial codes of lajja/izzat linked to elite Hindu nationalist male tensions of western modernity. Managing codes of lajja/izzat are particularly implicit

in the opinions around the visibility of bra straps in the workplace. Respondent Josna (aged 45-54), married, in part-time office employment in Mumbai, in an interview stated:

I like to feel comfortable, you don't want to have seams and straps showing, people might think you are too modern or too rebellious...if you are seen to be rebellious then you are a target of gossip and shame...some girls wear what they want but we don't say what to do, it's up to her to deal with gossip.

Bella, (aged 25-34), junior manager, during the survey in her office in the financial district of Gurgaon, Delhi, discussed how the right fit is more important than style when maintaining one's reputation for the workplace. Bella goes on to say that:

I prefer a good fit and comfort with lingerie, it really feels uncomfortable when you are wearing all that stylish lingerie, but you can't handle it. It's really embarrassing when they droop down, and you feel, ahh... And we keep on arranging and fixing our lingerie from the outer clothes which makes it feel more uncomfortable and disrespectful especially in the work environment.

The modern workplace is a place which demands women to self-regulate and police their appearance to maintain both a level of professional modesty, as well as novelty and style. Here *lajja/izzat* are evident through codes of fit and comfort. For Josna and Bella, wearing the right bra/lingerie plays an important role in providing comfort and fit to make sure they don't become targets for gossip or harassment as a result of being perceived too modern or sexual for the work environment. These codes of modesty and comfort are linked to the wearing of western clothes, which influence

wearing the right lingerie to manage codes of modest western dressing in line with cultural beliefs. Here we see the ways in which the bra and lingerie, similar to the dupatta is 'embedded in and embodies the female code of honour in subtle and nuanced ways' (Werbner 2007, 172) and plays out as a rule of dressing, only now disguised under a range of identities across poles of traditional and modern sartorial choices.

These moral conducts of virtuous and modest dress practices of covering of the female body and breasts are recycled from the colonial era of upper middle-class Bengali wives' codes of moral dressing (Chatterjee 1989). These attitudes extend the active male gaze (Mulvey's 1975) into that of the active postcolonial female gaze, where it is the elite male nationalist discourse of moral dressing which dictates which middle-class bodies are acceptable and which are unacceptable in the public eye, which bodies can and cannot be blamed for cultural defiance. The postcolonial gaze here acts in similar ways to the panopticon (Foucault 1977; Jantzen et al 2006; Begum 2018 ) in which the respondents have internalized the nationalist elite male gaze to regulate their bodies and to hold themselves accountable. The views of respondents related to 'disrespect' and 'discomfort' reinforce the controlling power of codes of *lajja/izzat*. These opinions on feminine identity, are a strong reflection of the continuation of elite male colonial myths of *lajja/izzat* which classifies female identity as respectable or dishonouring. The internalization and policing of self and other identities through clothing choice mirrors anxieties of earlier elite male national and religious struggles which have sought to desexualise and relegated female identity into the private sphere. These constructs of *lajja/izzat* perpetuate clothing and rape



myths, the internalization of moral codes of dressing leads to both self-blaming and victim blaming.

## **Conclusion**

Study findings reinforce how UIPW internalise patriarchal rape myths attached to clothing. It is such insights around moral codes of dressing, that illustrate myth making and false beliefs attached to which bodies are legitimate for the public gaze and which are not; what clothing is deemed provocative in public spaces and which is not; and how these codes are entangled within multiple patriarchal, national, colonial power struggles constructed by elite middle-class men for middle-class women.

Moral codes of sexuality are mediated through the gendered space of the dressed modern/western body. These codes are revealed as being closely linked to shame and modesty, or specifically the Indian codes namely *lajja* (shame) and *izzat* (honour), terms which frequently come up within the discourse of the gendered spaces and rape in South Asia. South Asian notions of honour, shame and female sexual modesty have dominated group social relations and are a salient feature of South Asian societies (Werbner 2007; Begum, Dasgupta and Lewis 2018). These notions make public sexual intimacy and public space a central factor of control. Central to wearing the right lingerie/bra, or any form of sexualized clothing outside of the nationalist discourse of respectability is the constant need to negotiate a sartorial safe space of bodily control against provocation and sexual harassment. This became explicit as respondents attached high importance to the fit of clothing for the purposes of maintaining professionalism and respectability within the public spaces such as public transport and male-dominated open-plan modern offices.

The nationalist associations attached to inherently western garments such as bras and lingerie reveal that the narrative of the post-independence Indian female form remains a political body and a site of resistance that remains subjugated to the Indian project of modernity, and ultimately a site of conflict constitutive of power relations. The nationalist construction of both Indian and western women through moral codes of dressing shows how women's bodies still remain trapped within false myths, physical and embodied myths of where they can and cannot go and what they can and cannot wear in public spaces. An extended view of postcoloniality unpacks this essentialism, and it is this essentialism that needs to be brought to the attention of lawmakers who time and time again use clothing as a weapon of initiation in rape cases in India. The so-called western and modern clothing items that are symbolic of material crossing of borders, reflect how middle-class women's bodies in urban India, despite their greater access to education and economic freedom, still remain territorialized; and framed within hierarchical models of the body corresponding to varying degrees of social legitimacy and acceptance. The pressures of globalization and consumerism complicated by religious national agendas have further complicated inequalities for middle-class UIPW, making them targets for moral policing in a greater number of public and private contexts, mediated through clothing and codes of respectability and shame.

It could be said that the visible/invisible bra strap is symbolic of embodied national boundaries, a crossing, an 'ethnosexual frontier', an erotic intersection that is heavily 'patrolled, policed and protected, yet regularly are penetrated by ethnosexual settlers, sojourners, adventurers and invaders' (Nagel 2006, 545). In the case of clothing and

rape myths in India, these ethnosexual frontiers are mediated through the victims' bodies and clothing. The patriarchal nationalist view is that, if Indian women are patrolled (as seen in the Pink Chaddis incident) to retain traditional clothing (symbolic of their roles as bearers of nationhood), they can be protected from rape (impurity, erotic intersections and penetration from invaders). This struggle for carving nationhood perpetuates rape and victim blaming narratives – if the victim is not wearing traditional clothing, symbolic of upholding nationhood, her body cannot be protected from perpetrators, and must be made to feel shameful for erotic intersections with colonial borders.

If rape and clothing myths are to be dispelled in India, we need to keep revealing how neoliberal discourse of women's empowerment through sexualized and chaste consumption mediates and perpetrates fear and safety, good and bad, available and chaste bodies. We need to dispel that cultural assimilation (the wearing of western clothing or sexualized clothing) does not lead to the erasure of cultural borders, neither does the entrance of a greater number of Indian women into public space threaten male rights to public space. These myths are not only to be dispelled by men, but women too to avoid the policing of self and other female bodies in terms of what is deemed for example appropriate in public and in private spaces. By encoding the meanings attached to the bra and lingerie (locus between the inner/outer; global/local sexual/chaste; traditional/modern western) within an urban middle-class context, we provide a deeper understanding of the everyday micropolitics of globalization (from myths to markets) and the reinvention and resistance to patriarchal neoliberal power in the subjectivities of symbolically powerful women, which can be missed by grand analysis alone (Radhakrishnan 2012).

In this article we have demonstrated how a sense of safety is negotiated through everyday sartorial choices linked to sexuality, and how these choices shaped by rape myths legitimized by multiple regimes, including colonial and nationalistic ideologies of sexuality and space mediated through moral codes of dressing. We demonstrate how Popular rape myths focus on, amongst other things, victim's clothing and serve to portray the victim as socially transgressive, personally responsible, and promiscuous. In the context of our paper, we have shown how the bra and lingerie's association with Western ideals marks Indian women who make these sartorial choices appear transgressive, personally responsible and promiscuous. Through their narratives of the 'right fit', 'comfort', 'non-display of bra straps' etc; the women in our study sought to reduce perceptions of personal culpability and avoid the male gaze for fear of inviting unwelcome attention. Shining a light on women's subjective and situated reality is to reveal, expose, decenter and demonstrate the importance of holding perpetrators accountable, and not victims. It is by allowing women to narrate their own voices, that we can seek to raise consciousness of how everyday meanings of geographies of dress can reveal complicated structures of patriarchal power that expose, organise, recast and renovate dangerous myths that seek to continue the subjugation of women.

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