

WOMEN'S VIGILANTISM IN INDIA: A CASE STUDY OF THE PINK SARI GANG

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INTRODUCTION

On 18 December 1752, the New York Gazette reported that an 'odd Sect of People' had been appearing in New Jersey. Calling themselves the Regulars, they dressed in women's clothes, painted their faces and then visited the homes of reported wife-beaters. They stripped the abusive husband and flogged him with rods, chanting, 'Woe to the men that beat their wives'... The following year, the New York Gazette printed a letter by a 'Prudence Goodwife' whose husband had incurred the wrath of the Regulars: '[T]hey have regulated my dear husband, and the rest of the Bad Ones hereabouts that they are afraid of using such Barbarity; and I must with Pleasure acknowledge, that since my Husband has felt what whipping was, he has entirely left off whipping me, and promises faithfully he will never begin again.' (Cutler, *Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States* [New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969], quoted in Law 2011: 18)

Banwari Devi (52): 'C'mon take your clothes off (chal kapde utaar),' my rapist barked at me. He was a high caste man, he followed me into the field. I shouldn't have headed to the pastures alone, especially when the crops had already been harvested. But I really wanted to pee. When the crops are reaped, they are sliced off by sharp sickles, not uprooted, the dried ends of chopped stems are like a bed of nails... If I tried to run barefoot it would be like running over a field of spikes, the bottom of my feet would have been lacerated... I tried to run on the mud path and not through the field. But the man caught up with me and slammed my head against a tree... Then he took me. After he was finished, he spat on me. I was only eighteen. I went to the police, the politicians. Everyone said I had asked for it, going into the fields by myself. I wept a lot... didn't want to go near the pastures again... yet it was our only source of sustenance. My husband finally left me, and he took our boys. I was left with nothing at a young age. Now I am 52. Yes, I do go around beating men who attack village girls. You asked me why I joined the Gulabi Gang... So that women after me can walk through fields with long, fearless strides... (Personal interview with Banwari Devi, a Gulabi gang member, at a public demonstration in Delhi, 17th September 2009)

Historically, neighborhood vigilantism has proved to be an effective, short-term response strategy for localized forms of gender violence (Sen and Pratten 2007; Oomen 2004). Yet, these acts of retribution have often presented feminist scholars and activists across the world with a moral predicament (Baccheta and Powers 2002). For example, a substantial amount of literature on outlawed women combating crime in US ghettos has documented that poor women have taken self-defense classes and organized themselves into armed aggregates, primarily to lynch sexually abusive men in public (Rutter 2008; Cutler 1969). This scholarship has underlined reasons why women's illegal task forces (despite their limited successes) cannot not be entirely celebrated—as their agency to resist patriarchal cultures has not been bound by the aims and aesthetics of long-term feminist action (Parashar 2010; Ayyildiz 1996). In addition, some women's vigilante groups, such as anti-migrant hit squads patrolling the US-Mexico border regions, and anti-abortion activists, attack women across religious and ethnic divides (CNN Wire Staff 2011; Mason 2000). Despite the convoluted maxims associated with female vigilante practices, critiques of women's vigilantism acknowledge that collective acts of aggression create new feminine social linkages, which, in turn, allow certain women's groups to acquire physical and social mobility (Blee 2008; Sen 2006).

In India, contemporary women's vigilante groups battling dowry practices, wife-beating, and other gendered oppressions are usually affiliated with left-wing ideologies (Shah 2010) or extreme right associations (Sarkar and Butalia 1995), which renders their social positioning somewhat precarious. While informal male vigilantism, even that which benefits impoverished communities, can be easily criticized by state officials, scholars, and social workers; armed women fighting for the rights of their disempowered counterparts have created a great dilemma considering the long history of women's voicelessness in the region. Yet, in 2004,

when Akku Yadav, a thug who raped several women in a Nagpur slum, was castrated, blinded, and killed by a group of victimized women outside court, media reports of his spontaneous lynching gained the group enormous public sympathy, especially since this action displayed no overt links with party politics (Banerjee 2006). The northern-Indian Gulabi Gang or the Pink Sari Brigade (named after the group's electric-pink sari uniform) is one such rare vigilante group, which did not emerge in "political cadre-land", but as a response to the harsh needs of illiterate village women on the ground. Based in one of the poorest regions of Uttar Pradesh, the Pink Gang is considered to be the world's largest existing women's vigilante group, with 20,000 recruits in India and a newly established network in France.

This case study explores the quotidian philosophies and social logic of women's vigilantism through an analysis of the Gulabi Gang's activities. It shows how marginalized women, who have resorted to organized violence in an attempt to secure justice, walk a tightrope between legally reprehensible and socially condoned action. I argue that women's squads operating outside the legal system eventually take recourse to the language of politics and pacifism to gain validity and sustainability as a social movement. By drawing on the oral testimonies of Gulabi Gang members (some narratives documented by the author, and some derived from scholarly research and media accounts), this study highlights how female vigilantism, in most deprived societies, procures a legitimate space when viewed and examined through the model of "ethical violence", and related understandings of proportionate punishment for crimes against women (White and Rastogi 2009, 315). "In all the time that I have been with the gang, we only beat people, we have never murdered anyone," said Shanti, a gang member since 2007.

"IT'S A CURSE TO BE A DALIT WOMAN:" CONTEXTUALIZING FEMALE VIGILANTISM IN BANDA

The unofficial headquarters of the Pink Gang are located in the dusty agricultural town of Badausa in the heart of Banda, a blighted area of Uttar Pradesh, one of India's most populous states. According to economic reports on the region, Banda has been particularly plagued by years of drought that severely parched its arid, single-crop lands. It was identified as one of India's poorest districts, and targeted by the state government's large-scale jobs program. Over 20 percent of the 1.6 million people living in Banda's 600 villages are situated at the bottom of rigid caste hierarchies. These low-caste groups are known as Dalits (or "untouchables"), and any form of discrimination against them has been banned by the Indian Constitution. However, legal directives have had little effect on social practices, and high-caste members continue to repress Dalit communities subsisting at the margins of struggling agricultural economies (Ciotti 2006). Rural women bear the brunt of poverty, illiteracy, and discrimination in Banda's highly feudalistic society. Over the past few years, Uttar Pradesh registered one of the highest rates of dowry demands and deaths, as well as of domestic and sexual violence against village women of all castes (Srivastava 2003). And these are merely the official figures. The area is also reputed for continuing the practices of child marriage, female infanticide, and son preference; and for the mortality rate of its young brides during childbirth (Arnold et al. 1998). Chanda Devi (46), a gang affiliate, said, "Not only is it a curse to be a Dalit, but it is just as difficult being a woman." Thus when the media interviewed members of the local population in Banda, most villagers did not express any surprise that a women's vigilante group had sprung up in this rural landscape afflicted by poverty and patriarchal prejudices.

According to Khan, who is currently writing a book on the Pink Sari Brigade, the group's main office is "a concrete, box-shaped structure and it belongs to Sampat Pal, the self-proclaimed commander in chief of the Gulabi Gang." Sampat is a wiry woman, married to an ice cream vendor, mother of five children, and a former government health worker who has played a pioneering role in setting up the gang. She rebelled against caste and gendered inequities at an early age—when faced with her parents' resistance to her receiving an education she began drawing on the walls, the floors, and dusty village streets. Sampat's parents finally acquiesced and sent her to school. Her education came to a halt when she was married off at the age of nine and, subsequently, had her first child at thirteen. To increase her meager family income, Sampat began working as a government health-worker, which brought her into close contact with the socio-economic problems of rural women. She quit her job in frustration as she felt the state government had done little to alleviate the pitiable conditions of muted village communities.

Returning home one evening in 2002, Sampat heard rumors that a friend had been beaten by her alcoholic husband and that the local police, chronically indifferent to violence against women, had looked the other

way. When she went alone to rescue her friend from a fraught household, Sampat was abused and turned away by the inebriated husband. She gathered some neighbors, returned to her friend's house, and thrashed the abusive husband in view of the community. This event triggered Sampat's aspiration to create a band of women fighters. She said: "In our villages where food is scarce and there has been a drought-like situation for ten years, women are the most abused. I realized that under these conditions, a woman has to fight to survive."

At first, the gang consisted of just five women, all old friends. Over time, Sampat's small successes in battling domestic abuse attracted the loyalty of dozens of female neighbors. The gang members began to train in techniques of counter-aggression, such as smearing abusive men with chili powder; however, the most popular drill was in the use of sticks (lathis), a baton usually carried by local policemen when out on patrol. According to Sampat, "I wanted to work for the people, not for myself alone. I was holding meetings with people, networking with women who were ready to fight for a cause, and was finally ready with a group of women." Over a span of five years, the gang grew into a powerful posse of 20,000 women, including ten district commanders who ran the gang's outposts across Bundelkhand (a subdivision of Uttar Pradesh)—an area that spans 36,000 square miles. According to the Gulabi women I encountered in Delhi, the current members of the gang are aged between eighteen- and sixty years old; they are mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, and even grandmothers (since rural women bear children at a young age); and they belong to various low-caste groups; even though they claim to battle for women across caste and class divides. While some gang women are still unemployed, others are engaged in marginal agricultural activities (as landed or landless laborers).

The local Pink Gang stations, including Sampat's home, operate as meeting places where women can discuss their problems. In Sampat's house, she offers a steady supply of steaming cups of tea and samosas to women who have shown up on her doorstep. Some women asking for help are reticent to join the gang, but, nevertheless, retain an important role as sympathizers, circulating information about the gang's activities in their respective localities. Others travel great distances in order to enlist as gang members having experienced the immediate benefits of violent collective action. Some others, like Tara (22), joined the gang because it had become a craze. "Everyone was joining in drives. So I went along with the herd." Despite having gathered reinforcements, Sampat continues to work seven days a week, from the crack of dawn until nightfall, counseling women, organizing sit-ins, and leading rallies, while relying entirely on the rusty bicycle that she uses to get around and on her old Nokia cell phone.

ASSAULTING HUSBANDS AND ATTACKING THE STATE: WOMEN ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE LAW

Every day, nearly half a dozen desperate women arrive at the gang's meeting place asking for support. Most of them have come through word of mouth, or after having read about the gang's victories in vernacular newspapers. Some unaccompanied women travel long distances on rickety buses, or even hitchhike on unsafe roads, knowing well the risks involved in journeying alone through rural areas. They come with tormented tales of abuse, discrimination, and sexual violence that neither the police, nor male decision makers in their communities, would openly address. According to several gang members, when a complaint is lodged, the Gulabis jointly agree on a plan of action. Chamania (40) said, "First we go to the police and beg them to do something. But the administration won't listen to poor people, so we end up taking matters into our own hands." In the case of a wife-beating, for example, should the police refuse to arbitrate, gang members first speak directly to the husband and demand he change his ways. If the man does not relent, gang members then invite his wife to join them in thrashing the husband. "Our missions have a 100 percent success rate. We have never failed in bringing justice when it comes to domestic problems," said Sampat. Within the space of two years after they had given themselves a name and a uniform, the women-in-pink had thrashed hundreds of men who had abandoned or abused their wives.

Even though a majority of the gang's cases concern marital violence, dowry demands, and (or) abusive in-laws, they also address land disputes, resolve neighborhood skirmishes, and help poor women procure socio-economic benefits, ranging from school admissions to acquiring food cards. Kamat Devi (48) said, "Though I don't have any designated role in the gang, I end up settling fights between neighbors in the village. When we hear of a rift, we hold meetings with Sampat Devi and try to come up with an amicable solution. It isn't always easy, but people respect the Gulabi Gang as we are always neutral." In her account

of Sampat's services, Khan documented the leader's interaction with Soman, a petite woman who arrived at the leader's home with her husband and son in tow. Soman's husband was recently released after three years in captivity, kidnapped by a local gang of thugs over a property dispute. The anguished woman claimed that the police were heavily bribed not to interfere in the investigation. While her husband was away, Soman relied exclusively on Sampat's protection. The leader collected donations of grains and pulses to help see Soman through her crisis, and she organized protest marches to put pressure on the police to track down Soman's husband. Sampat's gang also tries to ensure that village women who are either unemployed or own small pieces of land obtain red cards (or Below Poverty Line Cards), which allow poor villagers access to subsidized grain from local public distribution centers. These actions suggest that the gang not only takes on challenging missions, but offers all-round support to both rural men and women, looking after the latter's basic needs while helping them regain a sense of security in their everyday lives.

Sampat's version of vigilantism, however, is not dramatically different from those employed by women who execute brutal justice among fringe communities in other parts of India. My own research with vigilantes in the Bombay slums revealed that despite the pro-women stance of local female gangs, their collective actions could only be accurately peddled as a variety of "soft feminism" (Sen 2007). As did the women's squads in Bombay, Gulabi Gang members thrashed husbands but stopped short of urging abused wives to leave their marital homes. For example, in Khan's narrative on Sampat's home, a mother arrived with her weeping daughter who had been thrown out by her husband for having demanded 20,000 rupees from his in-laws. "He married me for the love of money," sobbed Malti, the despairing wife. Sampat told her followers that they would march to the girl's house and demand an explanation from the husband. "If they don't take her back and keep her well, we will resort to other measures," she said, implying that the husband will probably be put in his place. This suggests that the gang members abstained from developing a radically liberatory voice, and refrained from dismantling rural families; instead, preferring to "redomesticate" village women by enabling the latter to lead better conjugal lives and carry on familial duties under safer conditions. Even committed gang members did not abandon their households, but resorted instead to negotiations with their families for permission to continue their participation in gang activities. Banhari Devi (21) said, "I was recently married and my family thought it was a ridiculous idea and were dead against my stepping out of the household. My husband wasn't supportive at all, but I was convinced that I wanted to join the Gang and so I did. This took months of persistence but my husband finally agreed." Educated gang members have played a leading role in inventing slogans on women's employment and education (discussed later), but they have not devised a rhetoric of emancipation (from men and marriage). Globally, female vigilantism eventually achieves only partial social freedoms for women, while continuing to operate within the constraints and constants of patriarchal structures (Sen 2007).

It is to be noted that, in Banda, the gang's notoriety overstepped the boundaries of gender-related disputes, as their violent vigilantism posed a direct challenge to state officials and the government machinery. In June 2007, the Gulabis received complaints that a government-run fair-price shop was not giving out grain. Sampat and her gang surreptitiously observed the shop owner. The gang eventually intercepted two truckloads of grain marked "Below Poverty Line" as they were being shunted off to the open market. Armed with their evidence, the gang members pressured the local administration to seize the grain and hand over the shop owner to the police. But when local authorities refused to register the case, angry gang members assaulted one of the police officers. This incident immensely bolstered the Gulabi Gang's credibility in the region. Later that year, the gang stormed a police station where an untouchable man had been held in custody for two weeks without any case having been filed against him. In 2008, gang members raged into an electricity office in Banda district forcing officials to turn back on power that had been switched off in an attempt to extract bribes from local villagers. In January 2011, the Gulabis helped a 17-year-old girl who had been gang-raped by a group of men, including a member of the local legislature. When the rape victim, Sheelu Nishad, went to file a case, to her utter dismay she was arrested by the police under trumped-up charges. It turned out her attackers had already called the police, accusing her of theft. After the girl's father approached the gang for help; the Gulabis organized a demonstration in front of the police station, and, subsequently, another in front of the legislator's house. The gang's effective intervention led to the rapist's arrest, and Rahul Gandhi, the heir to the Gandhi family's political throne in India, traveled 370 miles from New Delhi to meet the victim. The gang, thus, struck fear into the hearts of abusive men, but they also grudgingly earned the wrath and respect of the local administration.

What I found curious in my personal interviews, as well as in media reports on the Pink Sari Brigade, was the problematic associated with the gang terminology used by armed village women. The gang's trust is formally called the Adivasi Mahila Utthan Gram Udyog Seva Sansthan (tribal-women's advancement and village-

development service organization) and yet very few people (a) know the gang by any other official name and (b) refer to the women as providers of service or seva. The gang members, however, emphasize that they don't follow hierarchies, are treated as equals, pursue a common goal of removing corruption, and cannot be labeled "anti-social." "Mind you," Banwari Devi said after giving an emotional account of her journey with the gang, "we are not a gang in the usual sense of the term. We are a gang for justice." Bhagwati Devi (45) said, "The word 'gang' doesn't necessarily denote criminals. It can also be used to describe a crew." Yet another Gulabi I interviewed said, "We are a women's team [using the English word for it] in pink. Gang means team." For the Gulabi women, it is imperative for the general public to understand the importance and vitality of operating as a collective; to increase the self-worth of rural women, while at the same time fighting off the backlash from incensed husbands and corrupt officials. The gang's women are regularly threatened, sometimes at gunpoint; hence, they use the language of self-defense, instead of aggression, while training women in stick-fighting. Even though the women have attacked a number of villagers and anti-poverty government officers in the region, the gang insists that they would use violence only as a last resort. Their primary endeavor is to initiate peace talks, which are usually, then, followed by "shaming rituals" in which gang women demonstrate outside the homes of offenders. According to Sampat, "We don't like using violence, but sometimes that's the only way people listen." The use of the word 'gang', the carrying of sticks, and the electric-pink saris were all designed to give visibility to the "Pink Women". Sampat said, "In rallies and protests outside our villages, especially in crowded cities, our members used to get lost in the rush. We decided to dress in a single color, which would be easy to identify. We didn't want to be seen in other bright colors as they had associations with political or religious groups. We settled on pink, the color of life." Most Gulabis point out how the concept of a "women's gang" continues to perplex rural people who assume the term 'gang' refers to local bandits. However, as the idea of a violent women's identity politics caught on, shops in the region could not keep up with the demand for pink saris; some women wore them simply to display their solidarity with the Brigade. Vernacular newspapers finally shied away from calling the Gulabis a crudely violent gang, often referring to them as either folk heroes, a concerned citizen's group, the "pink sorority", a civil-defense patrol, or the "Banda sisterhood"—amongst others—which enabled the vigilantes to move away from their image as deliverers of rough, illegal justice toward an image of them as rural women and precursors of social change.

FEMINIST FUTURES?: IMBIBING THE LANGUAGE OF ACTIVISM AND DEVELOPMENT

Sampat is a key actor at the Woman's Forum Annual Summit held every year in Deauville, France. During each session, (with the use of translators) this semi-literate village woman addresses an international audience and gives a speech about the future of ostracized communities across the world; she highlights the significance of mass violence perpetrated by poor women as a social necessity, and not as a whimsical expression of raw justice. Over time, she has attempted to distance the gang from being tagged as a contingent of crude male-bashers, and has fostered its status as a harbinger of social development. "We don't use violence much anymore," she said. "Now just our name and [the fact] that [they know] we are coming are enough."

To justify and prolong the existence of the gang, Sampat and her followers have empowered themselves with a new language of education, stability, and employment (as opposed to a language of war and armed resistance). Sampat has often claimed in the media that there are fewer rapes in her area and more girls are attending school. To promote child education, the gang has regularly visited households to offer parents guidance on educating girls. Some villages had dilapidated primary schools without teachers. Following Sampat's initiative, the schools acquired teaching staff and the children were encouraged to attend classes. Instead of bashing up men, the gang has started to use street theater as a popular medium for reaching out to a larger audience. Currently, the women have also drawn up plans to run rehabilitation centers for alcoholics. The Gulabis have begun offering free advice on general family-welfare, and are travelling across the countryside raising rights-consciousness amongst Dalit and non-Dalit villagers. Parvati (24) said, "I met Sampat Devi when she came to our village and spoke at a public gathering. I was amazed after seeing a small woman sound so determined. Everyone listened in silence. I knew that I wanted to be part of her Gang." In villages with high rates of hunger and unemployment, the gang designed tentative blueprints for fabric-production centers, especially for women. According to Sampat, "I work on a grassroots level and want to set up a small-scale industry for poor villagers. We have talented young men and women who can make organic manure, candles, Ayurvedic medicines, and pickles. They could earn a decent livelihood. If I get

funded, I can set up a stitching center for women who can then support their families. The future of the Gulabi Gang is bright.”

With few resources at her disposal, Sampat charges about three euros for membership in the group, in exchange for the pink sari that members wear with such pride. In the initial years, the Pink Women of Banda shunned political parties and NGOs because, in the words of their feisty leader, “they are always looking for kickbacks when they offer to fund us.” In several other interviews, the Pink Sari women had claimed that they were against donations or handouts. Even though the state government officially favored positive discrimination and reserved jobs for low caste groups; these benefits rarely trickled down to remote rural communities. One of the gang’s supporters stated, “We don’t want appeasement or affirmative action. Give us work, pay us proper wages and restore our dignity.” However, Sampat’s agenda of turning a large group of stick-wielding women into a coherent social movement forced the gang to renegotiate their anti-funding stance. In a number of recent interviews, Sampat has stated, “I want this movement to carry on and would like support from international or local agencies.” In an interview with me, one of her followers said, “We need a support system. I don’t have any means of travel; I cannot even afford to pay the bus fare, so I end up walking. If we don’t ask state organizations for help, then we will fade away.” On a number of websites developed by the gang, as well as on their Facebook pages, the Gulabi Gang requests donations from governmental and aid agencies.

Until recently, the Pink Gang had, strategically, acted outside of the political system as well, which greatly irked local politicians who ran their own versions of private armies in order to silence poor villagers. “Joining politics is not my chosen way to help people. We will keep up our good work, so the state does not take us for granted,” Sampat said. The gang has even been called “militant Maoists” by local police authorities, the latter having repeatedly accused the women of assault and defamation. While Sampat has survived assassination attempts, a number of other Gulabi leaders have been threatened with counter-violence by political leaders and the police force, making them apathetic to the police-politician nexus that has plagued rural areas. But, in yet another attempt to move beyond being labeled as crass vigilantes, Gulabi members have finally started to enter the realm of party politics. In 2006, Sampat contested the local body polls as an independent candidate and mustered only 2,800 votes. By 2010, the Pink Gang’s tremendous popularity helped them develop substantial political clout. In October of that year, a record number of twenty-one Pink Gang members won panchayat (municipality) elections. In these positions, elected Pink Gang officials oversee construction and repair work on local roads, provide for sanitation and drinking water, and implement development schemes for agriculture. “Before, the village chiefs never used to listen to our issues, but with the Pink Gang in power, life will become easier,” said Usha Patel, who spent many days rallying support for her district commander. Sampat expressed hope that these victories would represent the beginning of a political future for the Pink Gang—and a way for their authority to rout mob power.

In 2009, when the Gulabi women trekked to Delhi, India’s capital city, to supposedly demand independence for Bundelkhand, they merely demonstrated on the streets. This petitioning was curious since Mayawati, the powerful woman leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) which (a) claims to champion the cause of low-caste communities in Uttar Pradesh, and (b) has been pressuring the state reorganizing committee to draft a separate state for Bundelkhand, had wooed Sampat ever since the latter’s rise to fame. Even though, eventually, Sampat did not team up with the BSP, she evidently emulated this woman who led the populist politics of a mainstream party. Without allowing their actions to escalate into violence, the gang and their display in Delhi of tinted rage attracted the media attention they had desired. “We want a separate state so that our people get better facilities,” said Sampat, offering a rationale for the gang’s journey to Delhi. The leader offered to give pink saris to the Indian President, Pratibha Patil, and the Congress chief, Sonia Gandhi, so that these powerful women, thriving within the domain of formal, constitutional politics, could also express their sympathy for the Brigade. While district commanders were raging against crime and corruption, Neeta a “foot soldier,” confessed that she had come to Delhi in the hope of meeting the female Minister for Railways, Mamata Banerjee, in order to lodge a complaint against her husband Sanjay, a railway employee. Neeta had been abandoned along with her two children after fourteen years of marriage and wanted the minister to take punitive action against her truant husband. While Sampat was pre-occupied with obtaining a political voice for her troops, conversations with women at the demonstration revealed that it was still the desire for everyday justice for women (couched within a need to engage in parliamentary politics) that had brought some Gulabis to Delhi.

Even though the gang carried out violence against abusive husbands and corrupt officials (usually men), they had acquired the sympathy of most villagers. Their membership included a few men, such as Jai Prakash Shivhari, who joined the gang to help settle the issues of depleting water resources, farm subsidies, and funds being siphoned off government projects. Some men openly equated Sampat with the legendary, militant Queen of Jhansi, Laxmibai. Phoolan Devi, a Dalit and female dacoit from nearby Chambal, also led a crusade against upper-caste atrocities perpetrated upon low-caste women, and should have been another iconic figure of comparison; but the men often attributed Sampat's character an anti-hero status similar to that of Dadua, a notorious, low-caste (kurmi) male dacoit from Banda. A villager, Babloo Mishra, even risked allowing Sampat's followers to use his premises for an office. "The best thing is that these women will take up anyone's cause as long as it's genuine, not only those of its members," he said. The gang also earned the support of those men connected to women who had been rescued by the Gulabis. When rape victim Sheelu Nishad's father realized that his daughter had been imprisoned on false charges he was distraught. "I was nervous and crying and somebody suggested I go to the Gang," said the frail elderly man. The unfettered support offered by the gang kept him deeply indebted to the women. Aarti Devi (22) said:

My father is an educated man. He has a double Masters from the university despite being a Dalit. He has always had to fight for his rights and the dignity of local villagers. About six months back, an upper-caste man raped a local Dalit woman. Police refused to register the case. When my father protested, he and two others were taken into custody. I went to Sampat Devi and asked for help. That same day I joined the gang and, led by Sampat Devi, we stormed the police station demanding the release of my father and the other villagers. The police still refused to register the case against the rapist. We ended up beating a policeman black-and-blue with lathis. I cannot take injustice lying down. My father is a great inspiration to me, he was very proud when he saw me in a pink sari demonstrating and shouting slogans, rubbing shoulders with the rest of the Gulabi Gang.

Other villagers who have socially and financially benefited from gang activities now openly support their Gulabi wives, sisters, mothers and grandmothers, occasionally giving bus fares to women who travel great distances to carry out gang work and at other times by accompanying them when they go out to tackle a difficult case.

Sundar, in her in-depth exploration of contemporary vigilante practices in India, states, "A long tradition of writing about peasant or working-class resistance addresses issues of morality, people's culpability for violence and notions of justice in situations where the protection of the law is unequally available to different classes of citizens" (2010, 116). She goes on to argue that these forms of small struggles highlight the ways in which hierarchies of gender, caste, and class taint formal processes of law (2010, 117). However, if a rebellious (imaginary) community takes up arms against local injustices, the state, with all its legal shortcomings, will attempt to reclaim its position as the only legitimate deliverer of violent punishment (Anderson 2006). Even though controversies about state torture in Middle-Eastern countries, as well as humiliating interrogation techniques at US military-bases are currently grabbing headlines, the supreme position of the state in managing retributive justice has not been open to global policy negotiation. Despite the fact that state-related organizations openly outsource protection to security agencies across the world, at the end of the day, these groups remain accountable to their state's machinery (Sen and Pratten 2007). These power relations place women's vigilantism in a peculiar position; not only do these vigilante groups exist outside the purview of the state, but they further emasculate the malfunctioning state by highlighting its paternal failure to protect vulnerable women. According to Sundar, subaltern insurgencies or Robin Hood-style vigilantism are aimed less at reorganizing the state and directed more toward obligating it to live up to its promises (2010, 116). But (a) if the state steps up and delivers goods and services to the poor, and assumes legal responsibilities on their behalf, then the Gulabis may be rendered useless and might eventually disband; and (b) if women defy the state machinery to the extent that the local police ban the gang—clamping down on low-caste women—then the Gulabis may have to transform themselves into a secret society. Hence, there is particular pressure on women vigilantes to don moderate identities as activists and as "clean" politicians in order to remain visible and indispensable within rural societies.

VIOLENCE AND ITS LIMITS: SOME CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Focusing media and scholarly attention entirely on the sensational activities of the gang diminishes the innumerable accounts of covert, everyday resistance against gender discrimination that have been devised by poor women in rural societies across India. Having said that, the popularity of the Gulabis, illustrated in

this case study, suggests the limits of the women's capacity, however subjugated, to tolerate sexual violence and social classifications. Even though most scholars and activists assume that rural, repressive patriarchies "normalize" intimate violence against women, the case study of the Pink Sari Gang is a testament to the power of informal women's collectives to implement change without elite intervention or leadership. Sandoval Girón, in her research on vigilantism in post-conflict Guatemala, argues that most populations living under conditions of intense tyranny do not comprehend or imagine any framework for seeking justice beyond the use of armed violence (2005, 12). Hence fragile communities, faced with a corrupt state administration and political 'clientelism,' often seek out vigilantism as a form of social control. In this context it is important to highlight that vigilantism may have been the immediate choice available to Banda women surviving violence-prone rural societies, but through their public actions women also received exposure to other possibilities and spaces for sustaining militant activism. And despite their initial failure to enter politics, they tried again, finally occupying a number of other democratic spaces.

There has also been a limit to the degree to which these poor women's vigilante groups have been able to proffer a façade of internal unity. As this case study has highlighted, the upward social mobility of a small cluster of women (like Sampat Pal and her commanding officers), and their desire for political visibility had already led to a divergence over the long-term ideologies of gang leaders and everyday gang actions. The Congress Party, currently in power at the Center, has been trying for over two decades to challenge the popularity of their rival, the BSP, in Uttar Pradesh. According to recent press releases, the secular Congress has invited Sampat to take on the challenge of the BSP in the 2012 state elections, by offering the vigilante leader a political platform in a constituency dominated by low-caste communities. This strategic form of attention from the leading Indian political party sets Sampat definitively apart from the rest of her ordinary crew, as she enters the game of caste politics in the region. In addition, political activism by marginalized women, who are realizing their potential as agents for the first time, often results in tensions over domestic responsibilities. For example, Ciotti's ethnographic depictions of low-caste women activists in the BSP show that the latter bring in "docile" daughters-in-law to take on the household burden so that activists can mobilize themselves outside the home (2009, 123-4). The author argues that various versions of women's activism in Uttar Pradesh are difficult to align with feminist theories, as Dalit women campaigners continue to reinforce the oppressive gender hierarchies that they claim to contest in public (125). In my research on poor women in the Bombay slums, I came across similar forms of domestic strife, for example, when two women from the same family were members of their local vigilante group and openly argued over daily chores (Sen 2007). Even though gang women at present receive an extent of familial support, it remains debatable whether they will continue to encourage all women in their families to play activist roles without ensuring that someone be designated as responsible for household and farming duties. Thus, power mongering, domestic tension, and emerging political hierarchies are likely to take a toll on the selfless female solidarity displayed by the gang.

This brings me to the question of illegal violence and its limits. According to a number of feminist psychologists (Meth 2004; Grindstaff 1998; Barnard 1993), female vigilantism in non-Western societies could be viewed through the lens of feminist opposition, but only as long as the vigilantes remained within the limits of ethical, extra-constitutional violence. The legitimacy of collective violence in the pursuit of political ends reflects a retributive model of justice (Gelles and Loseke 2005); the latter emphasizes "proportionate" punishment as a morally acceptable response to crimes against women (White and Rastogi 2009). This is in contrast to restorative models of justice that emphasize cooperation and healing relations between perpetrators and victims (White and Rastogi 2009, 323). Even though White and Rastogi (2009) suggest that the Gulabi Gang's violent actions could be? deemed a fusion of both models (as they engaged in delivering brutal justice and social redevelopment), I would argue that complex patriarchies have insufficient tolerance for women's violent self-determination. Even though the Gulabi women did not kill their victims, it was important for the gang to partially distance itself from violence, use the secular language of human rights, and to accept the support of rural men in order to lend ethical legitimacy to their collective actions. I would further argue that there are historical limits to viewing ordinary, non-militaristic women as perpetrators of violence and persecutors of men. Carden-Coyne (2008), in her exploration of the testimonies of wounded soldiers manhandled by female nurses as feminist revenge during the First World War, suggests that these acts instigate public amnesia after an initial round of applause for the women. Thus, women who are good "bad citizens" occupy an uncomfortable position in the public imagination (Sharma 2011). Without any institutional backing, it was also important for the now renowned Gulabi women to retain the sympathy of the common people (especially in light of recent accusations of rape and intimidation against gang members). Hence their gamut of actions (and not just violent vigilantism) underline the long-term, collective vision of rural women to position and reposition themselves between various discourses of justice, and subsequently remain alive in public memory. "We don't want to be forgotten," said Banwari Devi.

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