Grey land

Anurag Behar

Her right ear was torn from the beating he was giving her, by the time they reached. With five of them there, he stopped but soon resumed. They restrained him as he struggled to get away and box and kick her. They urged her to give him two slaps, after which they would handle him in kind. Which is their system -- the victim must deliver the first blow, then they beat the man up sufficiently, avoiding serious injury, so that he won't forget ever.

The woman hesitated and refused. They stayed for an hour, threatening the man with thrashings and police complaint, and then left. Riding back to the town they took a twenty-five-kilometre detour through the blazing sandscape to go to the police outpost and inform them of the case. This was standard procedure, though they did not expect any action.

They rushed again to the woman's village the next week. Not only had he battered her, but also his own elderly mother; and was rounding up the goats to sell for money to buy alcohol. They reached her hut in half an hour; there was no sign of the police, whom they had alerted immediately upon receiving the woman's call.

He was still there and chasing the woman to continue the assault. He paused as they reached. Seeing an opportunity, without being urged this time, the woman gave him four quick slaps. After which the team took over. The five delivered about ten blows each -- a mix of boxes and tight slaps. Soon he was begging for mercy. The drama was witnessed by most of the neighbours. The team threatened him with direr consequences if he ever struck her or his mother again. Then they left.

That man called the leader of this team the day before I met them, to report to her that he had been behaving very well, and they should talk to the woman. Which she did, and the woman confirmed that the man had been very different for the past five weeks – since the day of his thrashing.

Six members of their full team of twenty had come to our meeting. The leader was there, along with two who were involved in that incident; the three others were also veterans of many such skirmishes. Four of this group of six were women – of which three are survivors of acid attacks – amongst the most heinous acts that women suffer in our country.

Our conversation was light-hearted because the women were bubbly. Their bodies bore scars of the acid attacks but not their spirit. They seemed to be having fun. With the easy conversation, I could ask them everything directly. Wont he and others like him restart beating the woman very soon; how long can you keep watch? Can't you tackle

this some other way? You are yourself resorting to violence, isn't that wrong and bad? What about the law? And more in the same vein.

They described their experience. Cases where the man reverts back to serious violence are rare. In the past 10 years they have developed a collective of 2000 women who are their eyes-and-ears, along with a reputation for quick and decisive action. They act on every kind of injustice to girls and women. Forced dropouts from schools, child marriages, discrimination with widows, and more. Not all these require beatings, but all require quick fearless confrontation and hawk-eyed vigil.

The full force of their collective and urgent action is deployed not only with violent men but also with the community, the panchayat, local administration, the police, the designated government helpline and women safety institutions. Despite that the response is slow, and often not there.

They cannot wait, that is what they have learnt. Because the violence is relentless for the women who are victims. Little girls are married off overnight. Young widows routinely brutalized. Some are sold.

'*Na to koi sunne wala hai, na koi sunwai hai, sir. Koi aur tareekaa humko to samajh me nahi aata hai*'. There is no help, and no justice, sir. We don't know what else to do. She beamed and grinned and sobbed.

In Kurukshetra what answers does the warrior have to what is wrong and right? Or good or bad? She must battle, that is her dharma. Kurukshetra makes her.

The real question is why we have made this Kurukshetra and how we go on. Mostly oblivious, often complicit, sometimes self-satisfied by anodyne vacuous protests.

Who am I to judge her or even ask, in this moral grey land. Not only in that blazing sandscape, but right across in our plush metros. With daily indignities and brazen exploitation. Everywhere. Ours is no country for women, but a war zone.

On a hot summer evening she got a call. 'Come pick me up from the bus stand.' An unknown young woman with her five-year-old child was waiting. Kicked out of her house and her parents' door closed in faux shame, she had no where to go. She traversed 250 kilometres in that heat with nothing but her child and a phone number, to reach that bus stand.

She immediately rode her scooter to the bus stand. 'Why have you come so far?', she asked the young woman. 'They told me that when there is no one left to turn to, I must come to you.' People journey a lifetime searching for their saviour, what is 250 kilometres. The young woman rode pillion, the child in the middle. She took them home.