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From apathy to action in response to December tragedies

U.S. and Indian societies outraged by violent acts

By **Lakshmy Parameswaran**

Last month, the United States and India simultaneously had to confront gruesome violence against innocent children and women.

On the heels of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in New-town, Conn., where 20 children and six women were shot to death by a gunman, came the horrific news of the gang rape and assault of a 23-year-old Delhi woman while riding a bus. She later died due to the injuries she sustained. Two unrelated incidents on two different continents are stirring the countries involved in an unprecedented manner. The public in both countries seem united in their shock and outrage, and in their disappointment with the status quo and apathy with which their societies deal with violence.

The American society that values its freedom to own and operate guns despite an average 87 gun deaths each day is now forced to weigh this freedom against the lost lives of 20 precious children. The Indian society that has winked away reports of sexual abuse and rape of Indian women is daunted by the angry and sorrowful reaction of the masses over the rape and death of an ordinary woman, one of many rape victims in Delhi.

The about-face of people in both countries indicates their revulsion at tolerating violence for too long, at blatantly ignoring atrocities against children and women.

Ours is a nation that has consistently sacrificed its children to violence. American children have been molested by priests and mentors, and killed by abusive parents. The 2011 revelation of sexual abuse of several boys over a period of more than 15 years at Penn State by an assistant football coach, Jerry Sandusky, and the cover-up of the scandal by the head coach and other officials are perfect examples of our system grossly neglecting the safety of our children. Our courts routinely award custody of children to violent fathers. In 2010, Mohammad Goher shot and killed his three children in his Houston home. He was a batterer whom the courts had trusted with unsupervised custody privileges because the legal system saw no danger in Goher. Gun violence kills 12 children a day. Our gun laws remain unchanged even after a series of six public mass shootings in 2012, including the ones in an Aurora movie theater and an Oak Creek gurdwara, all prior to the Newtown tragedy. On that fateful day in Newtown when 20 children were felled by a deranged gunman, we as a society couldn't have felt anything but revulsion.

And revulsion has kept India awake, too. My relatives say that many in the country couldn't sleep at night when news of the Delhi rape incident broke. As Washington is finally forced to reopen the gun violence debate, the Indians are demanding immediate revenge in the form of the death penalty for the alleged rapists. It seems their demand will indeed result in swift punishment in a country where justice usually comes at a grinding pace. Although this justice may not apply to future perpetrators of rape and murder who will go unnoticed, the Indian society appears eager to avenge this particular violence. As believers in prayaschitha (amending sins), Indians perhaps hope that avenging this atrocity will absolve them of all entrenched and ongoing acts of cruelty toward women: sex selection and female feticide, bride burning, dowry death, honor killing, domestic violence, sexual assault, rape and murder. Together, these problems claim the lives of 2 million Indian women every year. Indeed, societal apathy has kept American children and Indian women united as hapless victims.

The December tragedies in Delhi and Newtown exemplify the mayhem of prolonged tolerance to violence. I hope that the people's response in India and the United States is an indication that our collective conscience has reached its threshold to violence and both societies will take meaningful steps to better protect women and children.

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