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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“MISSION FIGHT BACK PROLOGUE: FIGHTING BACK” **BY LT. COL. ROHIT MISHRA (RETD.)**

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



When Vedica my thirteen years old daughter insisted that we go to the India Gate to light a candle in honour of the late Nirbhaya, the young victim of the Delhi gang rape, I wasn't too keen on it.

The area remains a high-security zone after the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks and I didn't think a candle would do much good, anyway. "Why don't you do something meaningful for her cause?", I remember telling her.

And this was a year later, wasn't it? Life was business as usual, the rhetoric and the protests had died down, television debates were focusing on other headlines and Nirbhaya was long forgotten while unabated cases of rapes and molestations kept being reported daily.

But I didn't expect the barrage of questions that met my advice: "Dad aren't you a grown up already? What have you done for her? Why wait until I am an adult? Why not fight back now?"

I realized then that Vedica and her friends hadn't forgotten Nirbhaya at all, on the contrary, violence against women was a main subject of conversation for them and they were genuinely concerned for their safety.

I didn't say anything then, but the issue remained with me until I retired from the Indian Army three years later.



Col. Rohit on a mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



I started then researching the subject, and it was as simple and damning as that: India is the most dangerous country for women in the entire world. Worse than Afghanistan or Somalia. Every day there are 10,000 reported crimes against women and girls, the estimated unreported number is four times higher. Meanwhile Vedica herself had suffered harassment at school by a senior boy right under the noses of teachers and the school management.

Vedica was right, there was only one thing to do and that was to fight back.



Col. Rohit at a training session.

First Step to a Million Miles Journey

I gathered with friends from all walks of life including Jaspal Rana, an internationally renowned shooting champion. I also met with Raj Khatri, a successful businessman from Mumbai's Bollywood.

Raj felt that training wasn't the only solution, he wanted to broaden the scope of our work. We further carried out extensive research and met with a lot of police officers, victims, NGO's and other stakeholders. The more we learned, the more we understood the terrifying range of sufferings women go through on the sub-continent. * (see fact sheet below) Raj kept talking to like-minded, socially conscious individuals who wanted to go beyond couch activism and living room debates. People from even more diverse fields such as Armed Forces, Education, Sports and the Media started extending support and bring resources to start a social movement to empower the girl child through self-defence and self-confidence. We christened this project MISSION FIGHT BACK.

Clearly the challenge here was not only to train girls in combat but to bring about a revolution of the mind. We needed to equip them to challenge conservative traditions and be fearless enough to come forward and speak up.

We had embarked on a journey that would challenge centuries of deep-seated social conditioning in the guise of tradition, family values, social requirements and taboos. We needed to break a stereotyped mould women were cast into.



Mission Fight Back (MFB) now consists of three intricately woven programs: a 28 days self-defence training program in two levels, psychometric analysis tests (PAT) and a mobile safety app. The PAT helps to red flag harassed girls who are either unable to speak or who are not being heard. Such cases are brought to the notice of the school and parents by our MFB psychologists. We further developed an idea of involving citizens, especially women by raising a volunteer force of trained individuals acting as first responders to assist any girl or woman in distress who has activated the app alert. Uttarpradesh, one of the largest states of India decided to adopt the concept of first responders as a pilot project.

We have trained and supported thousands of girls so far and our program is extending. We hope to reach all of India and beyond that any country where women are subject to violence which sadly covers most of the world map. I believe Vedica made a wish that day when she lighted the candle. Or maybe a promise. I may not know what it is but I know what it did, something significant indeed.

Statistics about Violence Against Women in India

- 120 rapes happen in India every day.
- 4 out of 5 go unreported. So the actual figures exceed 400 daily.
- 95% of all rapes and molestations in the country are perpetrated by someone close or known to the girl.
- The conviction rate is as low as 19%.
- Social stigma, shame and reputation play a big role in keeping incidents under wraps, in some cases the girls are married off to their tormentors.
- Exploitation and harassment of the victim is rampant as the police force (acting upon orders) discourages families from reporting cases of rapes and molestations.
- The police to population ratio is alarmingly low. In some states it is nearly 1:2500.
- Suppressing women is an acceptable norm in urban areas just as much as it is in the rural areas. Misogyny is also accepted and the notion of female as being the weaker sex is embedded deep in the psyche of India's population.
- The victim is re-victimized in nearly 90% cases, whereas in most cases the rapists are made to feel no remorse.

- Rape is part of a greater revenge culture or 'teach the family a lesson' attitude and is thus considered a brave act in rural areas.
- Rape is used as a weapon to settle personal scores.

