After Nirbhaya: Anti-Sexual Violence Activism and the Politics of Transnational Social Media Campaigns

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract (English)

In December 2012, the brutal gang rape of a young woman in a moving bus in New Delhi resulted in widespread protests across India. Now known as the Nirbhaya case, this incident generated a mass media furor around the globe, bringing intensified attention to sexual violence in India, as well as revealing orientalist and neocolonial perceptions about gender violence in India. In this thesis, I analyse three campaigns that went viral on social media following the Nirbhaya incident. The *Abused Goddesses* advertising campaign uses images of battered Hindu goddesses to create awareness about domestic violence. *Priya's Shakti* is an augmented reality comic book that presents a rape survivor as a 'superhero' who embarks on a journey to overturn rape culture and victim blaming. Finally, *Talk to Me* is a site-specific performative art project that addresses the fear that defines the experience of many women in India's public spaces, by using the tools of dialogue and community building across borders of class, caste, gender, and language. I view the discourse surrounding these three campaigns through the conceptual lens of transnational feminist solidarity, as articulated in the work of postcolonial feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Jacqui Alexander, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan. I argue that international media reports which uncritically celebrate the use of Hindu mythology in campaigns about sexual violence contribute to the persistence of orientalist and neocolonial perceptions of India. In addition, they help render invisible the ongoing and increasing violence of Hindu fundamentalism in India. I advocate a conscious effort to move away from such narrow discursive portrayals of sexual violence in India, towards a more reflective and nuanced narrative. This move, I argue, creates the opportunity for forming coalitions and solidarity amongst transnational feminists across borders of class, race, caste, nationality, religion, sexuality and gender.

Abstract (French)

En décembre 2012, le viol collectif brutal d'une jeune femme dans un bus à New Dehli a généré une vague de manifestations a travers l'Inde. Maintenant connu sous le nom *d'affaire Nirbhaya*, cet incident a généré un scandale médiatique mondial, attirant une attention renforcée sur la violence sexuelle en Inde, révélant aussi des perceptions orientalistes et néocoloniales sur la violence à caractère sexiste en Inde. Dans cette thèse, j'analyse trois campagnes qui sont devenues virales sur les réseaux sociaux a la suite de *l'affaire Nirbhaya*. La campagne publicitaire *Abused Goddesses* utilise des images de déesses battues pour sensibiliser le public à propos de la violence domestique. *Priya's Shakti* est un magazine de bandes dessinées utilisant la réalité augmentée et qui présente la survivante d'un viol comme une 'super hero' qui se lance dans une aventure pour renverser la culture du viol et la logique de déresponsabilisation. Finalement, *Talk To Me* est projet de performance artistique qui adresse la peur ressentit par de nombreuses femmes dans les espaces publics en Inde, en utilisant les outils du dialogue et de l'esprit communautaire au delà des frontières de classe, caste, sexe et de langue. J'analyse le débat entourant ces trois campagnes à travers le filtre conceptuel de la solidarité féministe transnationale, comme décrit dans le travail des féministes post-colonialistes tel que Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Jacqui Alexander, Inderpal Grewal et Caren Kaplan. Je soutiens que les reportages des médias internationaux qui célèbrent sans discernement l'utilisation de la mythologie Hindoue dans les campagnes sur la violence sexuelle contribuent à la ténacité des perceptions orientalistes et néocolonialistes. De plus, ils aident à rendre invisible la violence actuelle et grandissante des fondamentalistes Hindous en Inde. Je préconise un effort conscient pour s'éloigner de ces représentations discursives étroites de la violence sexuelle en Inde, pour se rapprocher vers un récit plus réfléchi et nuance. J'argumente que cet éloignement crée une opportunité pour former des coalitions et de la solidarité parmi les féministes transnationalistes au delà des frontières de classe, race, caste, sexualité, nationalité, religion et sexe.

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List of Images

Introduction

In December 2012, the brutal gang rape of a young woman in New Delhi resulted in unprecedented social unrest across India, spreading to South Asia and beyond. The Nirbhaya[1] case, or Delhi Gang rape, as it has come to be known, became an international media event that brought intensified focus to India as an unsafe location for women, and dubbed New Delhi the "rape capital" of the world. The widespread attention to the Nirbhaya case, and the diverse responses it generated, reveal transnational declarations of empathy, but also troubling reiterations of classist, casteist, colonialist and imperialist positions. International news media coverage shows that the incident was not recognized as part of a global issue that points to the prevalence of structural violence against women everywhere, but rather was depicted as a failure specific to India. The case helped frame India as a place where sexual violence is rampant and ingrained in everyday life, without acknowledging the similarly pervasive nature of sexual violence in other countries such as the U.S. In other words, the discourse around the Nirbhaya case condemned India as an underdeveloped and unsafe place whilst upholding the social superiority of Western nations over developing ones. Hence, the Nirbhaya case, I argue, indicates a failure or crisis of solidarity, wherein an opportunity for building alliances across borders was lost. Instead, the case rendered visible the persistent power differences within different social groups in India, as well as between the Global North and Global South. Moreover, it demonstrates the still-prevalent orientalist and neo-colonial gaze cast upon countries like India from those positioned in the Western world, indicating the urgency for consciously adopting a non-colonizing transnational analytics of solidarity and care.

Four years later, the Nirbhaya case still circulates in mainstream discourse, marking the critical impact of this event on the discourse surrounding sexual violence and women's safety. Following the case, several new media campaigns focused on sexual violence have been created, while some existing ones have resurfaced, receiving widespread recognition in India and abroad. The worldwide

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[1] Indian law does not allow rape victims to be named in public proceedings. Although the victim in this case, Jyoti Singh Pandey, was named and identified by her father a few weeks after the assault, the media and general public used several pseudonyms to talk about her, including *Nirbhaya* (freedom). Throughout this thesis, while I use her name, Jyoti Singh Pandey, to reiterate the importance of acknowledging the identity of rape victims and thereby recognising their agency, I employ the term 'Nirbhaya' when discussing the larger political mobilisation around her rape to situate the rape case within a global analytic of feminist mobilisation against rape.

attention to many of these campaigns is both a consequence of the extensive attention generated by the Nirbhaya case, as well as an effect of the affordances of social media platforms, which have enabled people to share news of these events and campaigns across the world audience. Indeed, proponents of digital media often highlight the capacity of social media platforms to enable news to reach international audiences as an indicator of their success in enacting social change. Yet, transnational visibility of a cause does not automatically translate to solidarity, a crucial fact often ignored in the conversation about online activism. Instead, the crisis of solidarity that was clear in the discourse surrounding the Nirbhaya case persists in much of the discourse surrounding the anti-violence media campaigns, even when the responses have been largely celebratory and laudatory.

In this thesis, I analyse three campaigns that went viral on social media following the Nirbhaya incident: the *Abused Goddesses* advertising campaign against domestic violence, the anti-rape comic book *Priya's Shakti,* and the work of the Blank Noise artist collective, specifically its *Talk to Me* campaign. Each of these three campaigns attained high visibility following the events of December 2012, contributing to the transnational discourse about Indian women's safety or lack thereof. Since each of these campaigns is targeted towards specific constituencies, they also provide implicit characterizations of the perpetrator, the victim, and the larger community. In addition, these campaigns propose methods of countering sexual violence, and thereby contain an underlying educational component, presenting an understanding of who is deemed unsafe, and who is the agent of change. Interestingly, all three campaigns appear to address a middle-class, English-speaking audience even when they locate the problem (or the victim) amongst a different class of people. While this perhaps limits their reach within India to the privileged minority that has access to social media and is able to participate in the Anglophonic discourse on these platforms, it has also allowed for these campaigns to have an international reach and to be encountered by global audiences.

Notably, each of these three campaigns focus on ending sexual violence against women, and use evocative and provocative images in order to do so. Hence, these campaigns also offer insight into the creative and symbolic elements that grab attention on social media and encourage users to like, share, comment and participate in these campaigns. The images used in these works simultaneously situate them as being specifically Indian and talking about Indian femininity, whilst also being readable by global audiences. While the campaigns are quite distinct from one another, they each use culturally relatable iconography. *Abused Goddesses* and *Priya's Shakti* both use the familiar images of

Hindu gods and goddesses, icons that have been long used in popular culture. *Talk to Me,* on the other hand, is distinct in that it uses images of Indian women and men in urban settings. Global audiences can easily relate to these images, not because they are exotic symbols that connote "Indianness," but rather by the urban settings and modern subjects within these images.

In my work, I am interested in the ways in which these campaigns have traveled globally, and the conversations about violence against women they have helped generate. I argue that the international visibility of these works positions them as potential sites for constructing transnational feminist alliances. However, mere visibility and transnational discourse does not necessarily result in the desired social change. Although reaching and being celebrated by international audiences can in some cases result in successful transnational solidarity around a feminist cause, it may also inadvertently serve to reaffirm archaic, colonial conceptions of passive Indian women. This is where a deeper examination of the differences between the three campaigns becomes more useful, in terms of how the campaigns were constructed, by whom, and for what purpose.

I explore each of these campaigns in depth, taking into consideration not only the visual, textual and performative elements that constitute these works, but also drawing upon a range of first-person interviews with the creators of the campaigns that I conducted in person and via Skype. Furthermore, I include perspectives from participants in these campaigns, commentators of social media, and the national and international media discourses generated around them. This range of different source material allows me to delve into the intention of the creators, the perceptions of different participants, and also some of the effects of these campaigns. Several questions guide my work: What is the theory of change undergirding the campaign? As a part of this question, it is necessary to examine how the problem of sexual violence is presented, who is imagined as the perpetrator/victim, and who is portrayed as the locus of change. Second, what are the genealogies of social change that guide these campaigns? Here, I am interested in the extent to which these campaigns engage with existing activism against sexual violence, including the degree of engagement with other organizations and communities as well as the theories guiding their work. The third and final question concerns the ways in which these campaigns can be used to reaffirm or subvert problematic stereotypes such as the perceived passivity of Indian women or the supposedly aggressive and animalistic behaviour of Indian men, both of which have a long history within colonial and imperial discourses. This question is of particular relevance given that each of these

campaigns has traveled transnationally, and therefore plays an important role in perpetuating or transforming cultural discourses about India.

The first chapter focuses on the *Abused Goddesses* campaign, created as a pro bono social impact project by an advertising firm. The campaign depicts three Hindu goddesses as victims of domestic violence and beseeches its audience to "Save our Sisters." Here, I highlight the problematic use of religious symbols to discuss the issue of domestic violence, arguing that it disempowers the very women it hopes to save. Furthermore, although the images are clearly powerful in evoking emotive responses, I argue that their shock value tends to direct attention away from the issue they purportedly represent. Rather than focusing on the very real and prevalent truth of domestic violence, the conversation turns to whether or not it is appropriate to use images of goddesses, and specifically whether depicting them as victims might hurt religious sentiment. Finally, my analysis of the transnational discourse surrounding this campaign reveals the ways in which the campaign reinforces orientalist images of Indian women as exotic and passive creatures who must be saved from aggressive brown men. Even while the campaign stirs powerful emotions through its shocking imagery, it does so within an existing framework of acceptable discourse, reaffirming the existing worldview of Indian women as victims who need to be 'saved.' The success of the campaign, it can be argued, is premised on situating domestic violence as a problem specific to India, effectively disregarding the prevalence of domestic violence as a global and cross-cultural issue, and therein failing in many ways to generate a response based in solidarity despite its transnational visibility.

The second chapter focuses on the anti-rape augmented reality comic book, *Priya's Shakti,* created in the wake of the Nirbhaya case by an Indian-American filmmaker Ram Devineni. The story is situated in mythic times, featuring a young woman in rural India, Priya, who is gang raped by men from her own village and then spurned by her family and community when she reaches out to them for help. She is assisted by the goddess Parvati, who observes Priya's plight, possesses her body, and finally gives Priya a mantra to help change the minds of her community. While the story was ostensibly created to change the victim-blaming culture that can inflict further damage upon the victims of sexual assault, I argue that this story falls far short of these goals and instead presents several problematic views. Although Priya is meant to be the protagonist of this tale, she is in fact little but a vessel for Parvati. Aside from the problem of agency, it appears that the onus of changing the minds of her community lies with Priya, who as a victim must present herself as akin to a

goddess in order for her community to respect and support her. I explore this, as well as several other questions of who is imagined as the "superhero" of this comic, the pedagogical aspects of this work, as well the technological and participatory elements of the comic, and the other narrative embedded within the augmented reality features of this comic. Once again, I argue, Indian women are portrayed as passive victims of male violence, are exoticized by their proximity and relationship to goddesses, and yet still bear the burden of acting as good victims who lay aside their own burdens to take on the responsibility of educating others. Once again, sexual violence and victim blaming are presented as structural problems within traditional (read: backwards and primitive) Indian society, rather than seeing this as a cross-cultural issue.

The third and final chapter focuses on the work of the Blank Noise artist collective. Their *Talk to Me* campaign, which went viral soon after the Nirbhaya incident, also achieved transnational visibility. However, this work is substantially different than the previous two campaigns in its explicitly feminist roots that draw upon theories and practices of feminists in India and elsewhere. The collective, in existence since 2003, focuses on the problem of street-based sexual harassment using a range of different kinds of performative interventions within its work. As I show in this chapter, the prime locus of change lies within the participants of the collective. Through their embodied experiences of different interventions such as loitering, sleeping in public spaces, and speaking with strangers, the members of Blank Noise create moments of disruption in public spaces wherein women claim public spaces as their own. On the one hand, this individualized vision of change can be seen as a model of empowerment that arises out of the affordances of neoliberal politics, which may account in some ways for its transnational success. This discourse of feminist empowerment holds valence in the Global North, situated as it is in individual agency, and reflecting in many ways the discourses of feminist activism in developed nations. However, these actions are most often collective in nature, and moreover seek to build alliances with other communities and social groups. This complicates the reading of individualized social change, presenting a discourse of collective action in which the cumulative work of each volunteer is essential to the larger social change they seek to create. While the work of the Blank Noise collective has also traveled transnationally, it is specifically within communities of feminists and activist-scholars where the work has been most celebrated. This campaign thus stands apart from the previous two in delineating action that is situated within a larger history of feminist activism, and also draws alliances with other communities as an integral part of its own work.

12

Through my discussion of the three very different artistic anti-violence campaigns, I hope to cast light on which aspects of gender violence within India are considered worthy of transnational care. While there is a tendency to highlight campaigns that reaffirm India's rural, underdeveloped and "traditional" cultural characteristics, embodied in images of religious icons, there are also stories that reflect India's embrace of modernity and individualized neoliberalism. Although campaigns mobilizing religious iconography are powerful, they can contribute to the ongoing erasure of the violence of religious nationalism. Conversely, blind celebration of individualized action can disguise the impact of community movements. These nuances, I argue, are essential features that must be considered within transnational analyses of such campaigns. In performing this analysis, I speak to the creators of these campaigns within countries like India, but also to transnational feminist communities to advocate a more nuanced and non-colonizing feminist solidarity across borders.

Furthermore, I hope that this work can also contribute to research on social media-driven activism, which I argue must be approached with a critical eye despite the often-celebratory stance that many theorists and commentators have put forth. First, it will help feminist and other social justice activists better learn about how social media tools can be successfully used in their work in order to reach wider audiences, aiding the constitution of a social media 'toolbox' for feminists (Ng 2014). Second, it will help identify and navigate the potential pitfalls of using social media, point to the limitations of these tools, and bring about a deeper understanding of the political economy of these platforms, which is often diametrically opposed to the social justice goals of the activists. Finally, it could help develop a better understanding of how transnational feminist solidarity can be achieved without resorting to the exoticization or diminishment of the agency of third-world women.

In the remainder of this introduction, I seek to situate the three campaigns within the existing political and activist context of India. As already indicated, the Nirbhaya case marks a transformative moment for political, legal and cultural discourse on women's safety in India. Indeed, many of these changes continue to unfold today, and it is rare to find instances of media reports on sexual violence that do not refer to this landmark case. Furthermore, the discourse that surrounds the Nirbhaya case, within India and internationally, reveals several important ideological themes that also pervade the discourse surrounding the three anti-violence campaigns I analyse. Therefore, I begin by providing an overview of the Nirbhaya incident, accounting for the event, the protests that followed,

as well as the political, legal and media responses to the case, and setting the discursive context for the three case studies that follow.

The Nirbhaya Case: the Victim's Body as a Site for Competing Claims

The Assault

On the 16th of December 2012, a 23-year old paramedical student, Jyoti Singh Pandey,[2] went with her friend, Awindra Pratap Pandey, to watch a movie in affluent South Delhi. When the movie ended at 8:30 pm, the couple attempted to hail an auto rickshaw to go back home, but after repeatedly being refused, boarded a chartered bus. There were five other passengers in the bus besides the driver, all of whom turned out to be friends on a drunken joyride. The six men assaulted Jyoti Singh and her friend with an iron rod, knocking him unconscious, and proceeded to brutally gang rape her as the bus traversed New Delhi's highways (Mandhana and Trivedi 2012). They dumped the two injured friends, barely clothed and bleeding profusely, on the highway, apparently with the intention of running them over, but the young man pulled his friend away just in time (Ghosh 2013). They lay on the side of the highway until a passerby found them and took them to a hospital. Singh, who sustained terrible internal injuries, was rushed into emergency surgery.

Over the course of the next several days, she underwent five more surgeries, and was even airlifted to Singapore for expert treatment, but succumbed to her injuries and passed away on December 29th, thirteen days after the incident (Sinha 2012). Before her death, however, Jyoti Singh gave a detailed report of the attack to the police, which provided critical information about the bus, the names of the six rapists (which she overheard during the assault), and other important elements that allowed the police to quickly track down the six accused men. In this statement, it is reported, she pled with the authorities to apprehend her rapists and "burn them alive" (Singh and Bajeli-Datt 2013). All six of the accused (one of whom was a minor at the time of the assault), were arrested shortly thereafter. The juvenile was sentenced to a three-year sentence, the driver, Ram Singh, committed suicide while in prison, and the other four accused were convicted of the crime and sentenced to the death penalty.

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[2] Hereafter referred to as "Jyoti Singh" or "Singh" in order to not confuse her with Awindra Pandey, who has the same last name.

Protests and legal reform

Although several incidents of rape have provoked public outcry, the Nirbhaya case inspired elevated interest not only in India but also globally. Just a few hours after the incident, news of this brutal event was published in the media, and instantly resulted in widespread sharing and commentary on mainstream and social media channels. The extreme nature of the attack and the inadequate response of the government to the crime led to massive public protests in Central Delhi, in front of the Parliament building. The government reacted, by "invok[ing] emergency policing laws, closing off the governmental center of the capital, blockading roads and even shutting down subway stations—a democratic government temporarily encircling itself with a moat" (Yardley 2012). For weeks following the incident, protests escalated and spread to different cities across India. In Delhi, however, the protests became so intense that curfews were imposed and in several cases, the police resorted to physical violence against protesters (Taylor 2012).

It seemed, in the wake of these protests, as though "the Arab Spring for India had arrived" (Dutta and Sircar 2013, 294). The protests brought together people of all genders, classes, castes and politics, with a notably high presence of men (Kabeer 2015), a particularly critical difference from past protests. The diversity of protesters and their myriad political standpoints were reflected in the slogans and calls for castration and death in addition to calls for justice and gender equality. Despite the strong feminist presence within these protests, there were also many other voices that often stood in stark contrast to feminist perspectives. Legal scholars Dutta and Sircar assert,

> Feminist voices have been a part of these protests, but the chorus of slogans made it difficult to decipher who was saying what. There were loud calls to end state apathy on violence against women, make public transportation safe, make the police more vigilant, speed up judicial prosecutions, amend rape laws, and stop victim blaming. But demands for the death penalty, chemical castration, and death by stoning of rapists were louder (2013, 295).

Many of these more vociferous voices calling for revenge, retribution and death were also reflected in the Indian media. As feminist sociologist Maitreyee Chaudhuri argues, "the Indian media took on an aggressive position, became a spokesperson of the protests, and sought to set the agenda for both public discourse and the state" (2015, 29). For Chaudhuri, however, feminist voices were not lost; conversely, it was the active intervention of feminists and women's organizations that helped temper the public debate from "hysterical rantings to more reasonable debates" (ibid.). These debates, although often absent from mainstream media reports, were critical to the formation of the Justice

Verma Committee, a judicial committee appointed by the Indian government to review criminal law for sexual violence and provide recommendations for legal reform (Lodhia 2015, 97).

The committee, chaired by Justice J.S. Verma, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court known for his involvement in several landmark cases of sexual violence, received more than 80,000 recommendations from a wide constituency of stakeholders. The committee produced a 631-page report, which marked a watershed moment in reframing and recontextualising gendered violence in India. The report, Lodhia writes, reveals the structural and institutional challenges for women within the social, cultural and legal environments of India, and "rendered visible the role of state institutions in exacerbating particular forms of abuse and the limited ideological framework within which some forms gendered violence have been conceived" (2015, 97). For many, the report gave them "the audacity to hope that freedom from violence and constitutional equality would be reclaimed by and for women" (Nundy, quoted in Biswas 2013). However, the new rape law passed in 2013 "fell far short of the Verma Committee's recommendations and Kavita Krishnan [a prominent feminist activist] wrote that it 'makes a mockery' of the report" (Lodhia 2015, 98). Dutta and Sircar explain, "the government secretly passed an ordinance that selectively omitted some of the most important recommendations: to criminalize marital rape and to impose command responsibility[3] in cases of rape by the army" (2013, 301). In addition, the government chose to retain the death penalty despite the report's explicit position against it.

In the course of these debates, a group of Harvard University professors pulled together a task force called Beyond Gender Equality to advise the Indian government about how to best implement the Verma Committee recommendations. This move, seen as culturally imperialist in tone, was met by strong criticisms by many Indian feminists such as Prabha Kotiswaran, who wrote, "some Western feminists … barely care to become familiar with the context in which they are trying to intervene," a fact that is especially problematic because "Western feminists have access to Indian institutions in a way that Indian feminists do not" (Kotiswaran 2013). This raised, as Dutta and Sircar write, "another dilemma: how do we build a transnational feminist solidarity that does not reinforce

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[3] Command responsibility is the legal doctrine of hierarchical accountability in cases of war crimes committed during wartime. In other words, Command responsibility turns away from the standard idea of individual criminal liability: in the case of war crimes, the superior is responsible not only for crimes he/she ordered, but also for any other crimes committed by his subordinates that he/she failed to prevent from occurring.

civilizational hierarchies?" (2013, 302). Despite an opportunity in the wake of this event for feminists around the world to stand in solidarity with Indian feminists, there is a persistent move towards a colonizing, imperialist gaze, evident in much of the media reportage by international, especially U.S. and UK-based, press.

Media discourse and the politics of representation

While the protests lasted for about two weeks, media coverage of the rape and its aftermath continued for two months, with several resurgences at times of judicial rulings (Rao 2014, 154). The role of both national and international, media following the Nirbhaya case has been analysed in depth from a range of perspectives. To begin with, the very name of the victim, and the naming of this incident as Nirbhaya, deserves our attention. Indian law prohibits the identification of rape survivors by name in order to protect them from social stigma. As such, gender studies scholar Krupa Shandilya writes, "the victim's real name, Jyoti Singh Pandey, was not widely known until her father came forward weeks later. In the absence of a name, feminist publications and other media gave her symbolic names such as Nirbhaya ('Fearless') and Jagruti ('Awakening') to honour her courage" (2015, 467). These names, assigned by different media outlets, are largely derived from Sanskrit and are names for Hindu women. Even before Jyoti Pandey's identity was revealed, she had already been constructed as "putatively a Hindu woman" (Shandilya 2015, 469).

Furthermore, "representations of Pandey's body re/produce her simultaneously as 'everywoman' and as a middle class, upper-caste, Hindu woman" (Shandilya 2015, 465). This discursive production of Jyoti Singh Pandey as "everywoman," Shandilya argues, is premised on the continued erasure and marginalisation of *dalit* women from legal and social reform. Communications scholar Shakuntala Rao echoes this position when she argues that historically, "the media coverage of rape in Indian television news has been narrowly focused on instances of sexual violence against middle-class and upper-caste women and has tended to exclude any discussion about such forms of violence as poor and lower-caste segments of the Indian population might experience (2014, 154). However, a positive outcome of the Nirbhaya case has been the attention drawn towards sexual violence in India, and the increased reporting of rape from across the nation. While most of these cases have received far less coverage than the Delhi gang rape, it is nonetheless true that many newspapers have "reinvented themselves as rape-reporting vehicles," and "across the country have been devoting

much space, often several pages every day, to report of rape gathered together in a way they never had been before" (Drèze and Sen 2013, 227).

Shandilya (2015, 473-5) situates the Nirbhaya case within a larger history of women's bodies being used as the site for legal and political debate wherein the female body is the locus for ideological debates in which specific constructions of tradition and nation are formed. This is especially true of the middle-class, upper-caste Hindu woman, who has "functioned as a signifier in many ways in the contrary dialectic of stasis and change in the imagining of India… required not only to imagine one out of many, an operation requiring a relinquishing of the caste-based hierarchies to a pan-Indian modernity, but also to render this one ontologically stable, an effort that inevitably privileged the dominant cultural group – broadly speaking, the Hindu middle classes" (Natarajan 1994, 79). The body of the middle class Hindu woman has been mobilized as a site for discourses of nationhood, where tradition and modernity come together seamlessly. In post-liberalization India, the "Modern Indian woman" was heralded as the norm, celebrating women who were educated and employed, yet seamlessly and unproblematically integrated within traditional imaginaries as wives, sisters and mothers (Mitra-Kahn, 2012). Constructions of Jyoti Singh in the media as middle-class and upper caste, therefore, are unsurprising when viewed in this light. To become "India's Daughter,"[4] Jyoti had to be transformed into a type that did not necessarily reflect her actual background, but was a more ontologically stable trope for discussions about honour and respectability.

Shandilya holds that three competing claims can be gleaned from the media and political discussions that ensued. First, the Hindu nationalist Right claimed that the incident occurred due to the increasing "Westernization" of Indian women. In so doing, they positioned an ancient Indian (read: Hindu) culture as a safe sanctuary for women, which was being corrupted by Western values, and therefore advocated a return to this haven through a revival of a morally superior past, one in which the policing of women's sexuality is righteous and justified. A second strand of opinion emerges from the Indian Left, placing the blame of sexual assault within consumer capitalism, claiming that women, "draped in the robes of capitalist culture" (475), invite male violence upon themselves.

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[4] Here, I refer to the documentary film, *India's Daughter*, about the Nirbhaya case by filmmaker Leslee Udwin, which sparked controversy in India for numerous reasons. Mukesh Singh, one of Jyoti Singh's rapists, was interviewed for the documentary, and made controversial statements blaming her for the attack. These statements created public outcry and the film was subsequently banned (Gander 2015). Several feminist activists critiqued the film for its patriarchal views and white savior complex, but also maintained that banning the film was counterproductive (Ray 2015).

Finally, neocolonial feminism also mobilizes the discourse of tradition to claim that India's lag in development (read: Westernization) is the main cause of misogyny and sexual assault. The underlying argument here, reiterating Orientalist and essentialist stereotypes, is that submissive Indian women can be saved from violent brown men only by embracing liberal modernity. Shandilya succinctly argues, "In all three cases, the bodies of brown women, specifically middle-class, Hindu subjects, are considered the rightful objects of these debates, an argument premised on the erasure of the bodies of all women who do not fit this normative framework" (475).

The use of the Nirbhaya case as leverage for political parties within India is an important aspect of the "ideological traffic"[5] (Jacqui Alexander, quoted in Lodhia 2015, 89) generated by this incident. As sociologist Pratiksha Baxi writes, "the parliamentary discourse… [used] sexual violence as a resource for doing politics, and therefore re-entrenches rape culture" (2012). Public statements by political leaders in power as well as in the opposition reveal classist and sexist perspectives that seek to place blame on the victim, on Western culture, or on poor/migrant male bodies (Lodhia 2015, 94). For instance, the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated, "We have a large number of footloose young men who come to urban areas from rural areas in search of jobs, in search of livelihood strategies and if they do not get well absorbed in the process of development in rural areas, they can become a menace in society" ("PM warns of 'Footloose Migrants'" 2012). While Singh advocated better absorption of rural migrant men into the processes of development, other political leaders situated Westernized development as the culprit. For instance, Mohan Bhagwat, head of the pro-Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, said utterly counterfactually, "rapes only occur in cities not in villages, where they have adopted Western lifestyles" (MacAskill, 2013). Still other statements by prominent political and religious leaders situated the blame on Jyoti Singh's independence, her presence in the company of a man, her Western dress, and more. As Lodhia writes, "Rather than framing the issue of rape in terms of the complexities of evolving gender norms, violent masculinities, and neoliberal displacement, women were instead positioned as provocateurs, who by transgressing the boundaries of idealized femininity and the domestic sphere,

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[5] Jacqui Alexander writes, "bringing neocolonialism into ideological proximity with neo-imperialism has made visible the different ways in which ideologies and practices traffic within the two spheres" (Alexander, 2005, 246). Lodhia utilizes the concept of "ideological traffic" here to bring together in ideological proximity the otherwise disparate discourses of law, politics and societal norms as they produce certain ruptures in the socio-legal landscape in which sexual violence cases are adjudicated. Factors such as societal perceptions of shame and honor, hegemonic framings of sexual violence in the media, and the role of legal and political structures interact with one another in delineating the offense of rape.

had provoked these attacks" (2015, 95). Political interests, thus, were committed to either framing Jyoti Singh as a martyr at the hands of animalistic migrant men who could not control their urges, or as a provocateur whose misguided Westernized independence had brought the attack upon herself.

International media and the making of global causes

Furthermore, as many commentators argue, the very framing of Jyoti Singh as a middle-class woman was a political move, resulting from an erasure of her background, which, as sociologist Poulami Roychowdhury writes, was in reality quite similar to that of her assailants. Singh's family, like those of the attackers, were migrants to the city, belonging to a lower caste agricultural community. However, Roychowdhury notes, international media reports exaggerated the differences between Jyoti Singh and her assailants' social status and presented the "assault as a putative battle between two Indias: the first, new and modern, and the second, old and backward" (2013, 282). Portrayals of Jyoti Singh in the media consistently focused on her upwardly mobile social trajectory, drawing attention to her smartphone, her "western clothes," how she wanted "more" out of life, thereby situating her as a "new, relatively empowered, 'Third World' woman — one who not only demands women's liberation but does do within the confines of a global consumer economy" (283).

This deliberate glossing of facts, and purposive representation of Pandey as a modern Indian woman is juxtaposed with the representation of her assailants as insufficiently modernized, backward and misogynist. As Roychowdhury writes, this all-too-familiar refrain "illustrates the ongoing resilience and appeal of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'white men saving brown women from brown men'" (284). This is perhaps most visible in the disappearance of Singh's male friend from most accounts in international media, despite the fact that Awindra Pandey was also on the bus, tried to help Jyoti Singh, and was physically assaulted, stripped naked, and dumped on the side of road along with her. Roychowdhury argues, "He disappeared, firstly, because his body stood outside the economy of international care: white men are not in the business of saving brown men from other brown men" (284). Moreover, his presence as an ally disrupts the discourse of savage brown men produced in these accounts. Indeed, the Nirbhaya case became "an international cause because [it] indexes the inferiority of non-Western cultures" (285), a fact apparent in such characterizations of Indian culture as "traditional" and India's criminal justice system as one that is "riddled with incompetence, corruption and political meddling" (Harris and Kumar, 2012). Such an international cause, Roychowdhury holds, is invested less in the emancipation of Indian women as in the securing of

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"Indian women's abilities to be consumers and ready participants in India's neoliberal economy" (288), and as such poses real dangers for women's rights.

Implicit within this binary representation of poor and rural men as antagonists and young, urban, upwardly mobile women as victims is a neoliberal model of modernity wherein freedom of the body, of sexuality, and of desire are at once conflated with consumerism. The battle, as it were, is constructed "as a conflict between an aggrieved feudal patriarchy violently defending its prerogative to control women and youth, and a liberating modernity which allows both the possibility of discovering themselves as individuals" (Mani 2014, 27). This flattened, simplistic dualism is reproduced in political, nationalist, and religious discourse, and bolstered by both Indian and international media in their representations of gender inequities in India.

Maitreyee Chaudhuri makes similar assessments about the international media's response to the Nirbhaya case, but situates the lack of nuance of international media within a specific context, one that is "defined by neo-liberal globalization, India's own economic ascendency within it, the rise of a host of international organizations fitting norms of global governance; new technology, media convergence and the unprecedented role of a mediatized public discourse" (2015, 19). Chaudhuri draws on Dipesh Chakrabarty's (1992) articulation of the "inequality of ignorance"[6] between first world and third world scholars to assert that this asymmetry persists not only in academia but also in other sites of knowledge production including "international institutions, global think tanks, corporate research institutions and non-governmental organizations" (2015, 20), all of which not only exert great influence in the contemporary global order, but also act as key sources of information for the media.

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[6] Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his *Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?* (1992), discusses the asymmetry of knowledge production. He writes, "'Europe' remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call 'Indian,' 'Chinese, 'Kenyan,' and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called "the history of Europe". That the history of Europe acts as a silent referent in historical knowledge becomes apparent in the actions of third-world historians. Chakrabarty writes, "Third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate. ...'They' produce their work in relative ignorance of non-Western histories, and this does not seem to affect the quality of their work. This is a gesture, however, that 'we' cannot return. We cannot even afford an equality or symmetry of ignorance at this level without taking the risk of appearing 'old fashioned' or 'outdated'. This "inequality of ignorance," Chakrabarty holds, is by no means limited to the discipline of History, but rather can be found across the academy.

In the present moment, Chaudhuri argues, the inequality of ignorance mentioned above converges with "instant access" to information made possible by new media technologies. Instant access "does not necessarily spell either equal or informed access to content" (2015, 22), and therefore often replicates the partial (and sometimes blatantly uninformed) knowledge of hegemonic institutions. Furthermore, the increasing convergence of new and old media calls to attention the simultaneous proliferation of content and the rapidly decreasing diversity of sources which results in a "dominant, homogenized and effectively mediatized narrative that can travel instantly and spread everywhere even as 'unequal ignorance' in key sites of knowledge production persists" (2015, 25). This homogenized narrative of the Nirbhaya case masks and renders invisible the many nuances of the conversations taking place within India, in order to produce a singular narrative that reeks of the orientalist and imperialist claims outlined above.

In response to the persistence of disheartening neo colonialist discourses in the treatment of the Nirbhaya case, as well as other instances of gender-based violence in the Global South, Elora Halim Chowdhury calls for a transnational analytics of care. She writes, "We need an analytic of care that is cognizant of the local *and* global processes that create conditions of vulnerability for women and form the asymmetrical planes in which cross-cultural alliances and solidarity practices must happen" (2014, 9). Pointing to a crucial but often elided aspect of the case, Chowdhury reflects that feminists in India and around the globe often "failed to discuss the global economic conditions that make poor women and men especially vulnerable to extreme violence and suffering" (2014, 10). This refusal to acknowledge violence due to transnational neoliberalism is especially true of Western (predominantly U.S.-based) representations, which describe women's suffering in the Global South as a consequence of patriarchal oppression, but persist in presenting sexual violence within their own borders as exceptional, taking place outside of the normative bounds of socio-cultural relations. Karuna Nundy's experience of being interviewed in the aftermath of the Nirbhaya case, reflects this:

> When I was interviewed by the *BBC*, the *New York Times* and other highly credible news outlets, I would find that when I was attempting to link the patriarchies in other places — the Steubenville rape happened around that time — patriarchy's an issue around the world after all, and then talking about the trammels on freedom here, there was a very strong response from editorial staff — always a White man — saying that no, no, that's different. The approach would be: you poor Indian women, these Indian men are so awful. And then I was forced to cite statistics, such as that the conviction rate here is 27% because of the

change in evidence law that the Indian women's movement brought, and that the rate of conviction in France is 7%. If you look at the rate of women's representation in Parliaments it's really low in England, in the US, in other places (personal communication 2016).

Nundy points to how international media develops narratives of sexual violence in India as indicative of a primitive culture, ignoring other markers of women's agency and development. This erases the massive strides made by the women's movement in India, while also presenting it as a problem so steeped in India's specific culture that cross-border alliances seem impossible.

Chowdhury argues that the immense attention given to sexual violence is indicative of a long history of "using the status of women in a society as the measure of its progress, which aids colonial and imperial missions" (2014, 10). This singular focus on sexual violence often obscures the myriad other forms of violence enacted upon the bodies of male *and* female workers through "the structural inequality of globalization, colonial relations between supplier and buyer nations, corporate greed, [and] corrupt state machinery" (2014, 13). The marginalisation of migrant men and the precariousness of their lives, Chowdhury holds, should also be a focus of transnational care. This is not to excuse the brutality of their attack, or to deny that they should face judicial consequences for their act, but rather to situate the root causes of their own dispossession within larger transnational circuits of inequality. Chowdhury, therefore, calls for feminists to take on this difficult work of countering mainstream discourses and making visible the myriad interlocking forms of oppression that render the lives of both men and women in the Global South increasingly precarious.

Transnational solidarity, in this context, draws upon the work of postcolonial feminist theorists and activists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Jacqui Alexander, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, and numerous others. Their theorization of a feminist politics of transnational solidarity is one that refuses the binarisms of global/local, national/international and center/periphery, to instead adopt a framework that is attentive to the interconnectedness of these categories. They advocate a feminist politics that is attentive to global differences and borders while building alliances and transcending those borders. Transnational feminism, as presented in their work, questions dominant white, Western feminist perspectives that overemphasize gender as the primary reason for oppression. Instead, they call attention to intersections of nationhood, race, gender, sexuality and economic exploitation in globalized capitalism. This perspective advocates a feminist political practice that acknowledges transnational cultural flows that account for "the material conditions that structure

women's lives in diverse locations" (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 17). Next, I elaborate on this framework of transnational feminist solidarity, through which I analyse the three anti-violence campaigns that form my focus in this thesis.

Transnational Feminist Solidarity: a framework

Chandra Talpade Mohanty posits that a politically just feminism "would require recognizing that sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism underlie and fuel social and political institutions of rule and thus often lead to hatred of women and (supposedly justified) violence against women" (2003, 3). Identifying the need for an "antiracist feminist framework, anchored in decolonization and committed to an anticapitalist critique" (3), Mohanty outlines a notion of feminist solidarity. As opposed to vague notions of sisterhood which have often erased differences between women to the detriment of those who lie at the margins, solidarity in Mohanty's vision foregrounds diversity and difference, which are recognized and respected rather than rendered invisible. Mohanty invokes Jodi Dean's framing of "reflective solidarity," which is constructed as a process involving three subjects: "I ask you to stand by me over and against a third" (Dean 1996, 3 quoted in Mohanty 2003, 7).

This framing is useful in that it defines solidarity as an active, deliberate process based on conscious recognition, reflection, and struggle. This is in contrast to the notion of sisterhood, which assumes a commonality on the basis of gender, an almost passive construction that foregrounds gender and presents a "false commonality of oppressions, interests, and struggles between and among women globally" (Mohanty 2003, 36). Here it is useful to briefly discuss the concept of "global feminism," akin in many ways to the idea of sisterhood referred to above. Grewal and Kaplan write, "'global feminism' has stood for a kind of Western cultural imperialism [which] has elided the diversity of women's agency in favour of a universalized Western model of women's liberation that celebrates individuality and modernity" (1994, 17). This is a critical perspective to keep in mind because of the still persistent discourses that reflect such a universalizing and imperialist view, often in the guise of solidarity. Grewal and Kaplan further draw attention to the idea of "scattered hegemonies such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, 'authentic' forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-juridical oppression on multiple levels" (17). This notion is immensely productive because it moves away from unidirectional and geocentric conceptions of power relationships, instead laying bare the multiple patriarchies and hegemonic systems dispersed at various levels of social, political, and economic institutions.

Solidarity, Mohanty explains, is based on the premise that the local and the global "are not defined in terms of physical geography or territory but exist simultaneously and constitute each other" (2003, 242). Similarly dismantling the dichotomies of global and local, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan write, "the parameters of the local and global are often indefinable or indistinct — they are permeable constructs. How one separates the local from the global is difficult to decide when each thoroughly infiltrates the other" (1994, 11). They use the term transnational, therefore, as a means of problematizing "a purely locational politics" (13), underscoring instead the transnational linkages that influence every level of social existence. Here, it is the interrelationships and links between the local and global that are essential to transnational feminist analysis, wherein the differences and interconnectedness are simultaneously considered in relation to one another. Mohanty clarifies, "the focus is not just on the intersections of race, class, gender, nation, and sexuality in different communities of women but on *mutuality* and *coimplication*, which suggests attentiveness to the interweaving of the histories of these communities (2003, 242; italics mine).

This model of solidarity is useful for a number of reasons: it foregrounds context-specific and experiential histories while also seeking to draw connections between the social, economic and political histories of different communities. Moreover, it allows us to draw connections not only between systems of oppression across different contexts, but also between resistance and struggles against these systems. Mohanty writes, "Rather than formulating activism and agency in terms of discrete and disconnected cultures and nations, it allows us to frame agency and resistance across the borders of nation and culture" (2003, 243). Here, the process of solidarity requires an active, inward, introspective gaze into one's own political and social location, and an acknowledgement of one's own implication within the systems against which one is resisting. This is especially crucial in terms of recognizing one's relative privilege within the world. This sense of shared responsibility, then, allows for a conscious and aware process of solidarity that is always being reflected upon. This idea of a non-colonizing transnational feminist solidarity informs my analysis of the three case studies in this thesis. I am invested in understanding the conversations and collaborations produced through these three campaigns in order to identify the failures, barriers, and areas of potential collective action they enable. I propose that such an analysis can serve as a space of learning and future action for feminists committed to a more socially just world.

Methodology

Living in New Delhi at the time of the Nirbhaya case, I was, like most other people, deeply affected by the incident. As I read about the brutality of the attack, participated in the protests, discussed the incident, and observed different reactions to it, I felt as though Jyoti Singh's terrible ordeal marked a significant change in many of us. The Nirbhaya case appeared to have taken the issue of sexual violence from being a concern for women only, and feminists especially, and propelled it into the mainstream. But why *this* case and not one of the many other rapes that take place on a sickeningly regular basis? Many have argued that it was the terrible nature of the attack that provoked such a strong reaction. Others pointed out the ways in which Jyoti Singh's journey that night eroded the protection normally afforded to privileged upper classes in Delhi, spurring the normally complacent middle and upper classes to revolt. Singh had, after all, started her evening watching *The Life of Pi* at an upscale mall in South Delhi. At the time of the incident, I lived close to that very same mall, went there often, and had possibly even watched the same movie there, as had many of my friends. In many ways, then, Jyoti Singh's story struck closer to home than other incidents. Perhaps the thought that *it could have been me* was why, in addition to the sheer brutality of the case, so many of us were driven to take to the streets and call for more safety, accountability, and justice.

I had never seen New Delhi's body politic so profoundly angered by an incident of rape. In the days that followed the 16th of December 2012, it seemed like it was all that anyone could talk about. This was true both online and offline – indeed, it was impossible, if one was on social media, to avoid the constant slew of posts, links, and discussions focused on gender, specifically violence against women. I was deeply affected by these conversations, some of which provoked deep anger, some a sense of empathy and collective pain. Indeed, it was being in Delhi at this critical moment, participating and observing these conversations, that instigated in me a desire to better understand the events unfolding around me. I became interested in the ways that social media was used to spread information about the protests, to circulate petitions to the government, to collect pledges, share knowledge and experiences, and much more.

On the one hand, numerous feminist Facebook groups, Twitter hashtags, Tumblr blogs and other online spaces came into being, providing fertile spaces for feminist and activist discussions, self-education, consciousness raising, and community building. This reveals how social media can be

enormously useful tools that serve necessary communicative and educative functions. On the other hand, misogynistic trolls targeted these conversations, blaming and shaming women who shared their experiences of sexual violence, and revealing the persistence of misogyny and violence against women in online spaces. Additionally, international media's shaming and fear mongering permeated these debates within India, adding a layer of nationalist shame and protectionism to the discourse. Moreover, since the Nirbhaya case took place soon after other global social upheavals such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, wherein social media was considered an important player in instigating and enabling revolution, yet another stream of discussions was dedicated to the role of technology in the protests in Delhi. Many commentators argued that the widespread political unrest would have been impossible without social media. Others disparaged this argument, pointing the millions of Indians who did not have access to the Internet and these elite Anglophonic discussions, and yet participated in protests across the nation.

The truth, I would argue, lies in between these binary positions. Conversations on social media are generally limited to elite, middle and upper class Indians who are typically privileged and educated. This, of course, means that the publics of which we speak when we talk about social media are limited, and necessarily exclude millions who do not have access to the Internet. Indeed, even when they do have access, social hierarchies are duplicated in online spaces, and voices of marginalised groups are often rendered invisible even when they are online. Even while acknowledging the lack of equal representation of all social groups on social media, the conversations that take place on these platforms are nonetheless important. The views of the privileged English-speaking middle class travel transnationally, informing representations and understandings of India and the place of women within the nation. Social media have aided the transnational journeys of significant political events such as the Nirbhaya case, but tend to represent the views of upper class and upper-caste elites. The bias towards a minority but privileged viewpoint is essential to keep in mind as we consider international representations of Indian activism and social movements.

In this thesis, I am interested in two interconnected aspects of social media that inform online activism. First, the design of these platforms encourages (and indeed depends upon) participation, engagement, and sharing of content by users. This sharing culture is in many ways an obvious tool for activists to harness, in order to reach wider audiences, build online communities, and to garner more support for their cause. Second, these platforms help overcome barriers of space and time,

enabling content to travel instantaneously across borders, allowing activists to create cross-cultural connections and to form communities dispersed across the globe. At the same time, activism and political discussion become commodified within the political economy of social media platforms. Not all content is equal either, and content from already established and powerful spaces tends to travel further, and have a greater likelihood of going viral, a fact further enabled by ongoing and increasing convergence of social and mainstream media.

In this thesis, I am interested in why some activist media artifacts, and not others, attain transnational visibility on social media platforms. I argue that the affordances of social media help define which campaigns and events go viral. These platforms rely on the commodification of user-generated content, and content that already holds valence as commercial objects is perfectly aligned with the sharing culture of social media platforms. This is especially true of mythological figures like goddesses and superheroes, which are familiar, popular cultural icons that have a long history of representing the cultures from which they originate. They are instantaneously recognizable, both within the cultures from which they originate, as well as the wider world. It is easy, for instance, to associate an elaborately sari-clad, bejeweled, many-armed woman with Hinduism and India, or a woman wearing star-spangled spandex outfits and fighting crime with Wonder Woman and the U.S. The cultural readability of these icons helps cast light on questions such as: Why are some events and certain kinds of campaigns more shareable than others? What kinds of campaigns are read as specifically "Indian," to audiences outside India? What kinds of campaigns, conversely, might be read as more universally relevant? What are some of the ways in which specific media artifacts allow for greater and lesser degrees of orientalism and paternalism, or conversely, empathy and solidarity?

In this section, I will begin by discussing the reasons that led me to select these three campaigns as objects for analysis. I will then provide an account of the methodology used within this analysis, including a report of the different methods I used to collect and analyse the representations, comments and other meaning-making strategies surrounding these campaigns. I will then provide a brief overview of scholarly work on shareability, virality and memesis within the participatory culture of social media. This literature situates my analysis within existing vocabularies and frameworks used by scholars of new media. I then turn to critical explorations of social media that challenge the supposedly democratic and equalizing power of digital platforms. Here, I highlight different aspects of the political economy of social media, including unequal participation of different groups and the

commodification of online content. This, I argue, highlights the problematic ways in which online activism has to adhere to systems of commodification and consumerism in order to be successful. Using this existing work as a backdrop, I will conclude this section with a brief consideration of how the lessons from these three campaigns can cumulatively inform larger understandings of the transnational media dimensions of social activism.

Why these campaigns?

The aftermath of the Nirbhaya case created an atmosphere for the open discussion of previously hidden subjects such as violence against women. It also created an environment wherein any work—activist, artistic, technological, corporate—that addressed violence against women also received heightened attention. Interestingly, two of the campaigns—the *Abused Goddesses* and *Talk to Me*—were created before the incident, but were relatively unknown until after the Nirbhaya case, after which each of them became widely publicized against the backdrop of elevated attention to gender violence in India. The comic book, *Priya's Shakti*, on the other hand, was created directly in response to the Nirbhaya incident, although the story itself is significantly different from the case that inspired it. Each of the three campaigns focus on violence against women, have been written about in numerous mainstream and digital media sites, been shared widely through social media channels, and sparked discussions and debates on and offline. This is the primary reason for selecting these campaigns, as their transnational visibility allows them to function as sites through which ideas of India—especially as they pertain to gender and gender-based violence—are formed.

Second, the three campaigns I have selected mobilize popular, easily recognizable iconography to bring feminist issues to mainstream recognition using the affordances of social media platforms. Despite their distinctness, a thread of similarity runs through their use: popular myths and action heroes. The *Abused Goddesses* uses the figures of Hindu goddesses, who are not merely religious icons with immense power, but also popular images in Indian visual culture, appearing in so-called *bazaar* or calendar art, as well as in comic books. *Priya's Shakti* also uses goddess iconography, but combines it with that of superheroes, following in the lineage of comic books in India and elsewhere that use mythology as source material for their storytelling. Blank Noise, lastly, calls participants and volunteers "action heroes," once again bringing to mind superheroes and their vigilantism in the face of social evil that is ignored or worse, abetted, by corrupt governments. Their use of myth and popular cultural icons and knowledge points, perhaps, to one reason for their widespread popularity.

The use of culturally relatable symbols that carry preexisting meanings and associations is a powerful means of getting messages across. I argue that this makes the campaigns readable across borders, by appealing to a shared set of familiar iconographic materials that make them accessible to audiences in India and elsewhere. These mythological figures are striking—they capture the attention and imagination of readers and viewers—even while they are familiar, even evoking a sense of nostalgia. Seen in this light, these campaigns mobilize the familiar, but alter it and modify it, making them intriguing artifacts that seem to be uniquely shareable on digital platforms.

Although I do not develop this connection much further within my analysis, this link between the three works is one of reasons that first drew me to selecting them. Inherent within myths of goddesses and superheroes is a turn to the role of the individual agent – the hero – in creating change. That said, these are multifaceted campaigns with numerous possible readings, including several imaginable "heroes" within these works. This ambivalence within the works draws from the ambivalence of myth itself, providing the ability for multiple readings of the stories, and allowing space for inserting oneself into the narrative. What I am signaling here is that these campaigns are designed to engage the reader as a participant and a creator of change. The hero in this context, therefore, is the reader or viewer, who is invited to engage with the problem. In the *Abused Goddesses* campaign, the goddesses themselves are stripped of their heroism, portrayed as victims who beseech the viewer to save them. The hero or the one who possesses power is the one who saves them, or perhaps their abusers who resist from hurting them. *Priya's Shakti* is similarly ambiguous – while Priya is often spoken of as a superhero, her agency in the story is difficult to pinpoint, as I will show. Instead, the hero seems to be the goddess Parvati who rescues Priya from her isolation, or perhaps the readers who are invited to stand with Priya and support her. For Blank Noise, anyone who stands against the structures of sexual violence is potentially a hero; their heroism is located in small acts of defiance and in performances of trust and fearlessness.

Finally, I selected these campaigns because I personally engaged in conversations about each of them on Facebook and Twitter. My social media circles, like those of many others, span different geographies, comprising a network that spans from India to Canada and the United States, where I previously attended college. All three campaigns were shared in both my Indian network as well as amongst my international friends, but the conversations differed in each considerably, as they did between self-identified feminists and others. This spurred me to ask why these specific campaigns

had caught the attention of so many diverse audiences. What work were these campaigns doing in instigating conversations about sexual violence in India?

The *Abused Goddesses* campaign was equally widely shared in India and abroad, and both Indian and international audiences took notice of the shocking images that campaigned against domestic violence. Criticisms of the campaign were immediate and rampant amongst Indian feminists and social activists, as well as amongst religious groups in India. However, these critical viewpoints did not travel with the same speed or urgency as the campaign, and were rendered invisible in international media coverage. Moreover, many of the comments from various international readers and viewers tended towards orientalist, essentialist and racist ideologies concerning Indian society. Despite the many valid criticisms of this work, I wondered whether the campaign could hold lessons for activists and feminists, and if some of the means through which this campaign attained such widespread success could be used in future work.

The *Priya's Shakti* comic book was shared amongst my friends outside India more than in India, which also reflected the Indian and international media coverage of the work. The comic's greater popularity in international spaces suggests that it holds greater valence for non-Indian audiences. This is rather incongruent given that the creators hope to embed the comic in educational systems in India. Here, even more than in the case of the *Abused Goddesses* campaign, reception of the comic was laudatory and celebratory. The few positions critical of the work were barely acknowledged in most reports. While most news reports praised the innovative use of technology and the comic book format, they did not delve into the actual narratives of the comic. I saw this as a major gap in reportage about the comic, especially since I was disturbed by several aspects of the story, such as its uncritical celebration of Hindu mythology and its questionable framing of Priya's agency as a consequence of divine intervention. Furthermore, reportage and commentary on the comic tended to refer to India as a site of rampant violence against women, with backward local communities that refuse to support victims. Although this can be true, I find myself concerned that its narrow narrative justifies a paternalistic, orientalist view of India. Nonetheless, this initiative holds lessons as an example of creative transmedia storytelling that resonates deeply with some audiences.

I have been most engaged and personally invested with the final case study. Although I encountered Blank Noise's *Talk to Me* campaign online, through an article in *The Atlantic*, I had been familiar with

the work of the artist collective long before that. Soon after the Nirbhaya incident, I saw the *I Never Ask For It* installation at a public protest in New Delhi, which touched me deeply at the time. After this, I participated in some of their interventions in the city, and also became acquainted with the founder of the collective, Jasmeen Patheja. I have followed the work of the collective ever since, have met many of the Blank Noise volunteers, and engaged with some of their online campaigns and discussions. The work of the collective struck me as a powerful and unusual way of addressing the everyday sexism of street life in India. Blank Noise offered a vocabulary and methodology for talking about and taking back in public space and urban life, refusing discourses of victimhood and blame, and building communities where one can share experiences and work collectively, often in ways that underscore the importance of play and fun. The work of the collective, to me, brings together feminist theory and collective action in a way that is powerful and accessible, as is evident in increasing global attention to their work. In many ways, I include this case study as an example of transnational feminism that does build solidarity, perhaps because of its attention to the intertwined actions of pedagogy and performance.

My purpose here is not to present the first two campaigns as purely problematic, and the third as purely good. Rather, I am invested in understanding how these very different campaigns each reached such wide audiences, the conversations they produced within these spaces, and how the lessons learnt herein can help inform future activist work both within and outside of India.

Methods

I view these campaigns not merely as discrete, bounded texts, but as discursive interventions that respond to, reproduce, and alter the sociopolitical contexts in which they are created and circulate. Therefore, my analysis of these case studies has two parts: first, the media object (campaign) itself, and second, the commentary and discourse generated by the campaign. I begin with the history of each campaign, discussing how they were created, by whom, and to what purpose. I draw upon media reportage as well as information collected through in-person interviews with the creators of these works, and conversations with numerous participants, commentators, and academics that have engaged with one or more of these campaigns. These interviews were conducted during a field visit to India in January 2016, when I visited New Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore.

In Mumbai, I spoke with Santosh Padhi, co-founder and chief creative officer of Taproot India, the advertising agency that created the *Abused Goddesses* campaign. Padhi provided important information about why the agency chose religious iconography, the methods they used to create the images, and the story of how it achieved social media celebrity. The campaign was widely mediatized almost two years after it was created, when it was published on the Internet site *ScoopWhoop*, commonly described as the *Buzzfeed* of India. I attempted to contact the founders and editors at *ScoopWhoop* on numerous occasions, but was unable to secure an interview. I also attempted to contact the Indian chapter of Save the Children, the NGO that, according to media reports, had partnered with the *Abused Goddesses* campaign but later refuted this claim. However, once again, I was unable to secure an appointment.

In Bangalore, I met with Jasmeen Patheja, founder of the Blank Noise artist collective and artist-in-residence at the Srishti School of Art and Design. In addition to a conversation with Patheja, I spoke with Vira Mistry, the first and only employee of Blank Noise, as well as five students at the Srishti School who had enrolled in a workshop with Patheja and participated in several Blank Noise interventions. This set of interviews was particularly useful because Blank Noise, as an artist collective, relies on the actions of volunteers and participants. In addition, I spoke via Skype with Blank Noise action volunteers Shivangini Tandon and Dana Roy, located in Goa and Calcutta respectively. Both women have long been associated with the collective, as well as other feminist, activist and artistic interventions, and were able to speak about the work of Blank Noise and its evolution over the course of several years. I conducted additional interviews over email correspondence and Skype conversations with participants in Tokyo, Mumbai and Bangalore. Finally, in New Delhi, I interviewed Supreme Court lawyer Karuna Nundy, who recently joined the Board of Trustees of Blank Noise. Nundy is well known for her work on several landmark social justice and feminist cases, and is also frequently cited in the media as a feminist activist and legal specialist. Each of these conversations has provided me with invaluable information that informs my analysis of the *Talk to Me* campaign in particular, and the work of Blank Noise more generally.

Finally, in the case of *Priya's Shakti*, I interviewed the creator of the work, filmmaker Ram Devineni. This interview was conducted via Skype as Devineni is currently located in New York. The dialogue with Devineni provided an account of the context, history and making of *Priya's Shakti*, as well as reflections about the impact of the comic and the lessons that will inform future work. Devineni

also introduced me to members of the Apne Aap NGO, an organization with whom they are partnering to bring the comic book to schools in India. However, despite many efforts, I was unable to contact these members for an interview. That said, the interviews I was able to conduct provided useful insight into the reasons and choices made in the creation of these campaigns.

My analysis of the discourse generated by these works, draws specifically on English-language media sources within and outside of India. Indian media sources include some of the most widely read news sites, such as *The Hindu, The Indian Express, The Times of India* and *The Hindustan Times*. I also include perspectives from online media sites and blogs such as *The Ladies Finger, Kafila, The Wire, Scroll.in* and *ScoopWhoop*. International media sources are primarily located in the United States and the United Kingdom, and include mainstream publications such as the *New York Times*, *BBC, The Atlantic,* and *The Guardian,* as well as online media sites and blogs such as *Buzzfeed*, *Feministing, Everyday Feminism, Salon.com, Vice.com*. I selected these sites because of their wide readership across many different geographies and demographics. I analyse articles dedicated to the three campaigns, as well as user-generated comments that respond to these articles. Furthermore, where relevant, I also analyse Twitter and Facebook posts through which users participate in one or more of these campaigns, or simply reflect on them. I selected articles and comments that were most shared or liked, which indicates that they represent a typical and popular point of view.

In my analysis, I identify differences between Indian and international media reports and comments. I am interested in what these distinctions reveal about the ways in which Indian feminism is read through western eyes. Here, I believe that many of the discursive tropes that Chandra Talpade Mohanty identifies in her iconic essay *Under Western Eyes* persist in western representations of Third World women. In my work, I seek to unpack this discursive terrain to make visible the ways in which this patronizing viewpoint is both reaffirmed as well as challenged. My work, furthermore, is informed by the observation that feminist issues and campaigns are becoming more popular due to the affordances of social media and ways that it enables different kinds of work to travel.

A significant aspect of my work in this thesis relies on the idea of participatory culture, an aspect of social media that is essential for the ways in which these three campaigns, as well as the numerous responses to them, were all able to travel so widely and go viral. In the next section, I provide an overview of the theories that conceptualize how content travels on social media platforms, defining

terms such as participatory culture, virality, and memes. These terms offer a vocabulary that enables me to situate my work within existing research on social media participation. In the remainder of this thesis, I will mobilize these conceptual definitions in my analysis of the three campaigns.

Participatory Culture, Viral Media, and Internet Memes

The participatory culture of social media platforms relies on user-generated creative content and engagement. When such user-generated content from non-hegemonic groups travels transnationally, or goes viral, it can potentially act as a site for building transnational solidarity, but also as means of reinforcing existing hegemonies. To understand how media travels, and which media travel furthest, I turn to theorizations of participatory culture, spreadable media, virality and memetics by media scholars Henry Jenkins and Limor Shifman.

Jenkins writes, "A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another" (2009, 3). While participatory culture has a long history, in the present moment it is associated most with Internet-driven media participation and the ease of media production enabled by technological advances. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia, Twitter, and Tumblr offer spaces for people to share thoughts, opinions and creative work, to participate in conversations and commentary, and to build communities with others. Within and through these platforms, Jenkins et al. argue (2013, 2), audiences actively shape the ways in which media flows, not only through choices of what content they share but also through active engagement with media artifacts in the forms of remix media.

Jenkins et al. use the term "spreadable media" to "refer to the potential—both technical and cultural—for audiences to share content for their own purposes" (2013, 3). The concept of spreadability rests on the distinction between distribution (the top-down spread of media content as captured in the broadcast paradigm) and circulation (a hybrid system where content spreads as a result of a series of informal transactions between commercial and noncommercial participants). Spreadable media travels across media platforms at least in part because people take it in their own hands and share it with their social networks. "People don't circulate material because advertisers or

media producers ask them to," Jenkins et al. write, "though they may do so to support a cause they are invested in" (2013, 198). Moreover, "Content spreads when it acts as fodder for conversations that audiences are already having" (2013, 199). Spreadability of content is contingent on many factors, including its design, its source and its timeliness. Content that includes "shared fantasies, humor, parody and references, unfinished content, mystery, timely controversy, and rumors" (2013, 202) is most spreadable. Spreadability, Jenkins holds, is related to both the technological affordances of new media platforms, as well as to social relationships between media producers and consumers.

The framework of spreadability is useful for my work as it spans different spaces, audiences and types of content, and helps explain how content travels between commercial and non-commercial spaces, and what aspects of content might encourage audiences to share it further. The campaigns I look at were all designed to be participatory—they were produced to be shared, liked, commented upon, and engaged with—in other words, they were produced as spreadable texts. This is especially true in the case of *Priya's Shakti,* where readers are encouraged to take selfies with Priya using the augmented reality app. Not only is the app designed to help you take a selfie with a speech bubble reading "I Stand with Priya," it also makes the picture easily shareable on social media platforms.

In popular Internet discourse, terms such as memes and virals are more commonly used than "spreadable media." For Jenkins and his collaborators, these are biologically derived terms that do not adequately account for the way that culture travels. They write, "viral metaphors do capture the speed with which new ideas circulate through the Internet" but tend to signify passive audiences and active media, wherein "media content disseminates like a pandemic—spreading through audiences by infecting person after person who comes into contact with it" (2013, 17). The term "viral," therefore, does not address the fact that media spreads through the deliberate actions and engagement of users. Similarly, Jenkins et al. are opposed to the term "meme," a commonly used term in online participatory culture. British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins first introduced the term "meme," arguing that the meme is the cultural equivalent to the gene. "Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation," wrote Dawkins (1976, 192, quoted in Jenkins et al., 2013, 19). Accounts of memes and viral media tend to "describe media texts as 'self-replicating'… this concept of "self-replicating" culture is oxymoronic, though, as culture is a human product and replicates

through human agency" (ibid.). While these are valid and necessary critiques, it is nonetheless true that online audiences describing their own cultural processes have embraced the terms memes and viral media. Moreover, media scholars have also explored these phenomena in depth, and in the process have articulated important and revealing aspects of online culture that may not be immediately obvious in the idea of spreadable media.

Limor Shifman holds that the concept meme captures an integral aspect of cultural reproduction in contemporary digital culture, and indeed "epitomizes the very essence of the so-called Web 2.0 era" (2014, 15). She argues that while memes diffuse from person to person on a micro level, they shape and reflect the macro level: "memes shape the mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups" (2014, 18). Furthermore, the logic of memes is highly compatible with the affordances of Web 2.0 platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, which are designed for the creation and propagation of content, and offer "express paths for meme diffusion" (2014, 18). Indeed, Shifman writes, sharing has emerged as the "constitutive activity of Web 2.0" (2014, 19), an action through which one can simultaneously express "both their uniqueness and their connectivity" (2014, 30). The content that one shares online, therefore, becomes a means of declaring one's identity and positionality, especially in the case of political memes. Sharing content, therefore, can also be a political act. Each of these characteristics of memes can be applied to the materials that I examine in my thesis. The campaigns I analyse all reflect and shape the culture in which they circulate. Their circulation, furthermore, has been in large part a consequence of the affordances of the platforms through which they travel. Finally, these are all activist and political texts, and users who choose to share and comment upon them also use them to articulate their own political and social stance with regard to the issue of violence against women.

Shifman defines an internet meme as "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by multiple users" (2014, 41). Here, she deviates from the original concept of the meme as a single cultural unit that propagates, arguing instead that the meme is a collection of cultural texts that reference one another. This is especially visible in the remix culture that is so visible on digital platforms, wherein users mimic and modify original content to create an interconnected set of cultural texts that draw from and reference one

another. The texts that I examine might not necessarily be seen as Internet memes in the popular usage of the term, but do contain many aspects of memes in the definition Shifman offers.

As mentioned earlier, I look at campaigns not only as discrete media objects, but as discursive interventions that comprise a central campaign that has inspired numerous responses in the form of news articles, blog posts and comments. At least two of the works I look at utilize mimetic culture as essential aspects of their work. The selfie aspect of *Priya's Shakti* acts as a kind of meme that forms a collection of images and tweets that directly emanate from and respond to the comic book. The *Talk to Me* campaign has been replicated in several cities after the original intervention in Bangalore, indicating a kind of offline mimesis. Moreover, many of Blank Noise's online campaigns can be viewed as examples of mimesis. The Safe City Pledges, in particular, are an example of mimetic culture, wherein users tweet or post images of themselves holding a handwritten pledge. Not only do the images follow a kind of format, but the pledges do as well. These are scripts that are made personalized by individual users, and shared via social media, using a single hashtag, #safecitypledge.

In each of these examples, one may not immediately read these texts as "memes," yet they reflect many of the characteristics of memes as well as viral media. Virality, the other immensely popular term for online media, has been used to describe the widespread and rapid diffusion of a cultural text across digital spaces. The key attributes of virality are person-to-person diffusion, great speed and broad reach (Hemsley and Mason quoted in Shifman, 2014, 55). Notwithstanding some key differences between viral texts and memes, Shifman holds that we should think of Internet memes and viral media as "two ends of a dynamic spectrum rather than as a binary dichotomy" (2014, 58) that entail different modes of engagement, rather than simplistic active versus passive formulations (2014, 59). The spread of both viral and memetic content, therefore, is the result of engaged communication, albeit viral content may fall on the less participatory end of the spectrum, while memes require deeper engagement, and the creation of actual texts by users. The campaigns I analyse are not only widespread, but have evoked massive participation, although not necessarily imitation. Yet, the media reports and comments are in many cases imitative, using the same source materials and even very similar language in their descriptions of the campaigns. This, I argue, can be seen as a kind of imitation or mimesis, wherein journalists and other cultural commentators reuse and recycle reports that have already been published, albeit with minor changes.

Shifman, drawing upon the work of Berger and Milkman, articulates six factors that enhance the virality of a piece of content: "*positivity, provocation of high-arousal emotions, participation, packaging, prestige, and positioning*" (2014, 66). Positivity refers to the finding that most people are more likely to share positive stories, rather than negative ones, especially items that are "perceived as surprising, interesting, or practically useful" (67), especially as the sharing of upbeat content reflects back of the individual as an optimistic and positive person. The next finding showed that people tend to share content that evokes strong emotions – both negative and positive – which generate a sense of awe or a sense of anger and anxiety, which provoked a desire to act. Packaging refers to the fact that "simple and clear news stories spread better than complex ones," while Prestige relates to users' knowledge about the source of the content, i.e. "the more famous the author is, the more likely people are to share the piece" (2014, 69). Positioning manifests in the location of the piece of content in digital space and time, but also in the location of that content within social networks and its association with prominent actors (70). Finally, participation refers to the fact that dissemination is enhanced if people are "encouraged not only to share a certain item, but also to carry out other activities related to it" (2014, 72). Each of the three campaigns I analyse in this thesis reflects one or more of these six factors influencing virality. They are all activist works that are designed to provoke strong reactions and emotional responses. In other words, they have been designed to be shareable, to invite readers and viewers to participate, and to be spread further using the tools of social media.

The conceptual terms participatory culture, spreadability, virality and memesis are all useful in understanding the circulation of content through social media sites. However, they do not completely capture the political economy of these platforms, which plays a huge role in determining which contact circulates most widely. Here I am concerned with racial, social, economic, linguistic, national, and gendered inequalities online. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of some of these debates, acknowledging that there remain many perspectives that I am unable to address here.

The political economy of social media

The Internet's early proponents believed it would be a truly democratic space, in which all users would be able to participate equally. Scholars such as Howard Rheingold (1992, 2003, 2012), Manuel Castells (1996, 2012) and more recently Clay Shirky (2009, 2010) have optimistically portrayed Web 2.0 platforms as historically unprecedented, revolutionary, liberating and equalizing spaces. They hold that within the digital space, opinions can be expressed and political differences can be resolved

without the baggage of physical bodies and the identity politics that they inevitably contain. This liberatory view of social media, moreover, is further cemented by technologically determinist representations of social media as fuelling large social movements around the world, an argument made in light of the widespread use of social media in protests such as the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement. Indeed, the Arab Spring has been widely written about as the "Twitter revolution" (Morozov, 2009). While the true extent of Twitter or Facebook's involvement remains unknown, many nonetheless hail them as unprecedented new platforms, egalitarian public spheres where citizens can influence public policy (Juris, 2012). Clearly, the transnational presence and growing prominence of social media, or the Web 2.0 has given forth a discourse that frames these media as cross-cultural, community-building, socially equalizing sites.

This optimism, however, seems to be predicated on the continued erasure of marginalized peoples across the world, as it belies the less liberating, and even downright oppressive, effects of digital platforms. These, of course, are made visible in problems such as the proliferation of online abuse directed towards marginalized groups, unequal access to the Internet for populations across the globe, imbalances in online representations of different groups, corporate ownership and advertising, and undemocratic state-led surveillance policies. As Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White write in their introduction to *Race After the Internet*,

> Digital media technology creates and hosts the social networks, virtual worlds, online communities, and media texts where it was once thought that we would all be the same, anonymous users with infinite powers. Instead...the Internet and other computer-based technologies are complex topographies of power and privilege, made up of walled communities, new (plat)forms of economic and social exclusion, and both new and old styles of race as code, interaction, and image (2012, 17).

Numerous scholars have studied the pervasive ways in which digital platforms reflect offline social hierarchies along lines of race, gender, class, nationality, and sexuality. dana boyd (2012) has shown how offline structures of race and class were replicated online amongst teenagers on MySpace and Facebook. Her study of teenagers' move from MySpace to Facebook makes visible the highly segregated nature of online social networks. Ernest Wilson and Sasha Costanza-Chock (2012) articulate the problem of exclusion of people of colour from news media in new media platforms in the U.S., a practice that reflects the long-term and persistent exclusion of people of colour from ownership of and employment in the news media. Arguing that the ability to participate in content

production and distribution is a question of network access, they call for a reconsideration of "digital divide," to focus not on the benefits of inclusion, but instead on the costs of network exclusion.

These forms of exclusion and erasure also persist within feminist explorations of cyber technologies, Jessie Daniels (2009) argues. She writes that cyberfeminist viewpoints have been majorly constructed by an "educated, white, upper-middle-class, English-speaking, culturally sophisticated class," with little analysis of the intersection of gender and race online. Most practices as well as critiques position "gender" as a unified category and imply that digital technologies mean the same thing to all women across differences of race, class, and sexuality. This blindness to intersectional feminism, she argues, ironically replicates the damaging universalism of first-wave feminism.

Taking a postcolonial perspective that looks at populations outside of the Western world, Radhika Gajjala (2003) critiques dominant liberal celebrations of technology as empowering to all non-hegemonic populations, and asserts the need to contextualise these claims within race, sexuality, and geography. These technologies may be empowering to privileged groups of women, including educated South Asian upper class women. However, in the context of illiterate, rural women, these echo colonialist discourses, reflecting top-down impositions of technologies of supposed liberation. While Gajjala is wary of universalizing calls of adoption, she does not dismiss the notion of them being appropriated and subverted by the subaltern, and specifically that these technologies have the potential to be useful tools for those activist communities that have access to them.

Differences of class, caste, gender and other factors must be kept in mind in the context of online activism, especially in highly socially stratified societies such as India. It is often the case that the opinion of the few stands in as the opinion of all, effectively erasing alternative viewpoints of those who do not have access to the same networks. As Evgeny Morozov argues in the context of the so-called "Twitter Revolution" in Iran in 2009, Western media have overblown the effects of Twitter in fueling the protests. He notes, moreover, that the opinions prevalent in the Twittersphere were extremely skewed, highlighting the views of westernized, English-speaking Iranians while those of the majority of the nation remained unheard. In addition, he points to the ways in which on-ground activism in Iran was at times even hindered by the social media flurry and the state-driven surveillance it enabled. Thus, social media use, far from being an equalizing space for all, was used as a means to maintain the dominance of certain voices over others.

41

In addition to the unequal access and imbalances of power in online spaces, there is the also the issue of the economic design of social media platforms, which rely on the commodification of user-generated content. Geert Lovink, in his introduction to *Networks Without a Cause*, makes the case that in the so-called Web 2.0, "a new form of communicative capitalism has emerged, where discourse proliferates but is completely devoid of genuine political potency" (2011, 2). Lovink goes on to provide a brief history of the capitalist takeover of the Internet by economies of scale such as Facebook and Google, which essentially aggregate user profiles and monetize user-generated content by selling it for advertising and marketing purposes. In this case, he argues, every piece of political content becomes a potential source of revenue rather than an act of subversion, such that the "social beast has been tamed, the problem neutralized" (ibid.). Lovink, in other words, warns against the fetishization of social media platforms and their use for meaningful political action.

In a similar vein, Darin Barney critiques the idea of publicity and information being equated to political action when he writes "…the relationship between publicity and political action has become marginal in liberal, capitalist democracies where emerging media technologies continue to proliferate and that, under these conditions, publicity has more to do with depoliticization than it does with moving people to act politically" (2014, 76). For Barney, the abundance of information available through digital networks might, as he writes "provide what publicity has always provided for political action in liberal democratic contexts: an alibi for not taking such action" (2014, 77). In connecting these positions, it can be inferred that the increasing publicity and commodification of political and social movements results in a lack, rather than an increase, of political action.

Often, social media activism is seen as successful or unsuccessful based on the visibility it garners. The political potency of campaigns is measured in the number of likes and shares they generate, rather than any social change they make possible. Greater publicity often translates merely to more profits, rather than increased political action, and digital networks are complicit in this process of depoliticization. However, it is important to make distinctions between campaigns that are designed for mere publicity and spreadability, and those that are also accompanied by calls for action beyond the shares and likes. *Abused Goddesses*, for instance, is an advertising campaign whose call for action seems to have been focused on spreading awareness and generating conversation. *Priya's Shakti* goes

a little further in attempting to also educate its readers. Blank Noise's work, however, combines its calls for dialogue with perfomative interventions, both online and offline.

While one might argue that the former two campaigns should not be seen as forms of activism, I do not want to make that distinction, because activism can take numerous forms, and use a variety of tools. Indeed, those online users who did share the *Abused Goddesses* campaign or celebrated the *Priya's Shakti* comic were participating in political acts by aligning themselves against domestic violence and rape. Although forms of online activism that consists primarily of likes and shares is often derided as "clicktivism" or "slacktivism," and dismissed as being devoid of true rigor, I hold that even these small acts have power. One cannot ignore the ways in which individuals as well as social movements have been immensely empowered through their use of social media. However, it is also important to recognize the millions of people who are disempowered not only by being unable to access these technologies, but are also responsible for the majority of invisible labour on which digital media depends. These platforms do offer meaningful and important ways of communicating across borders of space and time, but also skew the conversation to highlight the views of those already in positions of power. They have enabled the creation of communities, support groups and other spaces of dialogue, learning, and pleasure. However, these same spaces can be rife with social exclusion, bile, misogyny and online violence.

The disruptive impact of social media, in short, is unevenly distributed and highly conflicted. As Astra Taylor writes, "from one angle, power has been sucked into the periphery: new technologies have created space for geographically dispersed communities to coalesce, catalyzed new forms of activism and political engagement, and opened up previously unimaginable avenues for self-expression and exposure to art and ideas.... But if we look from another angle and ask how, precisely...the picture becomes murkier" (2014, 30). In my work, I hope to do just this by looking at these three social campaigns from a different angle, to cast light on the murky discourses they generate. In doing so, I hope to unveil some of the ways in which online activism on social media reinforces power structures in the offline world even while it provides spaces to overcome and subvert existing hierarchies. My purpose here is to critically engage with these campaigns in order to reveal the lessons they hold for activism and radical change. I approach this thesis with a complex and multiply faceted understanding of social media that recognizes the distinct and diverse ways in which they can offer avenues for empowerment as well as disempowerment.

Chapter 1: Bruised, Battered, Bleeding

Mobilizing Abused Goddesses for "Women's Empowerment"

In September 2013, images of bruised, bleeding and battered Hindu goddesses went viral on social media networks in India. The images depict Saraswati (the goddess of knowledge), Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth), and Durga (the goddess of strength and power) as victims of domestic abuse. The goddesses, shown in all their finery (figure 1), look like their traditional counterparts in classical Indian 'calendar' art, all except for their black eyes, bleeding lips and silent tears. The copy accompanying the images reads, "Pray that we never see this day. Today, more than 68% of women in India are victims of domestic violence. Tomorrow, it seems like no woman shall be spared. Not even the ones we pray to" (Tikekar 2013). A separate blurb of text beseeches the reader to "Save our Sisters" and provides the number of a helpline for domestic violence.

Figure 1: Taproot India, *Abused Goddesses Campaign,* **2011, Photograph. Image courtesy: Santosh Padhi.**

These images—the result of a painstakingly elaborate photo shoot using models, makeup, props, and sets to recreate the well-known iconography of classical calendar art—were created in 2010 by the Mumbai-based advertising firm Taproot India. The images were subsequently made part of an anti-domestic violence campaign for the Indian arm of the international NGO Save the Children, for its anti-trafficking campaign, Save our Sisters (SOS). Although the firm won awards for the campaign, Save the Children later rejected the campaign and distanced itself it from it. It thus effectively disappeared until it was posted in 2013 on *ScoopWhoop*, a website commonly described as the Indian equivalent of *Buzzfeed*. The images immediately grabbed national and global attention and were reblogged, shared and circulated through multiple different social media, mainstream media and alternative media channels, including *Buzzfeed,*[7] *The Huffington Post*, the *CBC*, *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera*, *Hindustan Times*, *Times of India, New York Daily*, *The Feminist Wire*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Girls Globe*, *The Independent*, and *The Washington Post*, to name only a few.

Almost all accounts of the campaign, especially at first, cast it in a positive light and applauded its 'shocking' but 'provocative' and 'powerful' use of images of goddesses to draw attention to the issue of domestic violence. The campaign was not without critics, though, and several journalists, independent bloggers, academics, and readers critiqued its use of religious imagery, though for varying reasons, and to varying depths of criticism. While some focused more on damage to religious sentiments, others concentrated on the complex political, religious, social and economic undercurrents of these images and proposed that they did more damage than good. Notwithstanding these critiques, the overwhelming response seemed to be that the campaign was a success because it garnered such widespread publicity and that it highlighted the pervasive, but often invisible, issue of domestic violence. Many commentators, while uncomfortable with some aspects of the campaign, were content with the fact that it had provoked a conversation. However, I would argue that on closer examination, it appears that the conversation that ensued was less about domestic violence, and more about the campaign and its particular means of bringing attention to domestic violence.

The discourse surrounding the *Abused Goddesses* campaign, moreover, failed to situate this initiative within a historical context of the Indian women's movement and its work against domestic violence.

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[7] The BuzzFeed post alone generated 932,338 views and, through its international reach, helped generate a greater virality for the campaign.

In this sense, it exhibited a kind of cultural and political amnesia (Solnit 2016, xix) that ignores the decades of work that has raised awareness and made strides in legal redress to the problem of domestic violence. This is not by any means to claim that the problem of domestic violence has been solved, or that additional work is not required, or even that more awareness around the issue could not be of value. Rather, I am concerned with the consequences of divorcing the campaign from existing and historical activism against domestic violence. More specifically, I allude to the fact that, in the case of *Abused Goddesses*, the discourse generated around the campaign focused on increased attention, but did not call for specific forms of action that address the problem. While I do not discount the potential for productive discourse surrounding even commercially motivated campaigns, I am interested in the ways that such campaigns can work to elide and even reaffirm the deeper structural conditions that constitute the problems they purport to address.

In this paper, I examine the discourse generated by the *Abused Goddesses* campaign on social and mainstream media in order to trace how these images were circulated, perceived and engaged by Indian and international audiences. By focusing on newspaper articles, blog posts and the comment sections of different articles, I trace how these images are not merely a reflection of the socio-political environment in which they are created, but actively participate in the creation and propagation of that environment. I am motivated by the question of what happens when women's issues are addressed in the mainstream media, particularly when these are decontextualized from critical feminist discourses and divorced from action-oriented campaigns. What is the message relayed by this campaign, both for victims as well as perpetrators of domestic violence? Do campaigns like *Abused Goddesses* offer a meaningful theory of social change? Is the attention garnered through these controversial images a sufficient marker of their success? Does this discourse surrounding this campaign contribute to constructive cross-cultural alliances, or conversely, does it help reaffirm classist, casteist, racist, sexist and orientalist discourses about Third World women?

I begin my analysis of the campaign with an account of how the *Abused Goddesses* campaign was conceptualized and created. I draw upon media reports of the campaign as well as an interview with Santosh Padhi, co-founder of Taproot India and the creator of this campaign. This helps cast light upon why Padhi and others chose these specific images, as well as this particular issue, and how they imagined the social impact that the *Abused Goddesses* would help create. I then turn to a visual analysis

of the campaign, tracing how it mobilizes the aesthetic style of iconic "bazaar" or "calendar" art.[8] I draw on critical readings of this art form as a tool of Hindu nationalism to demonstrate how its use in the current campaign helps affirm the Hindu ethos in a supposedly secular state. Here, I argue that the campaign proposes an implicit framing of who constitutes a "good" victim, worthy of being a "sister" and therefore, of being "saved" (and who does not fall within this category). In so doing, I hold, *Abused Goddesses* normalizes the upper class Hindu woman as representative of India at the cost of rendering invisible abuse against marginalized groups such as Muslims and Dalit women.

In the next section, I turn to an account of the socio-political context within which the campaign was circulated, underscoring the social unrest following the Nirbhaya case. The media climate following the events of 16th December 2012, as I have shown, reflected a heightened attention to issues of sexual violence. The *Abused Goddesses* campaign resurfaced at this moment, published by *ScoopWhoop* at a time when the social and political discourse in India was focused on sexual abuse, rendering it an opportune time for maximum visibility. The timeliness of the *ScoopWhoop* post, in conjunction with the particular allowances of social media sites and related affordances of platforms such as *Buzzfeed*, I argue, contributed to the virality of the campaign. Here, I provide an analysis of the political economy of social media platforms and the ways in which they are designed as spaces for the sharing and propagation of content. I argue that, in this context, the success of political and activist campaigns is often measured in terms of the widespread reach of content to large audiences, while discursive nuance and depth are often ignored or considered unimportant.

The final section focuses on the discourse surrounding the *Abused Goddesses* campaign. Here, I analyse a range of different mainstream news articles, blogs, and comments by readers on these sites, in order to provide an overview of the diverse reactions to this campaign. I begin with accounts of dominant portrayals of the campaign, which tend to be largely celebratory, and then turn to critiques of the work from Indian feminists. Thereafter, I focus on comments by readers and social media

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[8] Patricia Uberoi (1990) defines 'calendar' or 'bazaar' art as "a particular style of popular colour reproductions, with sacred or merely decorative motifs, which may or may not have an actual 'calendar' attached to or printed on them (it is not known precisely when the 'calendar' became associated with the particular style of representation). Calendars are usually marketed at the time of the Diwali festival, in advance of the solar New Year, though posters in the 'calendar' art style may now be found all the year round. The art style extends beyond calendars and posters. In fact, it is a general 'kitsch' style which can be found on street hoardings, film posters, sweet boxes, fireworks (again for Diwali), wall paintings and advertising, amid in the knick-knacks sold in fairs and *melas*" (46).

users in India as well as abroad, many of which portray an uncritical celebration of the campaign. Here, I highlight the more problematic ways in which the discourse surrounding the campaign reiterated stereotypes of passive and goddess-like Indian women, dangerous brown men (Spivak 1988) from whom they need to be saved, as well as the angry feminists who are impossible to please.

In conclusion, I consider what happens when spectacular campaigns such as *Abused Goddesses* generate publicity and attention, but seem to be little invested in long-term change. Do such campaigns merely work as "the handmaiden of capitalism," to invoke the cautionary words of Nancy Fraser (2013), and, in this case, as handmaidens to Hindu nationalism and streams of paternalistic thought? Or can campaigns such as this be cultivated and mobilized to contribute to ongoing social movements? What use does public attention to the campaign have if it is not tied to movement activism and social change? I end with the proposal that tools of social media and viral advertising can be powerful when deployed within social movements, but that the generation of highly publicized campaigns regarding violence against women, and the cultures of talk that surround them, should not be considered an end in and of itself.

Abused Goddesses: a brief history

Abused Goddesses was created in 2011 by Taproot India, an advertising firm based in Mumbai, India. The firm spends roughly 10 percent of their time engaged in pro-bono work for social impact, Santosh Padhi, Co-founder and Chief creative officer of Taproot India, explained in an interview (personal communication, 2016). The campaign was first conceptualized at a brainstorming session when Padhi and others were discussing ideas to address violence against women, a problem that frequently surfaced in the media. They honed in on the idea of using Hindu goddesses because, Padhi explained, "In India, every female is called a *devi* (goddess), but we just say it for the sake of saying it. We don't treat them like goddesses—in fact, we treat them like animals. So we came up with the idea of taking real people, treating them as goddesses, and showing what's happening to them with these small touches of bruises and blood and stuff" (ibid.).

The creators of *Abused Goddesses* felt that, by using religious figures, they would harness the fear of the divine to incite social change. Padhi explained, "The whole insight, it came from men peeing on

the road—the minute you put a tile with a god's picture on it,[9] they stop. There is a certain fear against God. The minute you bring in the god angle, they get scared. So we thought, why can't we do the same here? We tell them she's a goddess—on the one hand, you say she's a *devi*, but then you treat her badly. So we wanted to use that insight that the minute you get the god angle into anything in India, it tends to work" (personal communication 2016). Although I understood Padhi's thought process, I also found it simplistic and exasperating. To rely on fear of the divine as a deterrent to domestic violence did not strike me as a tenable solution to the problem.

Padhi explained, furthermore, that the team was also driven by a creative challenge—they had previously encountered the idea of creating a photograph by painting on live figures—and wanted to use this idea in the campaign. Thus, the intricate and detailed *Abused Goddesses* images were born. Although they could have created the same effect by using image editing software and manipulating existing pictures and paintings, they painstakingly created the entire set, and hired professional models with "typical features" to play the role of goddesses. Padhi explained, pointing to the images, "this is an actual stone, this is a swan made out of thermocol (Styrofoam), this is a plastic lotus, this is a stone made of plaster of Paris, this is an actual tree, this is a feather, this is a backdrop (figure 2 shows how the process of creating the images is highlighted in the campaign). *Everything* is painted. The bruises and blood

Figure 2: Taproot India, Abused Goddesses Campaign, 2011. Detail of Saraswati. Image courtesy: Santosh Padhi

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[9] Padhi is referring to the curious but common practice in many Indian cities, of installing ceramic tiles with pictures of Hindu gods (and less often, other religious figures as well) on roadside walls. The tiles are intended to address the problem of public urination. Journalist Ranjini Mohanty (2014), in a delightful essay on the topic, writes that the practice comes from the hope "that people would refrain from peeing on a picture of a god or within the god's benevolent but omniscient gaze. It's an ingenious way to keep the roads—or at least that particular stretch of road—free of pee. The tiles are durable, inexpensive, difficult to steal, and easy to clean and install. The psychology behind why they work is complex. It could be a combination of fearing the wrath of God (especially when one's pants are down, or even just open) and wanting to seem RC (religiously correct)."

were also painted on the set. Everything is on the set, and it was all done precisely so it would look like a painting in the Sivakasi style" (personal communication 2016). The three images that make up the campaign are photographs of this elaborate hand-painted set, made to look like paintings in the popular calendar art style, the aesthetics of which I analyse below.

After creating the first of the three images, Padhi took the prototype to several NGOs and women's rights organizations. He first approached UN Women, because "they are a powerful organization, a global body," but the campaign was rejected because it was deemed too controversial to support. After being similarly turned away by several other NGOs, Padhi narrated, they approached the Indian arm of the international NGO, Save the Children, to use the campaign as a part of their Save Our Sisters (SOS) program. Padhi explained, "There was a very bold, young, strong, brave marketing person—a lady—who said 'this is superb!'" (personal communication 2016), and wanted to include the posters in a forthcoming event bringing together women's organizations from across India. With the event only six weeks away, Padhi and his team completed three of four images they had planned. A fourth poster, portraying the goddess Kali, was not finished in time.

The three images of Saraswati, Lakshmi and Durga were displayed at the SOS event, and were subsequently released as print advertisements, but soon after, interest in the campaign waned. The marketing officer they worked with at SOS left the organization, and although *Abused Goddesses* won some advertising awards, the campaign was soon buried. Padhi discussed his disappointment at the lack of interest in the campaign, saying "We thought this [campaign] would definitely call for controversy, and the minute something is controversial, people will talk about it—good or bad, we were not worried. We were prepared that we would also get slapped for it, but nothing happened" (personal communication 2016). Clearly, Taproot was not only prepared for controversy, they hoped for it, and were disappointed by the lack of attention to the campaign when it was first released.

Shocking and controversial images have a long history in advertising, and have been widely used by both for-profit and non-profit organization. Commonly known as shock advertising or "shockvertising," this tactic is defined as an attempt to "surprise an audience by deliberately violating norms for societal values and personal ideals...to capture the attention of a target audience" (Dahl et al. 2003, 269). Advertisements are considered offensive or "shocking" when they "violate personal and societal norms and values, regardless of whether it is because of being sexually

inappropriate, indecent, vulgar or aesthetically unappealing" (Urwin and Venter 2014, 203). Amongst the seven common forms of shock appeals that marketers use to capture their audience's attention (Dahl et al. 2003) is the use of "Religious taboos where marketers make use of religious or spiritual symbols or people inappropriately" (270).

The *Abused Goddesses* campaign clearly exemplifies the inappropriate use of religious symbols as an attempt to capture attention. However, as Urwin and Venter and a host of other advertising studies scholars have shown, shock tactics are becoming "obsolete and ineffective" (2014, 213) means of inciting behavior change in audiences. Their study reveals, "the majority of respondents…either did not remember anything about the advertisement or only remembered the imagery. Therefore, the advertisement was unable to imprint the brand or message into the consumer…the imagery instead, overpowered the rest of the content" (2014, 211). This, I argue, can be seen in the *Abused Goddesses* campaign, wherein the imagery evoked a more heightened reaction than the problem it was meant to solve. In the next section, I delve into the aesthetics of the campaign to analyse the specific visual language it used and how it was designed to capture the attention of its audience. Providing an historical account of the calendar art style, I argue that the campaign's use of this form of visual culture inadvertently associates it with the project of Hindu nationalism. Inherent to this ideology is the policing of femininity and female sexuality as well as the erasure of "other" bodies that do not adhere to narrow typology of worthy and good women.

Calendar Art and portrayals of the Nation

Domestic abuse is a recognized social problem around the world, and has been classified by the UN General Assembly as a human rights violation, that "occurs within the private sphere, generally between individuals who are related through blood or intimacy", and stating moreover, that "domestic violence is one of the most common and least visible forms of violence against women," and that it "can take many different forms, including physical, psychological and sexual violence" ("UN Resolution" 2003). Amongst the most prominent means of addressing this widespread issue is the use of public service announcements, often using mainstream media channels, which aim to raise awareness and provide information about domestic violence and related social services.

Portraying domestic violence, however, is a difficult and problematic task. Frequently, the visuals used in anti-violence initiatives reaffirm tropes of victimisation and project stereotypes of helpless,

battered women and violent or insane men (Wolf 2013). Moreover, these campaigns can have the unintended effect of further silencing victims of domestic abuse by portraying it as a private problem, a "victim's problem" (Berns 1999), or a shameful problem. Finally, creators of campaigns depicting domestic abuse oftentimes end up depicting violence and suffering in highly aestheticized ways that erase the torment, pain and horror of domestic abuse, and, in doing so, inadvertently glamourize the very act they set out to condemn. Examining the visual language mobilized in anti-violence campaigns is therefore critical to understanding the effects it has on the audiences they target, particularly in the ways in which they can reaffirm rather than subvert the existing structural hierarchies that are responsible for gender-based violence in the first place.

This section focuses on the visual discourse of *Abused Goddesses*, exploring the stylistic choices made by the artists and how these generated specific responses to the campaign. Following Christopher Pinney (2004), I am interested in seeing the images not only as a "reflection of something else, something more important happening elsewhere … [but] to envisage history as in part determined by struggles occurring at the level of the visual." I contend, once again invoking Pinney, that it is

necessary to view "visual culture as a key arena for the thinking out of politics and religion in modern India." Visual culture, seen in this light, provides an experimental space that can not only subvert identities, but also reaffirm existing ones and legitimize emerging ones.

Figure 3: Raja Ravi Varma, Saraswati, 1898, oil on canvas, Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum, Lakshmi Vilas Palace, Vadodara, Gujarat. Image source: Wikimedia Commons

In this case, the campaign deliberately uses the 'traditional' style of popular calendar art that flourished from the mid-19th century through the early 21st century. More specifically, the posters recall the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma, often considered the 'father' of the calendar art style and who was, according to Pinney (2004), "the Indian painter most amenable to the Western genre of art-historical evaluation" because of his successful integration of the

Western realist tradition of painting (figure 3) with traditional Indian art. Calendar art was not, in its origins, a

popular art form, but a hybrid style produced for British patrons and the anglicised Indian elite in continuity with the so-called "'company' style of portraiture and Indian 'sceneries'" (Thakurta 1986, quoted in Uberoi 1990, 43). It was the outcome of "a two-way process of the 'westernisation' of taste of the Indian aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie and of the domestication of a foreign medium in Indian soil, producing thereby quite new 'ways of seeing'" (Uberoi 1990, 43).

Calendar art is defined by its integration of Western aesthetics with Indian ones, of the sacred with the commercial, and the religious with the vernacular, as well as its sheer ubiquity. Indeed, as visual culture scholar Kajri Jain writes (2007, 3), "If you have lived in or visited India, or indeed an Indian shop or restaurant anywhere in the world, you are unlikely to have escaped the purview of the cheap, mass-produced icons known as 'calendar' or 'bazaar' art." This popular, mass-produced art form features primarily depicts Hindu deities, and to a lesser extent, other religious figures, movie stars, chubby babies, and seductive women. Created in vivid, saturated colours and often embellished with gold dust, sequins, glitter, or flowers, these rather garish images can be found "in all manner of contexts: chic elite living rooms, middle-class kitchens, urban slums, village huts, crumbling feudal mansions; hung on walls, stuck on scooters and computers, propped up on machines, affixed to dashboards, suspended from trees, tucked into wallets and lockers" (ibid.). Calendar art has circulated not only all across India, but far beyond, through the diaspora, foreign travellers, and popular media like comics, films, and posters that have been heavily influenced by this aesthetic. The calendar art style, Patricia Uberoi writes, is "now sedimented as authentic Indian 'kitsch'" (1990, 43).

The visual idiom of calendar art has been blatantly appropriated in the political project of Hindu nationalism, Kajri Jain argues, offering a nuanced reading of Hindu nationalism's mobilization of calendar art to "forge a modern and pan-national but vernacular and nonsecular public sphere" (2007, 71). Similarly, and particularly relevant to this chapter, Patricia Uberoi has highlighted the centrality of the feminine in the symbolic representation of an Indian national identity. She writes,

> A national identity was constituted through the construction of the ideal Hindu woman, and her characteristics derived from a hierarchy of textual authorities: the *Vedas, Shastras*, epics, *puranas,* and so on. In the process, obviously, a number of exclusions came into play: (i) of other religions and cultural traditions by the newly emerging Hindu tradition; (ii) of lower caste practices by Brahmanical and Kshatriya models; (iii) of folk genres by the new genres of the bourgeoisie; and (iv) of indigenous aesthetic values by those of the colonial power

through the psychology of identity with the aggressor. Simultaneously (v) regional varieties were transcended in the search for a pan-Indian cultural reality, or appropriated and domesticated within an aggregative vision of nation (1990, 43).

Here, Uberoi is emphasizing the ways in which the aesthetics of calendar art, and its portrayals of ideal femininity emerged alongside the formation of the nation. The vision of the nation that emerged was both subversive, in that it countered colonial ideologies, but also a hegemonizing one, in that it sought to prescribe and solidify a Hindu hierarchy. Uberoi captures these dual roles when she writes, "the genre of calendar art represents a ground on which the tension between 'unity' and 'variety,' or between 'hegemony' and 'pluralism' is played out, especially—though not exclusively—through the use of women as signifiers" (1990, 46).

The role of women as signifiers of nationhood is most clearly visible in the figure of Bharat Mata, or Mother India (figure 4), the national personification of India as a mother goddess. She is an amalgam of all the goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, and especially resembles the martial goddess Durga. While I cannot pretend to capture the complex and multifaceted history of the visual representations of Mother India here, I do want to signal the use of calendar art and Hindu goddess imagery in depictions of the nation. Sumathi Ramaswamy writes, "[Mother India's] pictorial persona essentially follows the newly formulated canons of the 'god-poster' industry for representing the divine female as sensuous but untouchable, blandly generic and anonymous. She is ethnically indeterminate and not readily associable with women of any particular region or locale, although the (unnatural) fairness of her complexion would appear to her Indian viewers as that of an upper-caste female" (2010, 57). By using Hindu goddesses to portray the nation, India is represented as a primarily Hindu nation even while it strove to project itself as modern, secular and diverse. Moreover, a visual narrative of which women are considered properly Indian emerges from the portrayal of Bharat Mata as a light-skinned, upper class, and upper caste woman. "Other" women, who fall outside these narrow criteria, and are not considered quite as authentically "Indian." This is

Figure 4: Bharat Mata (Mother India), 1890, Lithograph, The British Museum. Image courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

54

significant in the case of *Abused Goddesses* because the campaign employs a visual language that conveys a hierarchy of which women are considered "goddess-like," and hence, worthy of saving.

A Visual Analysis of *Abused Goddesses*

Through mobilizing the well-known artistic style of calendar art, *Abused Goddesses* invokes a sense of familiarity mingled with nostalgia, evoking both history and myth. The use of this iconography generates a sense of connectedness to the image, drawing the viewer in not only because they are beautiful and intricate images, but because they are intimately *known*. Yet, the familiarity and nostalgic beauty of these images is juxtaposed with the jarring portrayal of religious icons as victims of domestic violence. The bruises, blood and tears do not belong here. These images, then, are provocative works, meant to both attract and shock their viewers. The *Abused Goddesses* campaign, I argue, was designed to demand attention and invite controversy, to be shareable and "spreadable" (Jenkins 2013). They are beautiful enough that they capture the attention of their audience, and shocking enough that the audience is emotionally engaged and motivated to react, and share them further. Whether they were shocking enough to jolt or scare an abusive person to stop beating their partners, however, is difficult to assess.

Moreover, representations of suffering and trauma in mainstream media and advertising raise numerous ethical dilemmas. Heather Nunn, writing about charity advertisements in the UK that depict gruesome images of childhood abuse, signals the ways in which charity advertising works within a complex representational dilemma:

> Advertising more generally is associated with desire, consumer excess and visual pleasure; it frequently addresses and engages the eroticised gaze. Yet charity advertisements of sexually or physically abused children are intended to evoke different responses—compassion, horror, a desire to act, knowledge—and they act as a reminder of the proximity of utter misery to the complacent everyday life: the visual unveiling of abuse or neglect as the hidden truth of our society (2004, 277).

Visual representations of domestic violence certainly can provoke, as Nunn argues, compassion and a desire to act, to change the reality. *Abused Goddesses* does not have a clear call to action, either in soliciting funds or in asking the viewer to stop the abuse. This, combined with the beauty of the campaign, renders it almost stuck at the level of eroticizing violence. By rendering the mythical figures of goddesses as the victims, it distances the abuse rather than revealing its proximity.

Even though *Abused Goddesses* mobilizes the familiar images of goddesses and calendar, a crucial difference separates these campaign posters and the images from which they draw inspiration. The three posters contain not only the central image of the "goddess," and the accompanying text, but also a series of smaller images showing the process by which the campaign was created. Including this documentation allows Taproot to display their creative prowess, to demonstrate their ability to their viewers. Moreover, it clarifies that these are imaginary depictions, constructed images, and no religious imagery was defiled in the making of this campaign. This is crucial because, as Christopher Pinney writes, "within Hindu practice, the enormous stress on visuality endows a great range of images with extraordinary power. A key concept here is the notion of *darshan*, of 'seeing and being seen' by a deity, but which also connotes a whole range of ideas relating to 'insight', 'knowledge' and 'philosophy'… one is 'touched' by *darshan* and seeks it as a form of contact with the deity" (2004, 9). The concept of *darshan* extends even to mass-produced images such as calendar art, and there are strict rules about how deities should be portrayed.

Thus, showing that these are photographs and not digitally manipulated images is meant to affirm that the creators of this campaign were careful and respectful. Padhi emphasized, "We did *not* use goddesses. We *treated* women as goddesses, visually" (personal communication, 2016). In so doing, Taproot appears to be appealing to religious sentiment but also aims to appease it: the viewer is reminded that these are not the goddesses they actually worship, but women made to represent them. The idols that are worshipped every day are not being defaced or disrespected — this is theatre, a fantasy — and it is all for a good cause, we seem to be told. In this case, the images invoke a kind of repression, explained by Griselda Pollock (2009) as "delivery from potentially overwhelming affects such as anxiety, overpresent and unmanaged for the lack of representation as structuring in encounter with the other. Thus repression is a distancing of the subject from the unsignified, overpresent proximity to the 'trauma' of the corpo-real." The viewer is therefore safe from being too implicated, too bothered or too emotional, even while immersing him or herself in the images. After all, we are reminded, these are not "real" goddesses—they are models, and this is not *real* domestic violence—it is merely makeup. The campaign is presented as a thought experiment with a safe separation from both divinity as well as corporeal suffering.

Lilie Chouliaraki, writing about transnational media representation of suffering, argues that "so far as news on suffering and violence sells, it remains a priority in international reporting but only on the condition that it is subject to the demands of infotainment" (2008, 331). Representations and news about suffering, in other words, must fill certain criteria of entertainment: "sensationalism, whereby suffering is presented in terms of its dramatic details in order to grasp audiences' attention; sanitization, where suffering is 'cleansed' of its graphic dimensions in order to protect the audiences' emotions; and, finally, de-contextualization, where suffering is rarely explained as a complex event so as not to appear demanding on the cognitive capacities of media audiences" (2008, 331-2). *Abused Goddesses*, viewed through this tripartite lens, meets all the criteria of a serious yet nonetheless entertaining view of domestic violence. The use of goddesses renders it sufficiently sensationalized yet simultaneously sanitized, as well as decontextualized from real instances of violence and trauma. The intricacy and beauty of the campaign, with its rich, colourful painterly backdrop erases the gritty and ugly truth of domestic violence.

Indeed, it is difficult not to be captivated by the beauty of the images, which includes both the models and the elaborate scenes in which they are placed. Even while these images purport to depict the ugliness and brutality of domestic violence, the images are strikingly peaceful and serene. The women (the "goddesses") show no emotion at all—there is no anger, no rage, only an empty resignation and a silent acceptance of their fate. They are beautiful even when they are abused, serene even as they are traumatized, silently and dutifully accepting their fate as 'good Indian women,' even though their sorrowful, teary eyes exhort the viewer to save them. Perhaps the goddesses are meant to depict every Indian woman, but in fact they subtly reaffirm longstanding biases wherein light skin connotes purity, chasteness and 'the good,' while dark skin represents its opposite: impurity, loose morals and 'the bad.' By extension, it seems to position upper-class North Indian women as more goddess-like, more pure and more worthy of being saved, which, in turn, renders invisible the dark-skinned, 'immoral' women who, perhaps, are not deserving of being considered 'our sisters' and therefore, by extension, undeserving of 'being saved.'

India's obsession with 'fairness' is well documented, with a skin lightening marketing worth more than US$432 million in 2010 (Vaidyanathan 2012). "The whiteness factor plays into other colonial baggage, including the politics of complexion," writes Radha Hegde (2001, 131) in an article about Barbie in India, "[t]he dolls have a white mystique and perpetuate the global power of whiteness."

57

Similarly, Mimi Thi Nguyen writes: "The ideas in which we traffic—including that of beauty, which is so often aligned with truth, justice, freedom, and empowerment—must be interrogated not as unambiguous values but as transactional categories that are necessarily implicated and negotiated in relation to national and transnational contests of meaning and power" (2011, 360-361).

Here, beauty is a cultural artifact that travels transnationally, and the global power that whiteness holds makes the women more recognizable as 'human' to upper-class Indians as well as Western audiences. Shoshana Magnet's (2011) insightful analysis of the popularity of the 'Afghan girl' featured on National Geographic magazine is applicable here: the appeal of the Afghan girl came, in large part, from her blue eyes and the closeness of her physical appearance to her Western viewers. Similarly, the women in the campaign may be more recognizable to Western audiences because their whiteness renders them closer, but at the same time, they are not too close—they are appropriately 'ethnic' or 'exotic' in their presentation, particularly through the clothes and jewelry they wear. Again, this creates a safe distance between the goddesses and their Western spectators, who can bemoan their plight in being abused, and condemn the perversity of the Indian men who are responsible, without being implicated in causing it. Perhaps the simultaneous potential for identification and non-implication is what enabled this campaign to reach such diverse audiences internationally. In the following section, I turn to an account of how the *Abused Goddesses* campaign was circulated following the Nirbhaya case, and subsequently went viral, generating heated debates and conversations across Indian and international audiences.

The Transnational Circulation of Abused Goddesses

Abused Goddesses was created in 2011, but it was not until September 2013 that it became a viral phenomenon. I posit that the media environment created in the aftermath of the Nirbhaya case in December 2012 helps account for the massive publicity that the campaign received when it was first published on *ScoopWhoop*. Sattvik Mishra, an ex-advertising professional and co-founder of *ScoopWhoop*, used his network of friends to get the images from Taproot and is reported in the *Globe and Mail* as saying that he knew, "he was taking advantage of the timing to help generate buzz for his website by putting out controversial imagery" (Bhattacharya 2013). The timing that Mishra refers to is not only the Nirbhaya case itself, but the fact that just before the *Abused Goddesses* campaign was published in September 2013, a fast-track trial court sentenced four of the six rapists to death. A fifth had committed suicide inside his cell at Tihar Jail and the sixth was found to be a juvenile, and

is serving out a three-year sentence in a remand home. While the protests immediately following the Nirbhaya case had died down, the conviction of the rapists kindled a fresh wave of agitation and heated discourse concerning the position of women in Indian society, addressing not only rape and the safety of public spaces, but also other kinds of systematic violence, including dowry, trafficking and domestic violence. It was in this climate that *ScoopWhoop* published the campaign.

ScoopWhoop, incidentally, had been launched only a month prior to the publication of the *Abused Goddesses* images. While the widespread reach of the campaign certainly helped propel *ScoopWhoop* into the limelight, the case for its contribution to the issue of domestic violence is less certain. Here I question how the virality of a campaign's spread signals, or not, the political effectiveness of social media distribution and visibility. Websites such as *BuzzFeed* or *ScoopWhoop* build algorithms to specifically mobilize content customized for easy sharing via social media platforms. The editorial director of *BuzzFeed,* Jack Shepherd, explains the 'science' of making content go viral (2014). He argues that it includes two important points: first, people like to share things about themselves, which Shepherd explains, "is often a statement about what you believe in, what causes or values you align yourself with, and what, in particular, you love and identify with." Second, people are more likely to share content to which they have a strong, positive, emotional response.

Abused Goddesses certainly appears to meet these criteria, and to exemplify several of the six factors of viral content that media scholar Limor Shifman identifies: "*positivity, provocation of high-arousal emotions, participation, packaging, prestige,* and *positioning*" (2014, 66). The campaign was designed to provoke a strong emotional response, either fear or anger or perhaps another emotion. Reactions, I argue, are sufficiently ambiguous and multifaceted that the campaign can be read in numerous ways and provokes a desire to share it onwards and to participate and converse with others about it. The slick and beautiful execution of the campaign, combined with its use of a familiar and culturally relatable iconography, appeals to both national and global audiences. The prestige of the campaign comes both from the issue it highlights, as well as the endorsement of the Save the Children NGO (this was later revoked, but the brand does appear on the posters). Finally, the publication of the campaign at a moment when discourse about violence against women in India had unprecedented national and international attention reveals how it was positioned to take advantage of the affordances of social media in order to go viral.

The Socio-Political Economy of Social Media Platforms

The widespread reach of the *Abused Goddesses* campaign, I hold, is driven at least in part by the affordances of social media and the culture of sharing and participation they enable. In this section, I highlight some aspects of the socio-political economy of these platforms in order to highlight some of the problematic aspects of online activism and political participation. Often, social media activism is seen as successful or unsuccessful based on the visibility it garners. The political potency of campaigns is measured in the number of likes and shares they generate, rather than any social change they make possible. Greater publicity often translates merely to more profits, rather than increased political action, and digital networks are complicit in this process of depoliticization.

Geert Lovink holds that in the Web 2.0, "a new form of communicative capitalism has emerged, where discourse proliferates but is completely devoid of genuine political potency" (2011, 2). Lovink provides a history of the capitalist takeover of the Internet by companies such as Facebook and Google, which depend upon user-generated content for their profit, selling it for advertising and marketing purposes. For Lovink, this context renders political content devoid of its potency. It becomes a source of revenue rather than an act of subversion, such that the "social beast has been tamed, the problem neutralized." Lovink, in other words, warns against the fetishization of social media platforms and their use for meaningful political action.

Similarly, Darin Barney critiques mere publicity and information being equated to political action, writing, "…the relationship between publicity and political action has become marginal in liberal, capitalist democracies where emerging media technologies continue to proliferate and that, under these conditions, publicity has more to do with depoliticization than it does with moving people to act politically" (2014, 76). For Barney, the abundance of information available through digital networks might "provide what publicity has always provided for political action in liberal democratic contexts: an alibi for not taking such action" (2014, 77). Here, I argue that the increasing publicity and commodification of political and social movements does not necessarily result in an increase of political action. Capitalism is adept at absorbing and commodifying social causes and political issues, and greater publicity often translates merely to more profits, rather than increased political action.

The issue of gender-based violence is no exception, and is not limited to digital media. Carolyn Michelle and C. Kay Weaver write about the depiction of domestic violence in documentary films:

"…the emotional 'shock value' of such representations constitutes a recuperation of feminist attempts to 'break the silence' around these issues, by way of eroticising 'the depictions of survivors and of sexual violence to titillate and expand [television] audiences'…commodification of women's experiences of violence may have considerable appeal to documentary makers in particular, as they are increasingly searching for novelty and besieged by the need to increase ratings" (2003)

With a few minor changes, this description could just as well be applied to the *Abused Goddesses* campaign. The campaign is beautiful even while it represents the ugly truth of domestic violence. It allows readers to share with a single click content that not only made them feel a strong, emotional response, but also makes their personal and political position against domestic violence clear. It exemplifies how, in the content-oversaturated, commodified Internet of today, where sites compete for 'likes' and 'shares,' and where algorithms are designed to propel popular content to further and greater visibility, trauma becomes a commodity. Domestic violence becomes beautified, eroticized, and guided towards profit making for specific platforms, in this case *ScoopWhoop*.

Another limiting aspect of online political action that Lovink addresses, to return to his critique of the Web 2.0, is the idea of the echo chamber in which Internet users are typically imbricated. Lovink argues that users rarely share ideas that challenge their view of the world, and instead, engage in sharing safe ideas with friends who echo these back to them, thereby validating their world views. This is useful to consider with regard to how the campaign traveled, as it is evident that it was tailored to a rather narrow constituency of an English-speaking middle-class audience with access to the Internet. Indeed, Sattvik Mishra "admitted that debate sparked by the images may have happened in something of an echo chamber, limiting their ability to spark real change. Those who saw the images were among the country's affluent, English-speaking minority, in a country where more than half of the 1.2-billion population live on less than $2 a day" (Bhattacharya 2013). The article goes on to say: "That does not mean it had no impact. In fact, it might help an unexpectedly vulnerable segment of the country's female population: upper-middle-class women" (ibid.).

However, what is left unclear is *how* the campaign helped even this small segment of Indian women. The initial post provided no context in terms of where the images were first created, for what purpose, and in what context, with the only text reading—"The social issue that these ads try to tackle is a very important one and something we must take seriously as a society. And if this is what

61

it takes to bring the issue to the forefront, then so be it." Many assumed that the campaign was created by Taproot in the aftermath of the Nirbhaya protests as an educational campaign about domestic violence. Newspapers reported that Save the Children India originally commissioned the campaign in 2010 as part of a larger educational program, Save our Sisters (SOS), to prevent domestic abuse and sex trafficking. Yet, the NGO released a press release on September 18, 2013 distancing itself from the campaign: "Save the Children strongly denies producing a three-part advertisement campaign—featuring bruised and battered images of Hindu goddesses—which is being discussed and debated in the media, including social media platforms, in India and abroad." Indeed, as journalist Vaishna Roy reported in *The Hindu*, "...it is not even clear if it has ever been used. In fact, unkind industry insiders comment that it's one of those campaigns created only for award nights" (2013).

Neither agency nor NGO was available to talk to the media, because in an unrelated development the campaign ran into some litigation when it was originally shot" (Roy 2013). Santosh Padhi discussed the litigation issue, explaining that the original contract with the modeling agency gave them license to use the images for only six months. When the campaign went viral nearly two years later in 2013, Padhi expained the modeling agency "claimed that it was a strategy by us [Taproot] to generate renewed interest in the campaign. They said we were using their images beyond the limits of our contract, and demanded back pay for four years" (personal communication 2016). Taproot, on the advice of their lawyers, could not publicly comment on the campaign, at the risk of liability to the modeling agency. Furthermore, the person who they had worked with at Save the Children had left the organization, and the person now in charge did not wish to be associated with the campaign.

Save the Children's denial of commissioning and even being associated with the campaign begs the question of what happens when a highly publicized work such as this is left unattached to any specific action or larger movement. While Taproot and *ScoopWhoop* may benefit in economic and social capital, who holds the responsibility of ensuring further action on the issue of domestic violence that is ostensibly its focus? In other words, when a campaign such as this is unattached to longer-term violence prevention goals and social change actions, does its effects end with mere publicity? Here I reiterate Nick Couldry's critical question about the myth of social network potential for political change: "Without doubt digital networks enable faster political mobilization, accelerated cycles of action, and some new forms of collectivity, but how consequential is this in the

longer term when set alongside other longer term consequences of a digitally saturated environment?" (2014, 1). While I do not wish to dismiss the *potential* for social change through widespread publicity, I am concerned with what happens when there are no longer-term goals or actions associated with the wide viewership of this work.

Analyzing the Discourse Generated by Abused Goddesses

The creators of the campaign appeared content with its reception, based on the fact that it traveled so far and generated so much debate. Santosh Padhi stated that he would not change anything about the campaign, saying, "We set out to create awareness, and I think we managed to do that. I think if we had been able to speak out publicly, if we had had a stronger client, we could have created a stronger brand. But nevertheless it put the spotlight on the issue" (personal communication, 2016). The problem, for Padhi, lay not in the images but in the agency's inability to support their work publicly. The discourse that surrounded the campaign brought significant attention to Taproot itself, acting as a form of publicity for the company. For Padhi, as for the team at *ScoopWhoop*, the heated debates generated by *Abused Goddesses* led to increased interest in their organizations, and therefore was a success. However, the discourse that surrounds the campaign is indicative of the ideologies of the different audiences that encountered this work.

The *Abused Goddesses* campaign, as mentioned earlier, was republished and reblogged in several languages and across a plethora of online news and entertainment websites, mainstream news services, as well as many feminist and progressive blogs. In this section, I look at discussions about the campaign, as expressed as opinion pieces in online news forums or blogs and in the comment sections of different articles. Since it is neither possible nor useful to analyse every single response to the campaign, I focus on bringing attention to the various reactions to the campaign: celebratory, critical, ambivalent and otherwise, paying attention to both Indian and international conversations.

That the images were provocative and successful in drawing the attention of audiences is evident in the headlines of the numerous articles that describe them as 'shocking,' 'powerful,' 'heartbreaking,' 'haunting,' and 'daring.' *Buzzfeed*, for instance, titles its post "India's Incredibly Powerful 'Abused Goddesses' Campaign Condemns Domestic Violence" (Jha 2013). The text accompanying the article reads, "The campaign simply and effectively captures India's most dangerous contradiction: that of revering women in religion and mythology, while the nation remains incredibly unsafe for its women

citizens." Unfortunately, the post does not go on to explain why in fact this is 'India's most dangerous contradiction,' or examine the effects of the Hindu religion on creating structures of gender inequality and condoning violence against women. This is true of many of the other articles about the campaign as well, such as the feminist site *Bust.com's* article, "Haunting 'Abused Goddesses' Campaign Challenges Domestic Violence" (Fustich 2013), wherein the author writes, "The images, part photograph and part painting, feature beautiful religious figures with haunting scars. The use of traditional symbolism incites reactions of squeamishness, of disgust, of pain... 'Pray that we never see this day,' the ads implore. I certainly will." Here is a clear articulation of the goddesses as representatives of exceptional, especially worthy victims. The campaign appears to implore us to stop domestic before it affects *even* the women we pray to, rather than to stop the violence that is the everyday reality of so many women. In this article, as in so many others, there is no critical examination of how this squeamishness, disgust or pain translates into action to actually help women who are victims of domestic abuse.

Another feminist site, *Girls Globe*, writes that the campaign is genius in a number of ways:

> It points **out the irony of the oppression of Indian women juxtaposed against female deities in Hinduism,** the largest religion in the country.
>
> **Using bold religious imagery forces people to pay attention to the message**. Whether people agree with it or not, this campaign forces a conversation around domestic violence and the trafficking of women and girls.
>
> **The images combine art with reality**. The images are beautiful and realistic looking. They're not abstract images open to interpretation and subjective points of view. They are direct and explicit: this is what domestic abuse looks like on Indian women, important Indian women (Pope 2013).

The idea that bold and shocking imagery forces a conversation around domestic violence is asserted in numerous places, including by the creators of the campaign. A spokesperson from Taproot is quoted as saying:

> How do we create a campaign that hits where it hurts the most? The challenge was to find a suitable execution that would get people talking. The typical old traditional posters are seen and worshipped in almost every Indian house...Usually Indian people are great believers in God, they do have a great faith in God, hence we decided to choose this medium to communicate the message ("The One Time" 2013).

Similarly, and perhaps more surprisingly, some prominent feminists in India held similar views. Kavita Krishnan, for instance, secretary of the All India Progressive Women's Alliance, said the images made men and women think about rape and domestic violence. "They are good, we need more of these," Krishnan is quoted as saying (Bhattacharya 2013). Clearly, the campaign is powerful, is appealing, and is provocative. But it seems as though the conversation focuses entirely, with a few exceptions, on the campaign itself, not on domestic violence. The provocation, it seems, leads back to the commodification of and profiteering from violence against women rather than any productive action that prevents or attempts to resolve the issue or work towards equal rights for women.

It is also interesting to note the acceptance of using religious imagery of Hindu goddesses to depict Indian women despite a sizeable proportion of the population being non-Hindu. Of course, India has a long history of using Hindu-inspired deities to represent its nationhood, most notably in the representation of Mother India, wherein the goddess is overlaid onto the very map of India and embodies the nation (Ramaswamy 2011, 26). Most comments to this asserted that the use of religious imagery was a clever tactic. For instance, a discussion of the campaign on a blog reads: "Using bold religious imagery forces people to pay attention. Whether people agree with it or not, this campaign forces a conversation around domestic violence and the trafficking of women and girls. It was risky, controversial, and demanded attention. For a little perspective, imagine if in the United States, Christian images were altered and used to confront a social issue like this. I would imagine it would go viral and create serious backlash—but it would get people talking" (The Anchal Project, 2013). While I agree that people paid attention to the campaign, it is difficult to see whether it was directed towards the deep-seated underlying causes of domestic violence, including the complicity of Hinduism itself in creating the structural inequality of women in some parts of Indian society. Indeed, some critics of the campaign, though raising some important points, belie a similar bias towards Hinduism. The journalist Lakshmi Choudhary critiques the campaign, writing:

> The message is intended to shame: no woman is safe in our culture, not even our beloved goddesses. The Lakshmi who we once beseeched on bended knee for good fortune now sits sad-eyed on a lotus sporting a bloodied nose. This Saraswati's infinite wisdom and knowledge are no defense against a black-eye. The same Durga who once danced on Mahishasura's corpse now stands bruised, battered and teary-eyed, begging for our protection (2013).

Choudhary makes an important point about the campaign's potential erasure of strong role models for Hindu women. Depicting invincible goddesses such as Durga (figure 5) as weak and timid, she rightly notes, is a disservice to how these goddesses are seen as the embodiment of female power that cannot be made subservient. This is especially true of Durga, as Ramaswamy writes (2011, 107), "Durga is a three-eyed, multi-armed, and multiply armed goddess wielding weapons of all sorts. Resolutely unattached to any male, she rides a fierce lion, is invariably victorious in battle, and is a fearless slayer of all manner of evil forces." This representation "shows that in a dominant strand of Hindu belief the divine female is endowed with more power and potency than the male in vanquishing evil." As David Kinsley notes, "In many respects Durga violates the model of the Hindu woman. She is not submissive, she is not subordinated to a male deity, she does not fulfill household duties, and she excels at what is traditionally a male function, fighting in battle. As an

independent warrior who can hold her own against any male in the battle field, she reverses the normal role for females and therefore stands outside normal society" (1987, 97, quoted in Ramaswamy 2011, 107). In order to be saved, Durga must be tamed and portrayed as weak and powerless, bereft of all her fearlessness and power, stripped of her agency.

Figure 5: Durga as Mahishasura-mardini, the slayer of the buffalo demon, circa 1910, Ravi Varma Press. Image source: Wikimedia commons.

Whilst Chaudhary's critique of the erasure of potential icons of strength and power is important to consider, the problem of equating India with the Hindu religion, and of women with goddesses—and Hindu goddesses at that—remains. The goddess/whore dichotomy serves as the basis for several critiques of the campaign that deserve to be considered in detail. Activist and academic Brinda Bose muses,

> Why is she Hindu? Why is she a goddess and not a slut? Why is she Durga/Saraswati/Laskhmi and not Kali, whose nude monstrosity makes genteel society squeamish at the best of times? If she was a slut/monster, would she be worthy of being saved in society's terms? And why does she need to be 'saved', in that most patriarchal rhetoric?... if we send men—any men, all men— the signal that we should worship women as (docile, happy Hindu) goddesses, and/or that since we (should, or profess to) worship women as goddesses, we should not hit them or

66

kick them, we are telling them to consign and condemn their women to safe oblivion. And we are also telling them that any time their women fall short of their assigned roles as domestic goddesses, they can be abused for that original sin (2013).

Here, Bose calls for a portrayal of Kali (figure 6 shows a typical portrayal of Kali) in the hope that her wrath and "nude monstrosity" would provide an alternative depiction of a feminine reaction to domestic violence. Yet, when I asked Padhi about how they were planning to depict Kali, he responded that they would have used her image in the same way as the other three goddesses. He said, "Rather than getting very specific to the *devis,* we were taking *devis* as a general term associated with women" (personal communication 2016). In other words, the creators did not consider the specific attributes of any of these goddesses when creating these campaigns. The simplistic equation they used was woman equals goddess, goddess equals woman, and the model of "woman" used here is that of the ideal Indian woman: beautiful, submissive, upper-caste, and Hindu. Bose's critique, moreover, points to how this equation renders all those who do not fit the narrow confines of ideal femininity outside the purview of society's protection and care. The woman equals goddess equation thus signals how violence is justified against all those women who may fall short of the "goddess" role.

Figure 6: Kali, calendar art circa 1940. Image source: Wikimedia commons.

The problem with the campaign is not just that it equates women with goddesses and defines who should be saved and who shouldn't, but that it glosses over the true brutality of violence itself. Nisha Susan, on a post on the feminist blog *The Ladies Finger*, discusses how the empty aestheticization of the goddesses is akin to the empty signification of the term "domestic violence":

The problem with the term domestic violence is that, like the prettily bruised goddesses, it doesn't quite capture the shattering of bones, the clotting of blood, the breaking of nose, the breaking of teeth, the breaking of ribs, the attempts to burn you. Neither does it quite capture the casual slap, the once in a lifetime slap, the eternal threat of the slap. It doesn't quite get that second meaning of the word 'beaten'. It is being defeated. Only by someone you know and trust (2013).

The erasure of the real women who are at the receiving end of gender-based violence is in many ways at the heart of many feminist critiques of the campaign. Moreover, as in Susan's blog post, this is where we can finally see the opening up of a meaningful discourse problematizing how violence is represented both visually and textually, and how its effects on women are often glossed over in campaigns that appeal to wide audiences.

In this thoughtful piece, Susan also asks the necessary question of the audience to whom the campaign is directed, and what it aims to accomplish. Columbia professor Sayantani DasGupta (2013) similarly wonders what action the Abused Goddesses campaign suggests, beyond prayer. While there is a helpline number, she notes, to 'report abuse', there is no explanation of what sort of abuse to report, "as one of the posters mentions domestic violence and another trafficking, and the organization seems primarily an anti-trafficking group." In her analysis, DasGupta also critiques the "positive reactions of feminist and progressive sites in the U.S., [which] might have more to do with Orientalism ('ooo, brown goddesses!') and a sisterhood of 'saving' than any position of global feminist solidarity." The patriarchal and colonial assumptions of docile Indian women in need of rescue is reinstated in this campaign, DasGupta writes, noting that "it is a bit uncanny how well the Save Our Sisters campaign fits into Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's colonialist trope of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (whereby this 'saving' becomes justification of everything from political paternalism to military invasion of the Global South by the Global North" (2013).

The demonization of the (brown-skinned) Other, is manifested more openly in readers' judgmental comments. Two specific comments on the NY Daily News article (Taylor 2013) stand out:

> User Lefty Loopy:
>
> India has two problems --Hindus and Muslims--and both have a culture of abusing and murdering women and girls for more than 1,000 years.

> User Joe Gaerdner:
>
> Anywhere there is a significant Muslim/Hindi [sic] population there are high incidence of rape and domestic violence against women...It isn't just in India. Since opening their borders to Muslim immigrants, girls and women in Sweden now have a 1 in 4 chance of being sexually assaulted...Those religions are based on power and conquest.... that will never change.

Lefty Loopy and Joe Gaerdner's statements call to mind Gargi Bhattacharyya's (2008) work on how the demonization of religious differences serves as a form of "cultural racism." This cultural racism, she argues, is used to "explain the misfortunes of minority communities in the labour market, criminal justice and education systems and at the hands of their neighbours as an outcomes of their own illiberal, repressive and discriminatory culture which makes it impossible for them to integrate with the more progressive majority culture and leads to their self-segregation" (103-104). While Muslims are the most identified focus of such narratives, similar allegations transfer easily to other groups that face disadvantage, in this case Hindu men.

Here, social problems such as domestic gender-based violence are seen as symptoms of religious and political extremism, which in itself implies:

> …a refusal of westernised sexual cultures… of the pleasure-centered commodified 'depravity' of the West. This is portrayed as a highly suspect perversion - one that leads to outbursts of frustrated sexualised violence or, alternatively, that uses sexuality as a tool in a larger ideological battle. (Bhattacharyya 2008, 104)

For Joe Gaerdner, moreover, the depraved and dangerous Muslim men also corrupt civilized and progressive nations like Sweden. This connotes a unidirectional idea of progress and reiterates the colonial trope of seeing the 'Other' as backward and primitive, and by extension, in need of civilization and progress. A comment from a user named Seansohn on *Huffington Post's* article does not blame violence on religion, but similarly affirms this idea of progress and evolution. He writes:

> If we observe England/Norway, russia etc etc a few centuries ago..the status of women was almost as restrictive as of the indian women a few decades ago..it will take time.. but they will evolve to equality...a matter of time (we can already see the uprising)...and the slow but sure change in the laws in india, permitting these women to stand up as equals ("'Abused Goddesses' Shows Shocking Images" 2013; reproduced exactly as printed).

This comment reveals the unfortunately still-prevalent colonial view that countries like India are primitive societies that need the guidance of the Western world in order to become more equal and just. This point of view effectively erases the damaging role of colonialism on gender equality in colonized nations, as well as the inequalities that still persist in so-called developed nations.

Not all comments are the same, however, and it is important to know that there are thoughtful, passionate and compassionate readers who were compelled to critique the campaign from a range of

different perspectives. For instance, a comment on the *Buzzfeed* article by Agratha Dinakaran points to the fact that domestic violence is not only a problem of men being violent towards women, but that there are underlying socio-cultural structures and beliefs that contribute. She writes:

> Domestic violence is a much bigger problem in India than people actually think it is. It's not just the men, but also the women who contribute to such a culture. A whopping 52% of women believe that it's justifiable for a man to beat his wife. A lot of women are stuck in violent, abusive and loveless marriages because it's a social stigma to be single/divorced. Instead, parents encourage the girl to stick around with her husband as 'he's a man' and has a right to exercise what he believes (Jha 2013).

Another commenter, Indrani Sengupta, writes of the problematic portrayal of women as goddesses that, "The moral pedestal that women are often put upon is an enormous burden — it demands a higher standard, and thereby, makes it so much easier for us to 'fail.'... True freedom comes not from being worshipped, but from being respected, and extended the same rights — including the right to fail and falter like any other person" (Jha 2013). Recognition of the humanity, and the human rights, of all women is what is at stake for Sengupta.

Contrary to many who celebrate social media platforms for enabling conversation, comment sections often do not yield debate, and many of the users seem to be content with expressing their opinions rather than engaging in dialogue. That said, there is still an important place for impassioned exclamations; one of my favourites is poet-activist Meena Kandasamy's spirited critique:

> This ad is wrong for all the wrong reasons. The women there, in all their frigidity, look fucking rich and feudal and (take offence with me, but yes) upper caste and fully-clothed and wearing enough silk and gold jewellery that will be better used to feed a small town or a big village. Show some women we really know. Not just the feudal-religious-hindu-upper-caste-bourgeoise shit... Show a hardworking woman who gets hit at the end of the day when she comes back home from her construction job. Show a woman who gets hit though she is a doctor by day. Show a woman who is dark-skinned. Show a woman who is hit for the dowry. Show a woman who is hit for talking back. Show a woman who is hit because she is not the right shape or size that a porn-addicted partner wants her to be. Show a woman who screams during sex and is hit for that offence. Show a woman who is hit because she is not wearing the "modest" clothing that some men demand. Show a woman who has been raped by her own husband on her own marital bed. I'm sick and tired of seeing such an ad that

doesn't address men, doesn't address violence and escapes into the convenient iconography of hindu calendar art. Hold a mirror to real life, not to some abstract goddess shit that some motherfuckers dreamed of" (Jha 2013, reproduced exactly as printed).

Kandasamy points to how *Abused Goddesses* positions highly exceptional, apparently worthy, and ultimately imaginary goddesses as victims. In so doing, it renders invisible all the women – poor, rich, uneducated, educated, lower-caste, upper class, beautiful, ugly, fat, thin, modest, immodest – who experience violence everyday, and yet have no place in a campaign that ostensibly serves them.

Conclusion: Beyond Critique and Towards Action

In her *Regarding the Suffering of Others*, Susan Sontag writes about the dangers posed by images of 'distant suffering':

> Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question of what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing 'we' can do—but who is that 'we'?— and nothing 'they' can do either—and who are 'they'—then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic (2003, 79).

The *Abused Goddesses* campaign, without a clear path to action, seems destined to wither away despite all the hype, the viral sharing, and the heated commentary that it generated. Of course, from the perspective of *ScoopWhoop* and Taproot, it was probably successful insofar as their commitment to it seemed to end with the publicity (and profit) that it generated. As I have shown in this paper, campaigns such as *Abused Goddesses* do have the potential to generate publicity, but oftentimes this reaffirms structural inequalities and negative stereotypes rather than creating meaningful paths towards their resolution. In many ways this campaign exemplified what Nancy Fraser fears when she writes, "the movement for women's liberation has become entangled in a dangerous liaison with neoliberal efforts to build a free-market society" (2013, p. #). In this case, feminist movements are mobilized for private profit with little regard for the history and value of the critiques they put forth.

But moving beyond the critique of the commodification of violence, of social causes and political unrest, how can we learn from the discourse surrounding this campaign? How can we deploy the creative tools of advertising talent and social media capital alongside responsible and long-term campaigns of social justice in order to generate meaningful action? Can we imagine possibilities for

using the compassion generated through spectacular, viral campaigns such as *Abused Goddesses* to action beyond publicity? These are some of the questions with which I close this chapter.

While I have no ready answers to these issues, one possible means of imagining this is to learn from successful campaigns that have begun to chart a road to action, and have clearly defined means of getting involved. The *Bell Bajao* (Ring the Bell) campaign, for instance, is one possible example from which we can begin to learn. *Bell Bajao*, an anti-domestic abuse campaign that urges local residents to take a stand against domestic violence through simple acts meant to interrupt violence when they hear it occurring. The campaign has a clear goal of reaching out to men and boys to get involved in taking a stand against domestic violence. According to their website,

> *Bell Bajao's* award-winning series of PSAs (Public Safety Advertisements) has been viewed by over 130 million people. The announcements showed men and boys stepping up and ringing the bell to interrupt overheard domestic violence. In 2010, Breakthrough's video vans traveled 14,000 miles through cities and villages screening these PSAs and involving communities through games, street theatre and other cultural tools resulting in a sustainable, on-ground process of transforming hearts and minds (BellBajao 2016).

Here, the tools and affordances of social media platforms are successfully used to generate publicity that is directed towards a specific goal. It engages all the members of a community — men, women, and children — to address structural change. In involving the entire community, gender based violence is depicted not as a 'victim's problem,' but as a social issue in which everyone is implicated and thus, which needs everyone's contribution to solve. By asking people to intervene in instances of real violence through simple but powerful actions, it empowers the community and veers clear of the 'saviour' complex. It resists falling into the trap of mere conversation and the echo chamber of viral social media audiences. If campaigns such as *Abused Goddesses* were designed similarly, perhaps we can collectively and meaningfully move forward, towards the social justice we hope to achieve.

Although this chapter has been concerned with one specific campaign, similar critiques related to the commodification and glamorization of violence, and of fetishizing the value of discourse for political action, can be found in different parts of the world, albeit with major contextual differences. Perhaps recognition of this common problem of representation, as well as our own complicity in reaffirming colonizing structures can provide a space for what Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) calls for when she writes of her commitment to a "noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders."

Chapter 2: Goddesses to the Rescue!

Priya's Shakti and the problematic question of agency

Comic books, like all pop culture, reflect who we are instead of who we say we are. They're a mirror, and even if we want to look away, we shouldn't. -- Andrew Smith[10]

In December 2014, an augmented reality comic book called *Priya's Shakti*[11] was launched at the Mumbai Comic Con and quickly went viral on social and mainstream media. Created by Ram Devineni, an American filmmaker of Indian origin, *Priya's Shakti* was envisioned as an innovative means of "supporting the movement against patriarchy, misogyny and indifference through love, creativity and solidarity" (PriyaShakti 2016). The comic (figure 7 shows the cover of the comic book) tackles issues of rape culture and victim blaming through the tale of Priya. Priya, a victim of gang rape, makes for an unusual hero, although the Hindu goddess Parvati, who has a longer history of comic books appearances, accompanies Priya in her struggles. Priya's travails are numerous and sadly not so unusual: she is gang raped by men from her village, shunned by her family, and forced into isolation and despair, where she prays to the Goddess Parvati for salvation. Parvati takes pity on the miserable yet pious Priya, and helps her overcome her ordeal. In the process, Shiva wages a divine war against humanity. Priya, with Parvati's help, spreads the message of acceptance, support and respect, transforms society for the better, and also pacifies Shiva and ends the war against mankind.
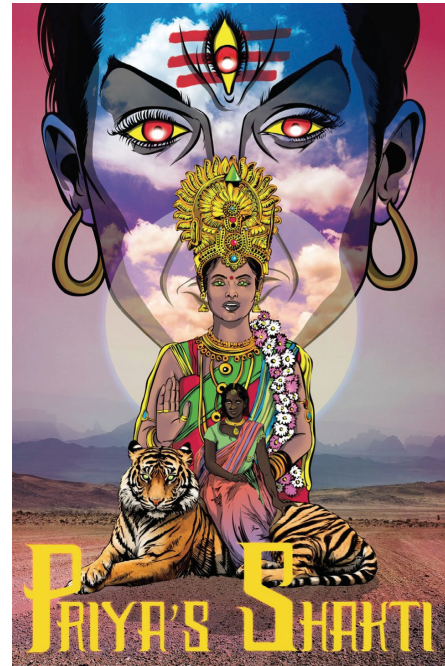
Figure 7: Priya's Shakti, cover image, 2013. Image courtesy: Ram Devineni

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[10] Hunter Lewis, "Good Gravy! Brothers Give Priceless Comic Book Collection to Duke," (Durham) Herald-Sun, 2 July 2003, Sunday Life section.

[11] Priya is a common name for Hindu girls, derived from the Sanskrit word *priy*, which means "beloved one" or "love." Shakti is a word of Sanskrit origin that means "power" or "empowerment," and connotes the primordial cosmic energy and dynamic forces that moves through the entire universe. Shakti is the concept, or personification, of divine feminine creative power, sometimes referred to as 'The Great Divine Mother' in Hinduism. The title of the comic, Priya's Shakti, therefore, is a play on words and can be read either as "Priya's Divine Feminine Power," or "The Power of Love."

Published in the aftermath of the Nirbhaya case, *Priya's Shakti* was instantly hailed as a promising and innovative anti-rape initiative. Numerous media reports, blog posts and social media users celebrated the comic and its heroine as creative and subversive means of transforming social and cultural beliefs about rape victims. The comic received widespread attention and accolades from around the world, including UN Women's *He for She* award, and was celebrated as "the first Indian comic book of its kind—not only confronting teenagers with the sensitive issue of sexual violence, but also engaging young people through its innovative use of augmented reality technology" (Bhalla 2014). The comic is available for download (free) online, is distributed for free at comic cons, and also give to students in classrooms across India with the help of the anti-violence NGO Apne Aap.

In this chapter I analyse *Priya's Shakti* as a unique medium for anti-rape storytelling and pedagogy. I explore the theory of change proposed by this comic, the ways it portrays the social problem of sexual violence, and the solutions it proposes. In addition, I examine the discourse accompanying the comic's circulation in mainstream news and social media. *Priya's Shakti,* to date, has been featured in over 400 news articles, which has impacted its distribution and success. I contend that the popularity of the comic was a result of two aspects of its creation and circulation. First, the story was inspired by the Nirbhaya case, and released at a time when the debate about sexual violence in India occupied a central space in mainstream social discourse. In this sense, the subject matter as well as the timeliness of the comic played a major role in helping it go viral. Second, media responses to the comic focused in large part on the innovativeness of the effort, rather than the strength and content of the story. A large part of this, I hold, is from the fascination with the augmented reality[12] incorporated into the comic and the seduction of technological solutions to social problems.[13]

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[12] Augmented reality (AR) is a live, direct or indirect, view of a physical, real-world environment whose elements are augmented by computer-generated sensory input such as sound, video, graphics or GPS data. As a result, the technology functions by enhancing one's current perception of reality. By contrast, virtual reality replaces the real world with a simulated one (Mashable). In *Priya's Shakti*, augmented reality features include pop-out animations, videos and advertisements that can be accessed through the Blippar app. In addition, murals painted in Mumbai's Dharavi slum also come alive when viewed through the augmented reality app.

[13] As I argued in the introduction, I hold that technological tools can be invaluable for activist work. However, some accounts tend towards representing technology as the whole solution, rather than one aspect of a larger social movement and activist practice. This tendency is visible in much of the discourse about social innovation and technology for social good in India, where it is assumed that the addition of technology will somehow result in social change.

My analysis of the comic book suggests that despite many journalists' celebration of *Priya's Shakti* as a "superhero" (Flood 2014) who "overturns rape culture" (Salian 2015), the comic falls far short of such grandiose claims. Instead, I will show, the comic reinforces mainstream and orientalist views that paint Indian women as submissive recipients of violence. The main female character, Priya, though described as a "superhero," not only lacks the traditional powers or appearance of superheroes, but also lacks agency and is portrayed as a passive vessel through which others can act. Paradoxically, Priya is still expected to take responsibility for transforming her community, raising the issue of how certain rape survivors are deemed "good" victims, and are expected to embody the position of the "heroic survivor." Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray write,

> Reports of … rape have been discounted unless the survivors looked and acted in certain ways. Older women and women who are not conventionally attractive often have a harder time getting acceptance for their accounts. Then again, women who are considered 'too sexy' and women who are prostitutes are either not believed about rape or held responsible for it. Women from oppressed raced who have been raped by white men are much less likely to be believed than white women reporting rapes by men of oppressed races. Lesbian survivors may be believed, but their rapes are more often discounted as less important (and may be seen as therapeutic). Survivors of multiple incidents of sexual violence are not believed. Survivors of especially heinous ritualized sexual abuse are not believed (1993, 266-7).

Most survivors of sexual violence, in other words, are dismissed or pathologized, and the few remaining exceptional and "worthy" victims such as Priya are expected to be heroic. It is up to them to tell their stories to the world and carry the responsibility of transforming social beliefs about sexual violence. Yet, as Alcoff and Gray note, speaking out as survivors of sexual violence can be empowering, but may also become exploitative. I would argue that while Priya's story is presented as an empowering tale, the underlying narrative is exploitative and requires her to take on the mantle of social change even as her rapists go unpunished.

Furthermore, I argue, the comic uncritically engages and promotes Hindu mythology and religion and seems at least as invested in educating its readers in Hindu mythology as it does in overturning rape culture. In *Priya's Shakti,* the creators claim to delve into the "matriarchal origins of Hinduism from millennia ago, mining that narrative to understand that Hinduism and Hindu-based cultures which affect millions of people does not support the subordination of either women or men and does not need to be interpreted as such" (Srivastava 2014). I argue that despite their desire to

present a different, subversive narrative of Hinduism, the creators fail in their mission. Their use of religious mythology is still a masculinized version of Hinduism, which not only reaffirms many patriarchal tropes, but also ignores the increasing violence enacted by right-wing Hindu nationalists on the bodies of women as well as sexual, caste, and class based minorities in India.

That said, the success of this comic nonetheless indicates an investment and momentum to address sociocultural prejudice against rape survivors and women in general, one that we must harness. The comic may in fact offer lessons for ways to develop impactful messaging against rape culture. For instance, it indicates the ways in which graphical modes of storytelling can be effective tools for anti-violence advocacy. The use of unconventional protagonists like Priya can be a meaningful way in which to empower survivors of sexual violence and transform typical discourses that renders them either invisible or powerless. In addition, the use of mythology has the potential to render the tale colourful and compelling, in addition to providing a familiar iconography and story structure for audiences. Although mythological tales can be useful tools, it can be difficult to separate them from the alienating effects of religion upon those who do not identify as Hindu.

This chapter begins with a detailed description of *Priya's Shakti*, in which I outline the narrative of the comic book, in addition to providing an overview of how the book was conceptualised and created. In the next section, I will provide a brief context of existing comic books in India and their relationship to nationalist discourse in order to situate *Priya's Shakti* within India's existing comic book culture. In the final section, I will examine the media discourse generated around the comic, in order to understand how the comic has been received and further publicized. I will conclude with a brief section on the directions in which the creators see their project evolving, and attempt to glean some lessons that can be learnt from this comic, which could potentially be used by feminist activists, and perhaps by extension, in social activism more broadly.

Priya's Shakti*: an introduction*

Priya's Shakti, a 32-page comic book, is situated in mythical times. It tells the story of Priya, a young woman in rural India who grows up in a strict, patriarchal culture in which she is subjected to different forms of violence. She is keen to study and dreams of becoming a teacher, but is forbidden from pursuing an education, confined instead to housework. Life is hard for Priya, and takes a turn for the worse when she is gang raped. Hurt and bleeding, Priya turns to her family for help, but they

shun her, accusing her of shaming the family. With nowhere else to turn, Priya flees to the nearby jungle and prays to the Goddess Parvati[14] for help. Parvati, touched and shocked by Priya's plight, incarnates into Priya's body. In this state, she goes to the *panchayat* (local government) for help, where one member suggests that she marry one of her rapists to mitigate the harm (figure 8). She then confronts one of her attackers, who attempts to assault her again. Parvati is livid and reveals her true form. Her immense rage reaches Shiva, who is shaken out of his meditative reverie in the mountains. Enraged by the attack on his wife, Shiva calls an assembly of all the gods, declaring, "Humans have degenerated and are an affront to the gods!" (2014, 12), and decrees that humans will no longer be able to procreate.

Figure 8: Priya's Shakti, page 10, 2013. Image courtesy: Ram Devineni.

This throws the world into disarray, with humans aghast at being unable to bear children, and the gods divided about Shiva's decision. While some support his views, others consider his punishment too severe, asking why all of humanity should pay for the crimes of a few. Gods and humans alike try to dissuade Shiva, but their pleas are to no avail, and a war begins across the worlds. Parvati, seeing that Shiva will not be swayed, takes the form of Kali, the bloodthirsty martial goddess associated with female power and destruction. In this fierce form, Kali mesmerizes and jolts Shiva out of his determination to punish humans, and he agrees to a reprieve from the war. Kali transforms back into Parvati, and pleads with Shiva to save the humans. Shiva responds by asking her to prove that humans are capable of change. Parvati then returns to Earth accompanied by a tiger (the mount of another of her avatars, Durga), and visits Priya, who has been living alone in the jungle during the chaotic war. While Priya is afraid at first, Parvati gives her the ability to overcome her fear, gives her a mantra for social, grants her the capacity for persuasion, and also gifts her the tiger. Priya's superhero powers, seen in this light, are her ability to overcome the shame of having been raped, her power of persuasion, and her tiger companion.

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[14] Goddess Parvati is the consort of Lord Shiva, one of the three supreme gods of the Hindu pantheon.

Priya overcomes her fear, mounts the tiger, and goes back to her village preaching the mantra Parvati has given her: "Speak without shame and stand with me… Bring about the change we want to see" (2014, 22). The villagers are afraid at first, but soon join Priya in her mission to educate. The last few pages of the comic focus on the lessons Priya spreads: respect women, speak out when women and girls are mistreated, educate your children, treat daughters and sons as equals, and protect all citizens equally (ibid., 27-28). Her family joins the march and they travel all over the country spreading the message (figure 9). Shiva is thus appeased and ostensibly grants humans their ability to procreate once again, but asks Parvati, "Will more people stand with Priya?" (ibid., 29). Meant to incite readers to get involved and support rape victims, the back cover of the comic features a picture of Priya, seated on her tiger and surrounded by her community. Using an augmented reality app, the reader can take a selfie with Priya, which includes a speech bubble stating, "I Stand With Priya." The reader is encouraged to share the picture on social media platforms, and publicly pledge their support for survivors of gender violence.

Figure 9: Priya's Shakti, page 29, 2013. Image courtesy: Ram Devineni.

Conceptualizing and Creating *Priya's Shakti*

Priya's Shakti was conceptualized in the aftermath of the December 2012 gang rape and the widespread protests it triggered in Delhi and around India. Devineni, a documentary filmmaker and founder of the New York-based Rattapallax Films, was visiting India at the time of the protests. When interviewing different people at the protests, he was struck by a police officer's response to a question about his opinion on the rape and the events that followed. Recalling the incident, Devineni says, the policeman said "no good girl walks home alone at night," which "impl[ied] that she either deserved it or she provoked the rape" (personal communication, 2016). This exchange signaled to Devineni that "this problem is most likely a cultural problem and not a legal issue," and that the core of the problem lay in a culture with "patriarchal views, stigmatizing rape survivors, and the lack of empathy for women who have survived gender violence" (ibid.).

This viewpoint is well documented, and many feminist and cultural critics have argued that the cultural bias against women in India, wherein the idea of "honour" takes precedence over the injustice of the crime, has been the primary reason for the lack of reporting of sexual violence. Phadke et al. write, "when a woman is raped, one often finds that the concern is less about bodily or mental harm to the woman and more about its repercussions on her reputation and honour. Shame appears to attach to the victim of assault than to the perpetrator of the crime" (2011, 29). Similarly, Flavia Agnes argues, "Women carry the honour of their communities on their bodies and raping them is one of the surest ways of defiling the entire community" (2010, 96). Sexual violence is deployed as a weapon of subjugation, a means through which the social hierarchies and power relationships are maintained. Survivors of sexual violence are seen as having compromised the honour of their families and communities, rather than as victims deserving of support and care.

The policeman's comment initially inspired Devineni to make a documentary film, but he felt that "the topic was way too hot" (Mullin 2015), and that he would not be able to do it justice. After months of research, during which he spoke with survivors of gang rape, social justice activists, artists, poets, philosophers and writers, Devineni came upon the idea of using Hindu mythology to speak about the issue. Recalling the childhood tales from the mythological comic series *Amar Chitra Katha,* he explained, "one of the common motifs recurring in all these comics was that a common villager would call upon the gods when there was a problem," (personal communication 2016). Inspired to use this trope in a story about a rape victim, Devineni wanted to create a comic book, but as a documentary filmmaker with no prior experience in graphic art, did not know how to begin.

Instead, he began creating a "remix film," titled *Parvati Saves the World,* which remixed footage of mythological films from the 1970s and 1980s. Devineni describes the project as being "like DJ Spooky's remix of *Birth of a Nation* but this focuses on sexual violence" (Crow 2015). In the film, a young woman is raped by the friend of a prideful king, and prays to the Goddess Parvati. When Parvati confronts the king, Crow reports, "he tries to assault her. This is a bad move. Her husband is the God Shiva, AKA 'the Destroyer,' AKA someone you really don't want to tick off. As punishment, he brings fire and death on heaven and earth. Realizing that violence isn't the answer, Parvati goes to Earth to become 'a beacon of hope for oppressed women everywhere'" (2015). In

this film, it is Parvati and not Priya who is the main protagonist, or the "superhero." This narrative, developed first, served as inspiration for the comic.

Although Devineni began work on the remix film soon after the December 2012 case, the project was time-consuming, and took longer than he had anticipated. In the meantime, he met comic book artist Dan Goldman, which he describes as a serendipitous moment because Goldman's experience as a comic book artist provided the means through which the original idea for the story could be actualised. They worked with writer and poet Vikas Menon, along with direction and support from Shikha Bhatnagar, a gender-based violence activist who acted as an advisor. Wanting to incorporate the actual stories of rape survivors and other narratives into the comic, they collaborated with Lina Srivastava, a transmedia artist whose work focuses on storytelling for social change.

Srivastava, who coined the term "transmedia activism," envisions it as a process of using stories to effect social change by offering interconnected narratives across multiple media, thereby enabling a cause to be presented in a complex and multifaceted manner (Jenkins 2016a). She notes, "When we build a story universe for social change under this framework, we think first in terms of an ecosystem of issues, social and cultural conditions, communities and solutions—and not only about the narrative arc of the story" (ibid.). While almost all of Srivastava social impact work has been based in non-fictional narratives, *Priya's Shakti* is one of the few fictional projects that she has contributed to. Speaking of the project as a unique method to engage youth, she notes,

> More importantly, we were able to embed real stories of rape survivors within the AR components, aimed at increasing the reach of our nonprofit partner Apne Aap into new audiences. And it set the stage for a series of workshops held with disadvantaged school-aged children to let them create their own comics (Jenkins 2016c).

Transmedia elements in the comic include narratives by two gang rape survivors. They are depicted in animated form to protect their identities, but speak in their own voices. In the first video, a young woman talks about how she was pulled into a moving car and raped by several young men. They filmed the rape as it occurred, she says, and threatened to go public and shame her if she approached the authorities. They also said they were immune to the law, as they were "politically connected." Although fearful, she came forward, and with the support of her family, took legal action against her rapists. She is currently pursuing a degree in social work and volunteers with a

local NGO which advices and counsels rape survivors. But her struggle is far from over. She's received multiple death threats and is under constant police protection (Chowdhury 2015).

The second video features another young woman with a similar tale. She came home from school to eat lunch, and was suddenly attacked from behind by four men who repeatedly abused her, calling her a "fucking lower caste whore," as they raped her. She was bedridden for a month as a result of her injuries. Her family tried to help her get justice, but the police were uncooperative and refused to register a complaint, saying, "It's a normal domestic fight." Finally, the culprits were arrested, but released after only 20 days, with all charges dropped. Confronting the injustice of the system, and recognizing the impunity with which the young men can attack other girls like her, she wants to fight back and come forward to help other rape survivors, and to educate society to treat women and girls with respect. "Her story and the stories of other rape survivors directly influenced in the creation of my character in the comic book. Priya is a compilation of them," said Devineni (ibid.).

These videos and other the augmented reality features integrated in the comic, are accessible with the Blippar app. Readers can view different pages of the comic through the app to see animations pop out, or to view videos, and listen to interviews. Devineni's remix film *Parvati Saves the World*, which inspired the comic, is embedded in the comic, as is an advertisement for Circle of 6, a safety and sexual assault prevention app. Short interviews with young working class men are also included. The men explain that they think rape is "50 percent the man's fault, 50 percent the woman's fault," or that provocative clothing invites rape and harassment. Although Devineni says he spoke to other men who defended rape victims (Chowdhury 2015), these perspectives are not included.

These various transmedia elements are all intended to cement the comic book's message to support rape survivors, including the interactive selfie with Priya, which enables the reader to declare their support publicly. *Priya's Shakti* is imagined as a pedagogical work, which hopes to transform the culture of victim blaming by inculcating a sense of empathy in its readers, especially teenagers, who are the target audience for the work. Partnering with Apne Aap, an NGO that works on gender based violence, was s a means to reach out to new audiences, especially schoolchildren. Apne Aap runs several charter schools in Delhi, and efforts are underway to integrate the comic as a part of the curriculum. The partnership with Blippar was meant to augment the comic with technological

features to further engage youth. Devineni claims, "We made the story fun to read, even though it's about rape, and challenging patriarchal views. It is perfectly designed for teenagers" (Flood 2014).

The diversity of commitments offered through these various partnerships indicates that the creators recognize the need for the comic to be integrated within existing social movements, and to work alongside other interventions. Devineni stressed this during our conversation, saying that "I didn't do this project as art for art's sake—when we designed and developed this project, we found a lot of partners—we spent a whole year developing it, and finding all the partners and people that, when we do launch it, can use the comic book on a real, on-the-ground basis. Creating these comic book workshops, and creating curriculums that people can use and download, these were all designed and thought out as a way of extending the message of the comic book" (personal communication 2016).

Priya's Shakti *in the context of comics in India*

Gauged by the media discourse surrounding the comic, the success of *Priya's Shakti* begs the question of how comics serve to both reaffirm and subvert mainstream discourse. Comics are undeniably amongst the most ubiquitous and influential popular media of the last several decades. Not only are they widely read as stories in and of themselves, they have also had a wide and multivariate influence on other forms of media and culture, especially popular media such as films, video games, and Internet memes (Robinson 2004, 6). The seemingly simple veneer of comics can hold a wealth of meaning. As comic columnist Andrew Smith claims in the epigraph, comics, like other forms of pop culture, are a reflection of the culture where they are situated. They make visible the underlying beliefs, values and desires of the contexts from which they arise, revealing the socio-cultural, political, and ideological underpinnings of not only their authors, but also the society within which they are created. Comics can act as fertile and unique spaces for interrogating subtle social norms and hidden ideological messages, although these are neither always subtle nor hidden.

It is increasingly recognized that inherent within the stories told by comic books are underlying cultural discourses of gender, race, class and other markers of identity, portrayed most often through existing tropes of popular storytelling, most often mythology, folklore and stereotypes. Comics, therefore, not only communicate and entertain, but also inform and educate their readers (McLain 2011, 598), often in subtle and unspoken ways, such as through the use of striking visual imagery that may reinforce racial and cultural stereotypes. Similarly, the use of mythology in comics makes

use of well-known symbols and pictures, to convey complex and multidimensional messages in an instant. This is true of other forms of popular culture as well, which uses myth as a "language construct that contains the power to transform something (or someone) from one state or condition to another" (Paula Gunn Allen, quoted in Caputi 2004, 4). Myth in popular culture, Caputi argues, has an ambivalent power which "cuts both ways"—it can legitimize dominant powers and further subjugate the already marginalized, but also can be "a place where things usually unspoken, things that go against established canons, can be said" (2004, 5). In this section, I situate *Priya's Shakti* within the history of mythological comics in India, specifically the *Amar Chitra Katha* series.

Priya's Shakti, as Devineni mentioned during our conversation, was greatly inspired by the *Amar Chitra Katha* series. This series of mythological and historical comics is widely read amongst children of the English-speaking middle class in India, as well as in the diaspora. This is particularly true for the generations who grew up between the mid-1970s until the 1990s, given limited access to other forms of media and entertainment. Indeed, to many of these readers, *Amar Chitra Katha* has been the foundation of their knowledge of Hindu mythology and Indian history, replacing the traditional religious education for the new middle-class (McLain 2009, 21). This is true for Devineni, who read these comics as a child and through them, learned about Hindu myths. "They've entered the collective consciousness of contemporary Indian culture," he says of the comics (Murphy 2015).

Highlighting the pedagogical value of this series, scholar of Hinduism, Karline McLain explains that while grandparents were traditionally the teachers of scripture, urbanization and globalization fragmented the vast extended families of the past. Since working parents often had little time to dedicate to religious pedagogy, these comics took on the function of religious and mythological education, and therefore form a "crucial site for studying the ways in which dominant ideologies of religion and national identity are actively created and re-created" (McLain 2009, 22). These comics' pedagogic function further extends to educating its readers in the ideals of beauty, valor, proper behaviour, good values, and aspects of gendered identity.

As one of the first major cultural artifacts to feature indigenous stories and indigenous heroes after India's independence from colonization by the British, *Amar Chitra Katha* played an important role in the formation of a sense of national identity, pride, and ownership within its readers. While the series offered an ostensibly secular narrative of the nation, it framed Hindu mythology and tradition

as the basis of India's lost and glorious past, positioning idealized mythological figures as roles models for the creation of a modern state. *Amar Chitra Katha* offers an ideology that is closely intertwined with the rise of the Hindu nationalist movement in India, one that I argue is deeply patriarchal, classist and casteist in its values.

Priya's Shakti references the stories of the *Amar Chitra Katha* and mobilizes religious mythology as a pedagogical tool, even as it deviates from this series in some ways. An analysis of this comic, therefore, needs to be situated alongside the role *Amar Chitra Katha* played in depicting a particular image of Indian nationalism, Hindu myths and portrayals of ideal femininity. In this section, I will present a brief history of the *Amar Chitra Katha*, summarizing some of the critical readings on this series. In particular, I focus on representations of Hinduism, Indian nationalism, and ideals of femininity within the *Amar Chitra Katha* series. I examine *Priya's Shakti* in this context in order to illuminate the ways in which it subverts as well reinforces themes of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series.

Amar Chitra Katha: **Hinduism, Nationalism, and Ideal Femininity**

Amar Chitra Katha, or 'immortal picture stories,' is India's most prominent comic series, developed by Anant Pai (now widely known as the Father of Indian Comics) in the mid 1960s (McLain 2009). Pai worried that middle-class, educated children in India were becoming overly "Westernized" and alienated from their own cultural heritage. He recognized the popularity of comics like *Tarzan* and *Superman,* and saw the potential of using them as an entertaining yet effective means of educating children in 'Indian values' (Chandra 2008, McLain 2009, Pritchett 1995). A devout follower of Krishna,[15] Pai believed that not only all Hindus, but all Indians should be familiar with his mythology, and launched the *Amar Chitra Katha* series with the Krishna comic book, marking the official birth of the popular Indian comic book industry.[16] While initial sales were slow, the popularity of the comics steadily grew, selling more than 90 million copies worldwide (CNN, 2008).

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[15] Krishna is one of the most widely worshipped gods of the Hindu pantheon, and is considered the eighth avatar of Vishnu, the Preserver. Krishna worship is part of a branch of Hinduism called Vaishnavism, which focuses on the veneration of Vishnu, one of the central gods of the Hindu trinity, also known as the Preserver or Protector of Cosmic Order. Vaishnavism is the form of Hinduism most celebrated by Hindu nationalists and the Hindutva movement.

[16] In attributing the birth of the Indian comic book industry to the Amar Chitra Katha series and the Krishna comic book in particular, I follow the precedence of scholars such as McLain and Pritchett. In doing so, however, I am cognizant of the other comics such as Chandamama and Indrajal comics that preceded Amar Chitra Katha, but never reached the same levels of popularity and cultural significance as Amar Chitra Katha. In addition, if one is to consider the definition of comics as a form of sequential art, as offered by Will Eisner, it is important to acknowledge the long

Pai sought to position *Amar Chitra Katha* as an authoritative and authentic pedagogical tool, giving away free copies of the comics to schools, and integrating the comics in school curricula (Pritchett 1995, 77). The institutionalisation of the comic series extended beyond education to political parties, especially the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).[17] In August 1997, when India was celebrating its fiftieth year of independence, *Amar Chitra Katha* released a bumper issue titled *The Story of Freedom Struggle*, which was inaugurated by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the prime minister at the time, a member of the BJP party, following which the series experienced a huge increase in sales. This is particularly important to mention in light of the many changes in the education curriculum that have been instituted by the BJP and other Hindu nationalist political parties, who have clearly viewed children's education and entertainment as essential sites for the formation of national identity (McLain 2009, 52).

Although the series attempts to promote a secularised, national integration, it constantly fails in this mission due to its underlying biases towards an overtly masculine, Hindu-driven strain of nationalism (Pritchett 1995, 89). Hinduism scholar John Stratton Hawley notes, "The line between 'Indian' and 'Hindu' has always been blurred…For better or worse, readers of the *Amar Chitra Katha* are not likely to be able to disentangle Hinduness from Indianness with any ease" (1995, 130). Despite *Amar Chitra Katha's* professed commitment to secularism and equality,

> Readers who happen to be of the wrong gender, the wrong politics, or the wrong religion will find themselves only scantily represented in what is ultimately a vision of the future at least as much as of the past (Pritchett 1995, 104).

Religion and tradition are not seen as artifacts of the past, but as means of constructing the modern future. Nandini Chandra offers an interesting reading of this ideological enterprise, writing,

> The idea is to produce the myth as an index of an implicit and eternal scientificity, which distinguishes Hindu religion favourably from others. The modern mind, in a previous nation-building phase, wanted to make myths not simply usable, as in the new-age

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and varied history of visual storytelling in India, which takes a variety of forms. However, for the purpose of this essay, I will limit my discussion to the modern comic book of the 20th century.

[17] It is worth mentioning that the BJP is the current party in power in India, now led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The party has a strong Hindu nationalist agenda and India has experienced a massive resurgence in Hindutva politics since the party has been in power. Activists and commentators have articulated how the rise of Hindutva politics has resulted in the increased exclusion of, and antagonism against, already marginalized groups including dalits and Muslims (Sarkar 1996, Prakash 2007, Thapar 2007).

postmodernist interpretation of religion as spirituality, but to use them in the very specific sense of creating modern subjects (Chandra 2012, 58).

Rupleena Bose similarly holds that, in "post-colonial societies, popular forms like comics and cinema become the vehicle of nation-building, where the "nation" is seen as monolithic and needs to be defined in opposition to the value system created by colonialism" (2009, 34). However, she argues, the very discourse of "tradition" was a historical construct created by colonial scholarship as a category against which colonial modernity and colonial reform could be defined (ibid.).

Similarly, Karline McLain argues that Orientalist scholarship created the discourse of an idealised past in order to justify their presence in India. She explains, "colonial discourse…emphasi[sed] the degeneracy of contemporary Indian society in contrast with the glory of ancient Indian civilization as found in the epics and other classical texts, and the status of Indian women, past and present, was central to this contrast" (2009, 62). Colonialists proposed a past "Golden Age of India" against that of contemporary "degraded" Indian culture. European civilization was justified as a means of restoring Indian civilization to its past glory. Much of the utopian construct of the precolonial India era of perfection was supported through the racial notion of the 'Aryan' roots of this ancient civilization, so that it became not "just a Hindu golden age but an Aryan one as well" (2009, 62).

Contemporary Hindu nationalists use a similar argument of a bygone golden age to critique the disintegration of Indian and Hindu values and to justify their own claims of restructuring the nation. McLain writes, "the qualities associated with the term *Aryan* in Orientalist scholarship – not just race, but also such positive attributes as culture, spirituality, and freedom – appealed to Indian nationalists as well" (2009, 62; emphasis in original). Conservative as well as liberal political parties adopted the idea of an ideal past, and classical Indian heroines were recast as Aryan women, who embodied all the proper Victorian characteristics of "modesty, chastity, self-sacrifice, devotion and patience" (ibid.). While modern European women and Classical Indian women were seen to occupy this elevated status, the "racially inferior native women of contemporary India" (Thapar 2000, 17-20) were denied this position, and required the civilizing presence of modern colonialism and later, the Hindu reformationists who would return them to this exalted state.

Femininity in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series is then narrowly defined. Karline McLain identifies two 'types' of ideal femininity in the series: first and most common is the *parivrata*, "one who takes a vow to worship her husband as her lord, and is characterized by her modest, chaste, and long-suffering nature" (2009, 75). These "long-suffering" heroines (figure 10), McLain posits, are deliberately
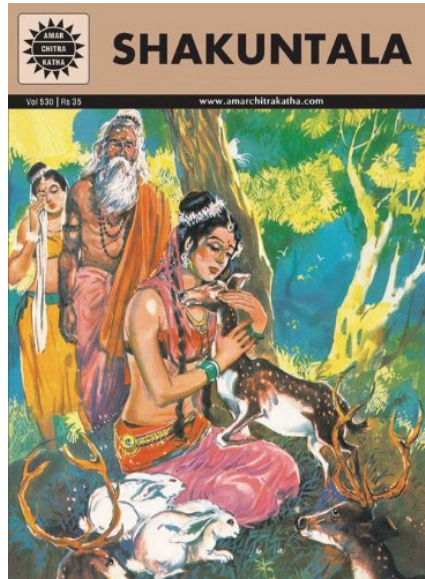

Figure 11: Shakuntala, cover image, 1970, Amar Chitra Katha.
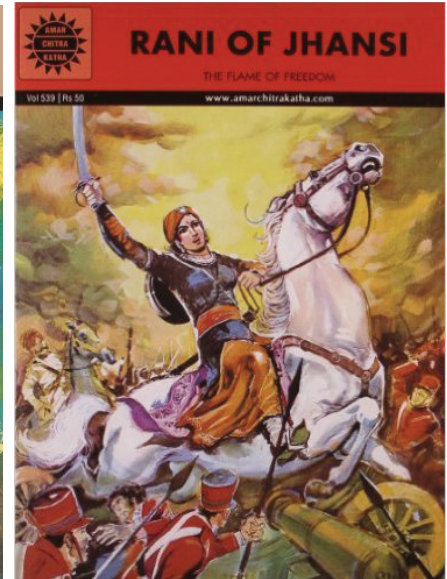

Figure 10: Rani of Jhansi, cover image, 1974, Amar Chitra Katha.

positioned as "role model[s] for post-colonial women" (2009, 72), appearing in representations of goddesses such as Parvati and Sati, mythological heroines such as Shakuntala, and historic queens such as Padmini. The second type of ideal femininity is that of the *virangana*, or the "woman who manifests the qualities of male heroism" (2009, 79), such as in stories of mythological goddesses such as Durga and Kali, and in historical warrior queens such *Tarabai, Rani of Jhansi, Sultana Razia* and other famous rulers who fought for the freedom and sovereignty of their land and people. *Virangana* femininity (figure 11) embodies so-called masculine values, and the women who possess them are "martial, independent, active, decisive women" (ibid.) who seem to differ in every way from their *parivrata* counterparts. However, McLain argues, these two ideals are not as distinct as they first appear. All the heroines, she holds, exemplify "voluntary sacrifice and suffering," and their superpowers are "the internal female virtues of chastity, faithfulness to husband, children, and country, and willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice" (2009, 84).

In a similar vein, Chandra describes the Sati-Shakti complex wherein women are assigned to either the self-sacrificing *sati* form, which is construed as "the eternal feminine principle," or the *shakti* role, the "provisional aggressive form of sati" (2008, 157). Yet the sati form is the normative role for women, and transgressions from it are only allowed when there is a threat to the nation. Chandra writes, "In the Sati-Shakti paradigm within which ACK locates itself, while the woman has a natural propensity for sati, her donning of the Shakti form is 'constructed' and 'provisional,' contingent

upon certain historical moments" (2008, 161). Thus, the shakti or martial form of the goddess is always subsumed within her natural state of a self-sacrificing, passive and docile being.

Amar Chitra Katha depicts ideal femininity not only through the acceptable behavioural traits mentioned above, but also through a very specific set of physical traits. Whether they are historical, divine or mythical, the heroines in the series all have fair-skin, voluptuous figures, submissive stances, and are draped in revealing silken clothes (McLain 2009, 61). Radhika Parameswaran and Kavita Cardoza analyse *Amar Chitra Katha* comics through the conceptual lens of colourism in order to determine the comics' implicit lessons of gender and skin colour. Colourism, a concept developed by Black scholars in the United States, traces the ways in which skin color is used as an insidious form of discrimination both inside and outside the Black community.[18] While darker-skinned men and women face greater discrimination, those who are light-skinned possess increased social capital. Colourism thus increases inequality *within* communities of color. Moreover, like other standards of beauty and acceptability, it is a gendered phenomenon that affects women more than men.

Parameswaran and Cardoza demonstrate that in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, light and dark skin are used to represent binary oppositions such as nobility versus bestiality, godliness versus the demonic, and good versus evil. While some dark-skinned men in the comics are able to occupy relatively humane roles that showcase their leadership and military authority, the authors argue, "the handful of dark-skinned women … do not win the same modest allowance for any mode of sympathetic representation" (2009, 30) Instead, they are portrayed as even more ugly, monstrous and evil than their male counterparts. They embody "the repulsive and savage 'other' of civilized, light-skinned

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[18] The term "colorism" was coined by Alice Walker (1983), and has been explored in depth by Black scholars in the United States. Parmeswaran and Cardoza refer to numerous scholarly explorations of this social phenomenon, including its legal, economic and social implications. They write, "Hill (2002) traces the origins of colorism to the historical division of slave labor; light-skinned Black slaves were recruited to work as domestic servants in the private sphere of the White master's home while dark-skinned Blacks were assigned to work outdoors on plantations. Sociologists have drawn our attention to the ways in which the social capital of skin color has eased light-skinned Black men and women's access to social and economic mobility, thus exacerbating inequalities within communities of color (Celious & Oyserman, 2001; Hall, 1995; Hall, Russell, & Wilson, 1992; Hill, 2000). Colorism, much like the standards of weight in modern beauty norms, is a gendered phenomenon that has affected Black women to a greater degree than Black men (Falconer & Neville, 2000). Hunter's analysis of national survey data shows that light- skinned Black women had higher education, earned higher incomes, and married men of higher economic status (2002). Thompson and Keith (2001) write that Black women experience a "quadruple" oppression due to their multiple marginalities along the axes of gender, class, race, and skin color. Finally, Keenan's (1996) analysis of popular magazines— Fortune, Black Enterprise, Glamour, and Essence—reveals that Black female models in advertisements were much lighter in skin tone than Black male models" (2009, 20-21).

women, who are coveted by both dark- and light-skinned men for their beauty" (2009, 30). For millions of young people in India, then, the comics act as a means of reinforcing their essential "otherness," their lack of beauty, virtue and self-worth.

Racialized women (as opposed to the normative fair-skinned women) in the *Amar Chitra Katha* are portrayed as 'other/othered' women (Chandra 2008, 178). The series "incorporate[s] them in the either/or binary as either the golden-hearted prostitute or the demoness-turned-woman" (ibid). In each of these cases, the "other" women have to compensate for the presence in the hallowed sphere usually reserved for the upper-caste Hindu woman, usually through self-sacrifice or some other means of proving their worth. In the event that these other women refuse to accept the terms of each of the patriarchal machinery, Chandra writes, "They are cast out in the most vicious manner. They are drawn in the racially inflected forms of blood-sucking demonesses like the poison-fanged Putana with bloodshot eyes, canine teeth, coal-black skin and green horns" (2008, 179). Their transgressions are punished, often in the most brutal ways, and they are abandoned, cast away, cursed, ostracized, and mutilated for their refusals to conform to ideal feminine behaviour.

Skin colour and other markers of class and caste determine which women deserve protection, which are deemed punishable, and where violence is not only justified, but necessary. In contemporary times, in the context of violence against women in India, this can and does translate to a mainstream distinction between women who are ideal victims and worthy of social outrage and protection, and women who are considered as deserving of the violence that befalls them. The bias against dark-skinned, lower caste/class women, and "excessively westernized" women (which translates to women who drink, smoke, have sex outside of marriage, and exhibit any other behaviours outside of the norms of ideal Hindu womanhood) extends well beyond the arena of gender-based violence, although it is here, perhaps, that it is most visible.

Priya's Shakti: an analysis

Priya's Shakti, in using mythological comics, immediately evokes the *Amar Chitra Katha* series to any reader familiar with these works. In so doing, it carries with it many of the ideological signifiers of the series, including the conflation of Hinduism and Indian nationalism, and the lessons of ideal feminine behaviour. The most obvious difference between *Priya's Shakti* and the heroines of the Amar Chitra Katha is, of course, Priya herself, specifically her physical appearance. Devineni

explains that they wanted Priya to "be very reflective of Indian women, especially women in the villages" (personal communication 2016). In creating the character, they compiled hundreds of photos of women from all over India to make a composite image. Lina Srivastava writes, "Priya is not docile, light-skinned, hyper-sexualized or objectified in the way mainstream Indian or global media often presents women" (2014). Contrasted to the fair-skinned, voluptuous heroines of *Amar Chitra Katha* as well as Bollywood and other popular culture in India, Priya's dark skin does set her apart. Casting her as the main protagonist can be seen as a subversive representation that suggests that "other" women can also be deserving of protection and respect.

Despite Srivastava's claim to the contrary, however, I would argue that Priya is in every way the exemplary submissive Indian woman. When she is told to abandon her education and instead do housework, she does so without a fight. When she is shunned and shamed by her family for inviting sexual violence, she cries but does not protest. And finally, when she is abandoned to her own devices, she does what all ideal Indian women are supposed to do: she prays. Priya shows none of the rage, the ferocity, the agency, that one might expect from a "superhero." While at the end Priya overcome her fear and shame, and returns to her village to preach social change, her transformation is result of Parvati's actions more than Priya's own agency. One wonders, therefore: what happens when there is no divine intervention? What happens to those women who may not pray to the benevolent Parvati because they belong to the wrong religion?

At the end of the tale, Priya astride her tiger is clearly meant to invoke the goddess Durga, but rather than a fierce goddess in search of retribution, one who is rightfully angry, she is smiling, calm and serene. The weapons and blades of the warrior goddess are replaced by Priya's words. Her superpower is not *shakti* or feminine strength, but the softness and empathy of *sati*. Srivastava writes,

> [Priya] is framed as an everywoman who reaches beyond her tragedy and circumstance by tapping into her own sources of power to reframe herself as a leader on her own terms, and one that challenges existing norms through art and love. She is an everywoman who becomes a superhero of a sort. And if she's a superhero, her super strengths to fight the patriarchy are song, nonviolence, and compassion (Jenkins 2016c).

Although Srivastava presents a compelling argument, I find that it collapses on closer scrutiny. Priya is not "everywoman" but a highly exceptional woman, who the gods themselves choose to rescue.

90

She does not become a leader on "her own terms," but is chosen for this role, and given a mantra as well as a tiger to help fulfill her journey as an agent of change.

Despite the appeal of a nonviolent discursive approach to social change, moreover, one is left wondering: what happens to the rapists? Do they get away with the crime? Are they punished in any way? Do Priya's words make them realize their misdeeds? *Priya's Shakti* does not resolve the issue of justice, whether it is the work of a legal system, a vigilante, or even the outcome of persuasion. Instead, the question of justice is channeled into the injustice of Shiva's war against the humans. It is here, ostensibly, that justice is served, when Shiva agrees to allow humans to procreate again. This rather convoluted story might lead the reader to support the rape victim, but it is unclear if we are being asked to do so because of the fear of divine retribution or because it is the right thing to do.

The divine war in *Priya's Shakti* is not only a manifestation of Shiva's misogynistic savior complex (after all, Parvati is a goddess with divine powers and perfectly capable of taking care of herself), but also assumes a heteronormative "humanity" that lives to procreate. Shiva's punishment is confusing, disproportionately severe, and indirectly appoints Priya as responsible for ending the war. Here, the victim of sexual violence is meant to take on the mantle of the hero and change society's beliefs. I recognize that "the act of speaking out can become a way for women to come to power" (hooks 1989, 129), and that narrating their experiences and naming their perpetrators can be immensely empowering for survivors of sexual violence. Yet, as Alcoff and Gray write,

> The primary political tactic for survivors should not be a simple incitement to speak out, as this formulation leaves unanalyzed the conditions of speaking…Before we speak we need to look at where the incitement to speak originates, what relations of power and domination may exist between those who incite and those who are asked to speak, as well as to whom the disclosure is directed (1993, 284).

Analysing *Priya's Shakti* through this lens reveals an imbalance of power between Priya and her divine ally. Although Priya is ostensibly the superhero in this comic, Parvati incites her to speak. Parvati's own actions are in turn incited by Shiva's war against humanity. Parvati must convince him that humans are capable of change, and she uses Priya as her means of enacting this change.

Representations of Parvati in *Priya's Shakti* are remarkably similar to her portrayal in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series. Not only is she fair-skinned and adorned in gold jewelry, she is submissive to Shiva's

greater power. Even in the brief moment during which Parvati assumes the form of Kali,[19] the fiercest avatar of female power, she is domesticated and subdued. The normally bloodthirsty, lusty Kali is represented almost comically (figure 12), in striped psychedelic tights, adorned with gold bangles and an elaborate golden crown. Noticeably absent is the necklace of skulls or the waistband made of the arms of the enemies she has vanquished. Even more surprisingly, she is bereft of any weapons, a strange choice for a warrior goddess. *Priya's Shakti,* like the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics,[20] presents a masculinized version of Hinduism that domesticates unruly feminine figures.

Another major theme of obvious similarity between the worlds of *Priya's Shakti* and the *Amar Chitra Katha* is the predominance of Hinduism. For Anant Pai and the creators of *Amar Chitra Katha* this was a markedly political project, and the comic series

Figure 12: Priya's Shakti, page 19, 2013. Image courtesy: Ram Devineni

arose "at a historical conjuncture when many of the resolutions that formed the basis for governance in the post-independence years had come in for questioning both from the right and from the left" (Sreenivas 2010, 3). This fraught political moment was accompanied by proposals for a new India which demanded a modern and international state, but also one that would allow for a discourse of traditional and markedly "Indian" values, requiring a new history of India's past, one

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[19] Kali is a Hindu goddess who is the mighty aspect of the Goddess Durga. The name Kali is derived from the Sanskrit "Kālá", or time—she therefore represents Time, Change, Power, Creation, Preservation, and Destruction. "Kali" also means "the black one", the feminine noun of the Sanskrit adjective Kālá. Her earliest appearance is that of a destroyer of evil forces, when Durga creates her during a battle with the demon Raktabija. He is impossible to kill because every time a drop of his blood fell on the ground, a duplicate Raktabija would be born. Kali is created to prevent his blood from touching the ground, which she does by drinking his blood and devouring all his duplicates. Kali is not only bloodthirsty, she is sexually unbridled, and embodies death, darkness and destruction (Banerjee 2006, McLain 2009, Sen 2015).

[20] Karline McLain's analysis of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic *Tales of Durga* provides an insight into Pai's extreme discomfort with the martial goddess. While the Hinduism that Pai follows and advocates "equated male gods like Vishnu with ultimate reality" (McLain 2008, 302), the Devi Mahatmya (the scripture on which Durga is based) ascribes the ultimate reality of the universe to the Great Goddess. However, McLain argues, this version of reality is constantly downplayed in the comic, and both the transcendental qualities as well as the more uncomfortable warrior-like and bloodthirsty aspects of Durga's mythology are transformed, tamed, or simply eliminated from her story, so that it better fits the Vaishnavic Hinduism to which Pai and Hindutva nationalism both ascribe. McLain writes that, "despite the emphasis on the comic's "authenticity," *Tales of Durga* fails to capture even the basic storyline of the classical text" (2008, 315). Instead, the creators reinterpreted the classical scripture to comfortably fit within a masculine ideal of Hinduism.

which stood in opposition not only to the stories of failure through colonization by the British, but also those of caste disparity made visible by the Left, especially scholars of Subaltern studies. It is in this context that *Amar Chitra Katha* arose, offering a new, modern version of Hindu nationalism, in which a "refined, brahminised, yet modern, masculinity" emerges as normative (Sreenivas 2010, 4). In so doing, it allowed for the Hindu Right to embrace modernity whilst positioning itself as opposed to the West.

Devineni's project, on the other hand, positions itself as a reflection of the existing omnipresence of Hinduism. He explains the reason for this, saying, "Hinduism is integrated into every part of Indian life. I mean, of course there's Muslims and Christians and a lot of other religions, but Hinduism, if you look at the whole country, is integrated into everyday life in a much deeper way than other religions—more than Christianity or Judaism or whatever. You wake up in the morning and there's a Ganesh at the door, and you give a little mantra or prayer to Ganesh and then you go out and do your work. It's just everywhere. It's not this kind of separate, removed thing" (personal communication 2016). This statement indicates a somewhat erroneous perspective that Hinduism is somehow more felt, greater on the scale of religious fervour than other religions, but more importantly reflects the pervasiveness of Hinduism in India. This view unfortunately disregards the fraught politics of the present moment, wherein the increasing integration of a militant strain of Hinduism in state politics is resulting in the rise of state-sanctioned persecution of minority religious and social groups, including Christians, Muslims and dalits.

Lina Srivastava reflects that using Hindu mythology was, "risky on a number of levels. But it was also imagery that we, the creative team (most of whom were of Indian origin or sensitive to Indian culture), had all seen throughout our lives and that was instantly recognizable – and we thought we might be able to subvert into a story of self-determination" (Jenkins 2016c). Although the creators of the campaign wanted to present a subversive narrative, I argue that their proposal of Priya as "everywoman" extends the discourse of the Hindu as the norm, with everyone else being consigned to the space of the Other. This is made all the more problematic in the context of violence against women because of the disproportionately high rates of violence against dalit and Muslim women.

While I recognize the difficulty—even impossibility—of representing all women in any given campaign, the centrality of Hinduism in this narrative is highly problematic because it erases the

violence done in the name of Hindu superiority. In fact, one of the rape survivors whose story has been integrated within the comic speaks about how her assailants repeatedly called her lower caste and untouchable as they assaulted her. Her circumstances of extreme poverty, and the impunity with which her rapists are able to act, are all too common in reports of violence against lower caste women in India. Given the comic book creators' professed commitment to representing the reality of rape survivors, the evasion of this disturbing truth is all the more poignant.

Uncritical discourse, unintended harm

Priya's Shakti has been featured in over 400 mainstream media articles, and numerous blogs and social media posts around the world. Most of these accounts uncritically praise the comic, highlighting its innovative use of the comic book medium and its integration with technology. The few critical readings that can be found are concentrated in Indian publications or in articles written by South Asian critics. In this section, I will analyse some mainstream media articles, blog posts and social media conversations about *Priya's Shakti* in order to highlight the undiscerning conversation about this work. These uncritical points of view, I argue, serve as means of reiterating longstanding orientalist notions about India and its culture. I will juxtapose these with the few critical reactions to the work that do exist in order to highlight the possibility for deeper engagement with the work.

In analysing the discourse surrounding *Priya's Shakti*, I do not wish to negate all potential positive impact of this comic, but rather hope to urge the creators and readers alike to reflect further on the unintended negative consequences of good intentions. Here, I refer to the ways in which the comic presents a masculinized Hindu culture as representative of India, and in doing so negates the experiences of minority groups. Moreover, I am concerned with its portrayal of the victim of sexual violence, Priya, as the agent responsible for social change. Media reports about *Priya's Shakti* not only fail to provide nuanced readings of the comic, but also ignore the narratives of the gang rape survivors embedded within its augmented reality features. While transmedia narratives such as *Priya's Shakti* have the potential to portray the issue as complex and multifaceted, commentary on the comic has largely ignored these narratives. Critically engaging with this work as a whole, I hold, can help us to collectively be more attentive, more inclusive, and more effective, in the important work of countering rape culture and supporting victims of sexual violence.

The comic was released in December 2014 at the Mumbai Comic Con. While there had been some media coverage prior to its release, the media began with a single story on BBC India. Interestingly, the article on BBC is far more nuanced than most of the other coverage it seems to have sparked. It provides not only an overview of the comic and its intended effects, but also importantly, asks prominent Indian feminists for their views, including Urvashi Butalia, head of feminist publishing house Zubaan Books, who "says its success or failure will depend 'a lot on the story, on how many people it reaches'" (Pandey 2014). Although Butalia had clearly not read the comic at the time of the interview, it is one of the few media accounts that includes the perspectives of feminists or activists not directly involved in the creation of *Priya's Shakti*.

Stories about the comic were published for a year following the initial launch. While more than 90 percent of Indian media coverage took place right after the launch, international press coverage has been more drawn out. Most articles situate the story in the context of the Nirbhaya case and India's rape crisis. They go on to stress the lack of societal support for survivors of sexual abuse, and proceed to an account of the interactive, technological features of the comic. A *Mic.com* article, for instance, begins: "This is much more than a comic. Literally. *Priya's Shakti* is a self-described 'innovative social impact multimedia project' that takes many forms: digital download, hard copy and—in an innovative, groundbreaking twist—augmented reality, a relatively new technology typically used in marketing and advertising" (Shaw, 2014).

The focus in most media reports is on the novelty of the project and its technological features, ignoring the content of both, the comic, as well as the content of the videos, images and stories embedded within the interactive features of the comic. This fascination with technology overrides the narrative that it transmits. Sasha Costanza-Chock, writing about transmedia organizing, says,

> I suggest that social movements have always engaged in transmedia organizing, and the process has become more visible as key aspects of movement media-making come online. This is not to suggest that nothing new is taking place. I believe that the recent emphasis on technological transformation is misplaced, to the degree that it blinds us to a comprehensive analysis of social movement media practices. In addition, while movements do already engage in transmedia organizing, they can be more effective if they are intentional about this approach. To that end, I suggest the following definition: "Transmedia organizing includes the creation of a narrative of social transformation across multiple media platforms,

involving the movement's base in participatory media making, and linking attention directly to concrete opportunities for action. Effective transmedia organizing is also accountable to the needs of the movement's base" (2014, 49-50).

Here, Costanza-Chock points to how social movements have a long history of transmedia activism, using the various communication tools at their disposal. Moreover, transmedia is most effective when it is use in creating narratives that are directly linked to opportunities for action, and are accountable the needs of the movement. He suggests, in addition, that the focus on technology can distract from the narratives being offered within the text. In the case of media reports on *Priya's Shakti*, the presence of technological elements appears to override the actual narrative.

The lack of nuanced analyses of the project and the multiple narratives it offers reflects neocolonial tropes that are not overtly stated, but nonetheless implied. Srivastava writes,

> We may believe that our colonial period is behind us, but neocolonialist perceptions persist in our institutions and in our cultural narratives. Media outlets trade in savior complex stories to audiences who consume simplified stories that allow them to feel good and ignore structural inequities, a relationship which leads to an ecosystem of cultural narrative that continually misrepresents poor, marginalized, and at-risk communities (Jenkins 2016b).

I argue that the media reports that uncritically embrace the simplified story of Priya as a "superhero" and ignore the story's problematic savior complex are equally implicated in promoting colonialist narratives. A critical aspect of this is the portrayal of Priya's community—and by extension, Indian community—as entirely unsympathetic and unsupportive. Although there are many cases in which a rape survivor's family and community do fail to support her, there are also numerous accounts in which they do. Both survivor narratives embedded within the comic indicate that the victim's family helped them in their pursuit of justice. Painting an entire nation as failing in empathy towards survivors of sexual violence detracts from the immense support that victims can and do receive, such as the protestors of all genders, castes and classes who came out to support Nirbhaya. It renders invisible the work of feminists who have worked for years, and made immense strides in legal reform, shelters and other spaces to redress the problems of rape survivors.

Priya's Shakti not only frames Indian community as having failed Priya, but also offers an alternative community through the selfies with Priya that users post. A search on Twitter for the hashtag #standwithpriya reveals a majority of white women, a few urban Indian women, and celebrities like

actress Mindy Kaling. These images not only come across as a kind of gimmick, probably insignificant to anyone who has not read the comic, but also connote a savior complex wherein communities of predominantly white women support Priya, apparently standing in for the failures of her community. Here, I suggest, is a subtle expression of victims like Priya needing outside support, whether in the form of divine intervention or western intervention, to become heroic survivors.

Although victim blaming is a global problem, *Priya's Shakti* and the discourse that surround it tend to paint it as a problem of Indian society alone. Comments on several articles reveal this misperception, such as Kavi Mazumdar writes, "This shows how low India has fallen. Shame on society as a whole for not doing more. I look forward to a day when victim blamers in India are in the minority and women achieve the freedoms western women have" (Flood 2014). This reflects a view of India as primitive compared to western nations, calling attention to Indian society for failing to support victims of sexual abuse. This point is made more obvious in user Jachin Phoneix's comment, which reads: "India has the highest sexual assault/rape statistic in the known world. They need to pull out all the stops and get their message to the people via any vessel they can possibly use" (Rao 2015). Several users begged to differ, and cited statistics of their own showing that the U.S. has the highest rates of rape, to which Phoneix responded, "That is actually quite offensive" (Rao 2015). This uninformed exchange is frustratingly common across many of the comment sections of different articles, wherein India is assumed to be "rape ridden" (Pal 2014) and victim blaming is rampant.

In many instances, however, comments analyse *Priya's Shakti* more thoroughly than most media reports. For instance, Aishwarya Lahiri Khanna writes,

> I find involving the Hindu gods and goddesses illogical and senseless. It is the name of religion that many injustices are done to women in India. Why could it not have been a rape survivor in India who gives gender equality on her own and with the help of other human beings? It is in the name of Gods and religion that gender inequality is even perpetrated (O'Connor 2015).

Similarly, reader leeyinyin writes,

> It is a bit odd isn't it to appeal to only a hindu sensibility in the first place? Does the issue of rape have a religious dimension in India? Surely if the righteous wrath of the goddesses (and attendant fearsome beasts) had any true power to shape cultural values and attitudes, India might not be such a deeply misogynistic society in the first place since the goddesses have

been around a few millennia working their magic? There have been real life Indian Priyas - Phoolan Devi! - who have avenged their rapes without magic and endangered critters. Sure the body count in a Phoolan devi comic will be far higher and make some men reflexively cross their legs, but seriously, it would have been far more empowering (Flood 2014)

Both Khanna and leeyinyin critique the comic for its appeal to solely Hindu sensibilities and point out the inherent contradiction of using religious imagery to overturn social prejudices that are in part, a consequence of religious practice. While it is clear that an appeal to the supposedly matriarchal roots of Hinduism, or simply using visually striking mythology, does garner attention, mere attention does not guarantee empowerment.

As leeyinyin writes, many real women have overcome the social and cultural stigma of sexual assault. While figures like Phoolan Devi (popularly known as the Bandit Queen) are controversial and fraught, perhaps centering the comic on these stories would have been more effective. Indian feminist Kavita Krishnan voiced similar concerns in an interview with *VICE News*: "The concern is that the book could speak to Hindus, but perhaps we also need other idioms to address those of minority religions who might not be comfortable with the 'divine is within us all' message. I think that perhaps that kind of message takes away somewhat from the central issue—that we should respect all humans as humans, not for divine essence, but for human essence" (Thacker, 2015).

In one of the few critical readings of the comic, Deepanjana Pal notes that framing Priya as a superhero is highly suspect because

There's no effort to show Priya's own strength of character. It takes a goddess—who is perhaps the only Indian woman blissfully unaware of the dangers and biases that inform being a woman in India—to spark courage and defiance in Priya. This begs a simple and uncomfortable question: what about all those women who don't have the benefit of being able to phone in a goddess and ride a tiger?" (Pal, 2014).

Pal's reading of the comic points to the most obvious shortcoming of *Priya's Shakti*—her *shakti*, her power, is not her own—it is the consequence of the gods acting upon her and through her. Moreover, Pal argues that despite the good intentions, Priya is a questionable role model—she is the stereotype of the passive, weak, devout Indian woman – who only acts when acted upon.

Analysing the visual elements of the story, she writes, "It's a bit odd to see Kali wearing striped tights, as though she's the Wicked Witch of the West's punk cousin… Still, Goldman and Devineni deserve gold stars for steering clear of the pinkish beige palette that usually makes up the skin tone of our comic book heroines" (2014). Indeed, Priya's skin appears to be the only subversive aspect of the story. Still, Pal writes, "for all its clumsy storytelling, you can't fault the intention behind Priya's Shakti or the mantra that Priya preaches, simplistic as it may be. There's so little in popular media and entertainment that encourages people to remove the stigma from rape, that initiatives like Devineni's are welcome even when they're disappointing" (2014).

While the intention may indeed be faultless, one is forced to wonder if it is enough. How much does the intention matter if the message is a tepid one at best, and neocolonialist and Hindu nationalist at worst? Kanishk Tharoor critiques international media's celebration of the comic based solely on its moral impetus. "No armour of pieties can shield it from its aesthetic failings," Tharoor writes (2015), arguing that despite the comic's noble intentions, the story does not stand up to aesthetic or literary scrutiny. Tackling the augmented reality aspects of the comic, he writes, "It doesn't help that the great selling point of *Priya's Shakti*—its use of 'augmented reality' technology—is more a clunky distraction than a boon" and that the comic seems "as committed to educating non-Indians about Hinduism as it is interested in advocating women's rights" (Tharoor 2015). The educative function of the comic, as Tharoor rightly notes, appears to be dedicated in large part to a non-Hindu or non-Indian audience, informing them about various aspects of Hindu culture. Seen this way, the comic seems to target international audiences rather than Indian ones, a feature which is also evident in the selfies it encourages reader to take.

Tharoor concludes his critique of the augmented reality features saying, "*Priya's Shakti* ends with small histories from rape victims about their lives. Their narratives are by far the most heartbreaking and powerful part of the comic sequence, but they have you wonder whether they deserve the indignity of sitting alongside all the 'superhero' guff'" (2015). Indeed, these deeply moving stories are given little attention in media reports, aside from the occasional mention that they are embedded in the comic. These stories are personal tales, potent in their expressiveness, and remarkable in the strength of the women who lived these experiences and summoned the courage to talk about them. To be consigned to near oblivion in the back of the comic, available only through a clunky app, seems to do them a disservice. In numerous ways, these short and touching narratives seem like they

would be far more powerful in generating the kind of socio-cultural shift that Devineni and his collaborators desire. That said, it might be that the popularity of the comic acts as a vehicle for these stories, through which they reach many more listeners than would be otherwise possible.

Although all of the critiques that Pal and Tharoor offer are in many ways obvious, these articles stand out as exceptions amongst the 400 or more stories about the comic. I hold that their failure to engage more deeply with the narrative is a means of maintaining the "inequality of ignorance" that marks so much international reportage of India. The lack of attention to the larger project that *Priya's Shakti* engages with, and its integration with existing social movements, begs other questions: Which aspects of the project are deemed most worthy of attention, and why? Does the innovativeness of a project supersede existing initiatives? Does Devineni's gender play a role in the media's fascination with this comic? Indeed, Devineni's masculine gender is another issue that has received little attention, aside from the UN Women's *He for She* award. When I asked Devineni about this, he replied, "I was never someone who—until the 2012 rape, even thought about gender violence or women's empowerment or women's equality. It was never something that was even on my radar. And I think that was the case for a lot of people in India—it was never on their radar until what happened there got them really motivated them and challenged to do something. And at those protests, there were a lot of men protesting along with women" (personal communication 2016).

The fact that the comic does reach out to men and women—and to boys and girls—equally is important, despite its other shortcomings. Srivastava points to this when she writes, "Will this project alone solve gender-based violence? No. Will we have measurable outcomes in shifts and attitudes and behaviors? We're not certain. But we do want Priya to be a superhero that both girls and boys can get behind" (Srivastava 2014). Here, she emphasizes the fact that any initiative is limited, and that this comic book can only be one part of the effort, reaching out to groups that may not already be a part of this conversation. This may be especially possible in the team's efforts to bring the comic to schools, to attempt to tackle rape culture amongst young children, before attitudes of victim blaming become normalized.

The creators of *Priya's Shakti* have been reflecting on these critiques, as I was informed during my interview with Ram Devineni. The team is now working on the second issue in the series, which focuses on survivors of acid attacks. Here, Devineni mentions, they will "de-emphasize Hindu

mythology and characters," and although "Priya will be the main protagonist, the focus will be on acid attack survivors and their stories" (personal communication 2016). Moreover, he added, "with this next chapter, [we] also want to engage boys and teenage men—in fact, they will have a more prominent role in the second chapter" (ibid.). These are important indications that Devineni and the Rattapallax team have been actively thinking about how to harness the excitement for their project towards a more sustained goal. Their desire to engage men and boys is especially crucial from the standpoint of social change. The third chapter in the series, Devineni tells me, will be focused on the issue of trafficking of women and girls, which is the major area of focus for their NGO partner, Apne Aap. While I tried to reach out to the NGO on numerous occasions, I was unfortunately unable to speak with them about this project.

With the support of the World Bank, the Rattapallax team plans to expand the comic and bring it to other countries. In addition, they plan to translate the existing story into more languages, beginning with Hindi. Devineni said, "I think the strength of the comic book is that we have the main character is a survivor of gender violence and rape, and she becomes this 'superhero.' That structure can be replicated in any culture. And it can be very culture-specific or more global as well. And of course there are goddesses in every culture around the world as well" (personal communication 2016). Since sexual violence is an issue in most parts of the world, and mythologies exist all over the world, it is easy to see how the comic can be translated and recast to appeal to different contexts. However, Devineni's statement seems to miss the larger problem with using religious mythology to tackle the problem of sexual violence. I would be curious to see responses, for instance, to images of the Virgin Mary rescuing a rape survivor in Protestant England. Would reactions to such a comic be quite as celebratory? Or is mythology, in fact, only considered a useful strategy in countries such as India, deemed appropriately "traditional" (read: backward, primitive)?

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have critically read *Priya's Shakti* within the context of existing comics in India as well as through the lens of media articles and reader commentary. In so doing, I have articulated how the central narrative of the comic, through its uncritical use of Hindu mythology, reiterates longstanding colonial and Hindu nationalist discourse about India. By portraying the main protagonist, Priya, as a docile, victimized, and devout Hindu woman who is triggered into transforming her society by an act of divine intervention, the comic fails to represent her as an agent

of her own experiences. Priya is a frustratingly ideal woman whose story not only fails to represent the lived experiences of rape survivors, but also renders many of these other stories invisible. *Priya's Shakti,* for all the good intentions of the creators, is an example of a cultural narrative that reiterates tired orientalist tropes.

However, *Priya's Shakti* holds important lessons for anti-violence activists, in terms its shortcomings as well as its innovations. Its portrayal of a rape victim as a superhero is a discursive move that has potential to transform narratives about survivors of sexual violence. The superhero genre is a remarkable space for challenging ideas of who can be heroic, therefore transforming narratives of power. Unusual superheroes such as Priya refuse the silence, victimhood, shame, and invisibility that is expected of them, and therefore offer opportunities for rape survivors to see themselves in different, more empowering roles. Moreover, in its use of transmedia, *Priya's Shakti* offers additional narratives that help provide a more complete picture of the pervasive victim-blaming culture in India. While I would argue that project could have used transmedia far more effectively, providing a wider range of commentary that delved deeper into the nuances of rape culture and victim blaming in India, *Priya's Shakti* is nonetheless a unique project that could inform similar efforts in the future. Sasha Costanza-Chock writes, "Effective transmedia organizing is also accountable to the needs of the movement's base" (2014, 50). It is this sense of accountability that is most necessary to cultivate in a project that is dedicated to longer-term change. Although *Priya's Shakti* makes some gestures towards accountability with its partnerships, this remains an underdeveloped aspect of the project.

The media commentary surrounding the comic reveals that it not only what is said, but also what is left *unsaid*, that determines how international media works to reinforce colonialist and orientalist perspectives. By not questioning the use of a majority religion in the context of a nation undergoing so many internal conflicts and the increased suppression of minority groups, the media propagates the invisibility of minority perspectives. The discourse surrounding *Priya's Shakti*, therefore, illustrates some of the subtle means through which power imbalances are maintained. I maintain that the problems of rape culture and victim blaming are global ones, which offer opportunities for building alliances across borders. However, projects like *Priya's Shakti* miss this opportunity in many ways, replicating the failure of solidarity so visible in the Nirbhaya case.

Chapter 3: Everyday Resistance as Feminist Praxis

The work of the Blank Noise Collective

On February 14, 2013, I walked out of a metro station in central Delhi to go to the One Billion Rising protest, a global event to end gender violence. It was incredibly crowded and I was a little overwhelmed by all the pushing and shoving, especially by the many cameramen who jostled participants out of the way to better place their tripods closer to the stage. While I was part annoyed and part amused by the fact that they had come to document a protest but wanted the protesters out of the way, I had had enough of their aggressive occupation of the space, and decided to wander away from the main area to the clearing at the back. There, along the sidewalks of the wide street that had been cordoned off for the protest, was a metal rack with clothes hanging from it, making for a somewhat incongruous display. Yet I was drawn to it because it seemed a bit out of place, much like how I felt at the time. When I got close enough, I saw that the rack had a sign with the words "I never ask for it" written in capital letters, and a short description stating that this was a collection of clothing worn by women who had experienced sexual harassment or violence. The clothes hung there, silent and benign, even banal in their ordinariness, their everydayness. While I stood contemplating the violence they had witnessed, the blame that was inflicted on their wearers on their behalf, it felt as though they spoke the words *I never ask for it.*

It is difficult to explain exactly why, but this silent installation of clothes spoke to me louder than any of the speeches or plays at that event. Perhaps it was because they made me think of the times in my own life when I had been told by teachers, friends and others that I experienced harassment because my skirt was too short; perhaps it was because of the rage I felt against the pervasiveness of victim-blaming; perhaps it was just the quiet power of the installation against the backdrop of all the noise that surrounded me. It was probably all of those things together, but it touched me. I not only felt a profound empathy for all the women whose clothes stood in silent testimony for their harassment, I also experienced it viscerally, with my skin covered in goosebumps as I stood there.

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The installation, as I found out soon afterwards, was the work of Blank Noise, an artist collective that uses public interventions as activism against street sexual harassment. The Blank Noise collective aims to create change not through spectacular, large-scale protests, but through interlinked tactics of everyday performance and sustained public discourse. The volunteers who make up the collective come together in public spaces to occupy space, loiter, play games, sleep, talk, and laugh. These seemingly mundane actions are performances of everyday activism that counter the pervasive narrative of fear within India's public spaces. Blank Noise's public performances and installations are accompanied by an active online presence that is engaged in a similarly multifaceted host of activities, which include collecting testimonials and pledges, sharing knowledge and experiences, and working in nuanced ways to build networks of feminists within India and around the world.

Blank Noise's interventions focus both on bringing attention to the existing discourses of fear and shame that surround the issue of sexual harassment, as well as offering counter narratives to these. Its work casts light on the prevalence of victim blaming and rape culture, but also offers potential solutions by bridging social divisions, creating communities, and overcoming fear and difference through dialogue. The importance of dialogue is especially visible in the *Talk to Me* initiative, a place-specific public art project from 2012 designed to transform the experience of fear that most women in Indian cities experience on a regular basis. The project transgressed binary categories of danger and safety that are traditionally used to limit women's access to public space. By employing tactics of trust and dialogue, *Talk to Me* helped transform, at least temporarily, the space and its inhabitants.

While the actual project took place in a small lane on the outskirts of Bangalore, a digital account of the event was shared on social media. The article, published on *The Atlantic* soon after the Nirbhaya case, went viral, bringing significant attention to the *Talk to Me* campaign, specifically, but also the work of Blank Noise more generally. Perhaps one reason it was so widely celebrated was that the project offered a much needed counter narrative to the discourse of fear that swept India after the Nirbhaya case. Reactions to the case that vociferously advocates "safety" for women, tended to advocate keeping women out of public spaces, and translated to increased policing and surveillance of women when they were in public. Moreover, as already mentioned in the introduction, the classist undertones of the case located blame and danger in the lower class and lower caste migrant men who live in the fringes of cities. *Talk to Me*, in this context, produced an alternative and deeply subversive solution to the unfriendliness of public spaces.

In order to situate this particular project within Blank Noise's larger repertoire of social activism, I will begin with an introduction to how the collective was formed. This section will explore some of the dominant positions regarding street sexual harassment, underscoring the discourse of fear that pervades discussions about women in public spaces. This will help contextualise the ways that Blank Noise develops counter narratives and proposals for social change through its performances and other interventions. I will go on to discuss some of the projects that they have created, exploring three main themes: the pedagogical aspects of their projects, the ways in which the collective bridges online and offline activism, and the role of the "action hero," the name given to Blank Noise volunteers. I draw upon interviews with the founder of Blank Noise, volunteers for the collective, and individuals who have worked with Blank Noise as employees or advisors.

In the following section, I analyse the *Talk to Me* campaign, providing an account of the campaign as well as the discourse it generated on mainstream and social media. Commentators from different parts of the world recognized this work as being powerful not only to the Indian context but also beyond. Read in this light, the *Talk to Me* campaign specifically, and the Blank Noise collective more generally, appears to be regarded in a different light than many other instances of transnational activism from India. It helps steer the conversation to one that foregrounds agency, that counters fear, and advocates collectivity. In this respect, I hold, the work of Blank Noise positions it as an example of productive transnational solidarity that is both responsive to the particular context in which the interventions take place, but can also offer tactics for similar interventions in other parts of the world. The final section will scrutinize this claim further, exploring the ways in which Blank Noise achieves a productive synthesis between practices of cultural critique and formations of counter narratives. In so doing, I argue, the collective points to the value of performance and dialogue as powerful forms of activism and political participation.

Blank Noise: collective action against street sexual harassment

Jasmeen Patheja founded the Blank Noise Collective in 2003, when she was a student at the Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore. Patheja, enrolled in a program focused on art for social change, was introduced to feminism as theory and practice, and to the work of feminist art practitioners like Suzanne Lacy and the Guerilla Girls. Art, in these works, was employed as a means of enacting protest, being confrontational, and providing spaces for healing and joy. For Patheja,

this was revelatory, as she realised that art can take the form of social action and a means of liberation. At the same time, Patheja was also confronting the challenges of having recently moved to Bangalore as a student, where she was "simultaneously thrilled by being in a new city, as well as experiencing the fear of being alone in an unknown place, heightened by constant experiences of street harassment" (personal communication 2016). When she shared her experiences with classmates and friends, she was surprised about her their attitudes. She revealed, "[reactions] varied from giggles, to questions like 'how come it's only happening to you?,' to 'it happens, boys are like that'" (personal communication 2016). Inspired by the knowledge she was gaining in classes, and driven by the knowledge gained through her lived experience, Patheja formed the Blank Noise project to address the pervasive problem of street sexual harassment.

Although the Indian women's movement has widely acknowledged street sexual harassment as a form of violence against women, mainstream attitudes tend to disregard "eve teasing," as it is euphemistically termed, as an insignificant problem. As Patheja explained, people said that if she was interested in tackling a feminist issue, she should look at domestic violence. "There was this hierarchy of what is issue-worthy and what isn't issue-worthy," she explained. Rituparna Bhattacharya writes, "eve teasing... has always been considered as a minor nuisance, a jocular practice validated both culturally and sub-culturally across India" (2014, 1346). In fact, the very term "eve-teasing" reduces the harm of street sexual harassment, rendering it a harmless bit of fun that is minimal compared to the real damage of domestic violence, unequal access to education, work and the many other systemic issues that Indian women face.

Street sexual harassment has only recently begun to be taken seriously, as urbanization in India expands, and greater numbers of feminists have advocated for urban planning to be seen as a gendered issue. For instance, Kalpana Viswanath and Surabhi Mehrotra write,

> The fear and insecurity that women face in accessing public spaces prevents them from availing the benefits of being an urban citizen. They are not seen as legitimate users of the space, except at certain times and for certain activities… going to work, market, picking up children and other such activities. But public spaces are not meant for women to be seen if they do not have a purpose (2007, 1542).

Here, Viswanath and Mehrotra point to two large issues at the intersection of gender and urban spaces: the climate of fear that plagues women when entering public spaces, as well as the perceived

illegitimacy of their claim to those spaces. Dominant discourses about this prevalent problem, using the binary language of danger and safety, reflect class-based biases that pit different social groups against one another and create a climate of fear and mistrust.

Fear in this context, as Shilpa Phadke and other researchers have shown, is a class-based phenomenon that pits lower-class men against upper and middle class women.[21] Phadke writes, "most respondents agreed that women must be safe in public space... the women they were referring to were inevitably middle class, usually Hindu upper caste, mostly heterosexual and always respectable women" (2013, 51). Implicit within the framing of "respectable women," Phadke explains, is the un-respectable woman and the dangerous man, "usually lower class, mostly migrant, often unemployed and sometimes uncomfortably Muslim" (ibid.), whose presence is what makes these spaces unsafe. This narrative is especially visible in the aftermath of the Nirbhaya case, Phadke explains: "The fact that the perpetrators of the brutal sexual assault leading to the death of the victim were a bus driver, two cleaners, a fruit vendor and an assistant gym instructor drew attention to lower class men in cities marking them for surveillance" (ibid.). While surveillance of migrant men is justified through the argument of the danger they pose, a simultaneous surveillant gaze is turned upon women - especially middle and upper-class women - justified through the argument of safety.

Following the Nirbhaya case, there has been a kind of mass hysteria about the prevalence of rape in India at large, and Delhi in particular. Facts and statistics that show that the rape per capita in India is not as high as in Sweden or in the U.S., for instance, have not prevented the fear mongering that has pervaded media discourse about Delhi and India. Countries in the western world began to issue safety notices to its female citizens traveling to India, and a university in Germany went as far as to stop a study abroad program in India (Shetty 2015). Some have even used the incident as a means of justifying discrimination, such as a rejection letter from a German university professor to a male Indian student. The letter read, "Dear Sir, Unfortunately I don't accept any Indian male students for

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[21] Phadke et al., in their discussion of urban public spaces, "explicitly foreground the middle-class woman because although public discussions of safety might appear to be about all women, they tend to focus implicitly only on middle-class women. In the urban Indian context, this middle-class woman is further assumed to be a young, able-bodied, Hindu, upper-caste, heterosexual, married or marriageable woman. A man with her set of identities would have open, legitimate and unquestioned access to public space. The middle-class woman is then apparently privileged in every way other than gender. Focusing on this woman then allows us to unravel the implicit assumptions of gender, class, caste, community and sexuality that underlie popular notions of safety" (2011, viii).

internships. We hear a lot about the rape problem in India which I cannot support. I have many female students in my group, so I think this attitude is something I cannot support" (Arora 2015).

Writing of the media hype about India's lack of safety, Rukmini Shrinivasan writes, "The beginning of a new conversation on women is welcome, but this two-year focus on rape as the key indicator of women's status in India has been both statistically faulty and counterproductive." The culture of fear, she argues, has obscured an even greater problem that Indian women face: the lack of freedom and autonomy. As she writes, "A statistically faulty focus on rape has led to a misdiagnosis and a worsening of India's real problem: women's autonomy" (2014). Although feminist and anti-violence groups have gained more attention, support and recognition for their work after the Nirbhaya case, the sole focus on rape has also simultaneously detracted and even worsened the "real problem when it comes to women: autonomy." This is apparent in the veritable explosion of safety projects and panic button apps[22] that are designed to increase surveillance of women in public spaces.

Blank Noise interventions represent a refusal to these limits to freedom and autonomy. By bringing groups of women together to claim public spaces as their own through a range of different efforts, Blank Noise pushes back against dominant social norms that police women's behaviour and bodies. Their work recognizes that "In a relative sense, the female body, which is expected to be located 'properly' in the private space of the home, has the greatest potential to disrupt the structures of power in public" (Phadke et al., 2011, 179). By producing these disruptions through playful, "risky" behaviour, designed as expressions of pleasure and in public spaces, Blank Noise helps erode the division between private and public, between respectable and unrespectable, challenging what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Action Heroes as neoliberal feminists

Blank Noise represents, in many ways, a new wave of feminism in India that is led by young, middle-class women protesting the sexual violence and constant surveillance that pervade their lives. Most of the women who participate in Blank Noise's interventions, conversations and performances seem

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[22] Officials in India hope to combat the threat of sexual violence against women and girls by requiring panic buttons to be installed in every new phone by January, and for every phone to be equipped with GPS by 2018 (Rogers 2016). In addition, all auto-rickshaws (usually driven by lower class migrant men) were mandated to change their meters to integrate a GPS tracking device and panic button as a security measure for women (Sharma 2014).

to adopt a "do-it-yourself grammar which lays claim to equality as entitlement and seems not to use the vocabulary of women's rights" (Mitra-Kahn, 2012, 113). Shivangini Tandon, a long-time volunteer at Blank Noise, captured this point of view when she reflected, "A lot of the feminist organizations that led the way in the '70s and '80s onwards felt really outdated, and weren't really speaking to me, which is fine because I'm a privileged, well-off, professional, independent kind of woman" (personal communication 2016). Blank Noise, she said "made me realise that if there was anything getting in the way of my empowerment, it was pretty much only me" (ibid.). While earlier waves of the women's movement in India aimed to reform patriarchal practices through the law or via appeals to the state, contemporary feminists emphasize their own rights and desires as entry points to their activism. Hemangini Gupta situates this emergent form of feminism as reflective of India's turn to neoliberalism, where "*individuals* are exhorted to take responsibility for themselves and to produce themselves as entrepreneurial citizens, exhibiting initiative to cope with precarious times" (2016, 153). She argues that India's entry into neoliberal market privatization has helped shape contemporary middle class feminism in India, exemplified in the work of organizations like Blank Noise, which promote an individual-driven model of change.

Many of Blank Noise's public interventions are temporary performances that bring together a group of volunteers to occupy public spaces (figure 13). These are silent yet discursive performances, where volunteers assert their right to the space through their body language and by making eye contact with strangers. These performances can be seen as the volunteers exerting their "right to chosen risk."[23] While men in India can often be

Figure 13: Loitering in public spaces, performance, 2009. Image courtesy: Blank Noise.

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[23] Phadke et al. (2011) argue that patriarchal institutions have long employed the notion of safety to monitor women's behavior in public spaces. "Safety," they say, "is connected not as much to women's own sense of bodily integrity or to their consent, but rather to ideas of *izzat* (honor) of the family and community" (53). In such settings, women are guarded against assumed sexual dangers from less desirable groups, including lower class men. Due to such a deceptive opposition between class and gender, women are consistently marginalized in larger urban contexts. "Instead of safety,"

found loitering in public spaces, women are rarely seen doing the same. Interventions that invite women to occupy public spaces, then, are as a much a challenge to the women who volunteer as a challenge to those already present in that space. Blank Noise's projects are designed to challenge external social norms as well as internal fears and prejudices. Fear, Patheja and Gupta (2007) write, is

> Often camouflaged or concealed by 'appropriate behaviour.' Mothers warn their daughters about what to wear—it must be 'respectable;' women cover themselves with shawls and stoles; middle class women do not take public transport if they can help it; young girls need male escorts at night. Fear is mitigated or mediated by denying the city: covering up the body, choosing to walk on the side of the road with no men; the ladies' special bus; the 'safe' mall over the bustling market.

Fiona Jeffries, in the introduction to *Nothing to Lose but Our Fear*, writes about how "fear is deployed as a technology of political discipline," one that can found in "metastasizing surveillance and the proliferation of increasingly elaborate modes of political repression" (2015, 3). The increasing political and social control, and the simultaneous escalation of scrutiny and restriction of the movement of myriad social groups, notably migrant men, sex workers and other "unrespectable women," can be seen as emerging from this climate of fear and the discourse in favour of women's safety. Indeed, as Jeffries writes, "a new geography of fear is a catalyst for the aggressive reorganization of cities around anti-crime and counter-terrorism planning and governance, often through the importation of changing techniques of warfare" (4). However, as Jeffries reminds us, "precisely because it is political, fear ought also to be understood as a catalyst to, if not a site of, a range of individual and collective forms of refusal and resistance" (5). Fear, debilitating and oppressive though it is, is not as totalizing as it may appear. Instead, it can act as a stimulant or motivator for action to reverse its effects. The collective of Blank Noise, I argue, is keenly aware of this climate of fear, and has devised a set of campaigns that hopes to counter and question the pervasive social fear of the "Other" that is so prevalent in India, and globally, at this moment.

To mitigate fear, Blank Noise asks women to embody their action hero spirit, to refuse the victim position. This is a form of neoliberal activism where the feminist is a central player who "accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care" (Rottenberg, 2014, 420). The very designation "action hero" seems to give several volunteers a sense of agency, making them feel capable of

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they add, "what women should seek is the right to take risks …" for it is only by claiming the "right to chosen risk" that they can claim full access to public space (60).

"tak[ing] hold of a situation that makes you feel powerless," (personal communication with Vira Mistry 2016). The language of the action hero "transcends any victim rubbish" (personal communication with Karuna Nundy 2016), providing an opportunity to reframe and take control of disempowering experiences. The term action hero, Vira explained, reminded her of superheroes and the "vigilantism of comic books, where the police, the politicians, they're not doing enough, so it's up to the common people" (personal communication 2016).

Several volunteers I interviewed spoke about how adopting the persona of the action hero, and consciously performing the small actions of returning the gaze and occupying public spaces, gave them a sense of agency and assertiveness. Palak Sarda, a student at Srishti, said, "it has made me look at the world in a much different way… every time someone stares at me, I have the confidence to stare right back at him in the eye and try and make him realise what he is doing is wrong and he has no right to do it ... working on my fears is still something that I have to keep building on" (personal communication 2016). Similarly, another volunteer, Sachi mentioned that "some of the activities seemed vague and didn't make sense at first - like walk swinging your arms around - but it all makes sense now... Now, when I walk outside, I do it with confidence" (personal communication 2016). Gupta writes, "The emphasis on the successes and heroism of participants lends the campaign an individualist bent that resonates with neoliberalism's emphasis on cultivating entrepreneurial selves who take responsibility for themselves" (2016, 160).

Accompanying this individualized, internal transformation is the collective transformation and community formation that is not entirely captured in idea of the "action hero." When Gupta offers Blank Noise as an example of neoliberal feminism that "foregrounds the self as an entrepreneurial and capable actor" (2016, 165), she makes a valid assessment, but evades the communal aspects of these interventions. Community is an integral part of Blank Noise's projects: the interventions are largely conducted in groups, and even when individual volunteers branch out for a project, they come back together to reflect on the project and the change they experienced and observed. There is a process of sharing and learning that can only take place in collective engagement. Indeed, many of the volunteers I spoke with talked about how the designation of action hero gave them both a sense of individual agency as well as made them feel that they were part of a community. Blank Noise, then, seems to place equal significance on the individual and the collective. The individual articulates

personal experiences, desires and dreams to create a vision of feminist freedom, but does so in the context of the group, which then performs these desires together in public spaces.

Blank Noise as a space for feminist pedagogy

Sharing personal experiences forms an important aspect of Blank Noise's work. Volunteers gather together before embarking on a public intervention to talk about their experiences of street sexual harassment and discuss how they think about the problem. In the process, many young women find themselves being able to reformulate the problem and to recognize the ways in which they had often internalized the blame. Rajalakshmi, a volunteer, revealed "I had never really thought about eve teasing as a big problem, related to more 'serious' problems like rape. When I shared my experiences with the group, I saw that every single one of us had this problem, and it made us all feel bad, like it was our fault. And actually, *that* is the problem" (personal communication 2016). These group discussions can be seen as forms of consciousness raising practices that have long been used by feminists as tools of organizing and community building. According to Catharine MacKinnon, consciousness raising is "the collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women's social experience, as women live through it" (1989, 83).

Consciousness raising can be seen as process of dialogical learning in which participants come to a deeper awareness of the intrinsic social structures that define and shape their experience in the world. For many volunteers like Rajalakshmi, this is a necessary step towards their understanding of the social structures that they internalize. For bell hooks, "Telling stories is one of the ways that we can begin the process of building community" (2010, 49). Stories are powerful tools for learning together, and feeling a part of community. Telling personal stories, hooks explains, also helps us reclaim our narratives. She writes, "The soul murder I felt as a child was no longer the mark of my being; by telling stories I had entered a redemptive space" (2010, 51). Stories are transformative for the storyteller as well as the listener, hooks believes, because "Active listening draws us closer together. Students listen to one another's stories with an intensity that is not always present during a lecture or class discussion" (ibid.). Blank Noise harnesses the power of storytelling and consciousness raising in its group discussions, where volunteers share their stories and in doing so, reclaim their own narratives to create a sense of community and bonding.

Other aspects of Blank Noise's interventions can be read as pedagogy. For instance, projects that involve occupying public spaces require outward performances of confidence and nonchalance, as well as playfulness and relaxation, are embodied forms of learning that require overcoming a lifetime of socialization (figure 14). For young women who have been taught all their lives to comport themselves respectably in public spaces, this poses a challenge. Loitering in public spaces, adopting a confident stance, making eye contact with strangers and even sleeping in a public park is not typically thought of as 'proper' feminine behaviour.
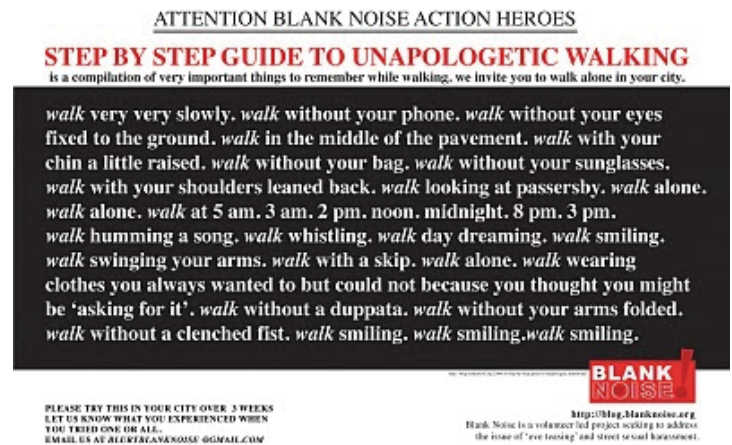

Figure 14: Step by Step Guide to Unapologetic Walking, poster, 2008, Blank Noise.

Iris Marion Young writes, "'femininity' designate[s] not a mysterious quality or essence that all women have by virtue of their being biologically female. It is, rather, a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical *situation* of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves" (2005, 31). In other words, feminine bodily comportment in the world is learned behaviour, dictated by social norms and expectations. Young writes, "Women often approach a physical engagement with things with timidity, uncertainty, and hesitancy. Typically, we lack an entire trust in our bodies to carry us to our aims" (2005, 34). This act of constant self-surveillance by women produces what French thinker Michel Foucault calls 'disciplined bodies' (Phadke et al. 2011, 31). Young uses sport as an example of a larger phenomenon of female containment and self-imposed bodily restrictions that are visible in everyday life, in actions as mundane as walking on the street.

Sachi, a Blank Noise volunteer, said "I always used to walk with my books or bag clutched in front of my body. I would always tie up my hair and make sure I wore a *dupatta*[24] in public. After being a part of Blank Noise, I stopped doing that. I now leave my hair untied when I go out, I walk swinging my arms, and I've stopped holding my books so close. I realised it was like a shield, and I

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[24] The *dupatta* is a long, multi-purpose scarf that is essential to many South Asian women's suits. The dupatta has long been a symbol of modesty in South Asian dress.

113

don't need it" (personal communication 2016). Through consciously adopting different bodily actions in Blank Noise projects, Sachi and other volunteers are able to experience a different relationship with the world around them, one that gives them a greater sense of agency. bell hooks, writing on anti-racist learning, says "explanations alone do not bring us to the practice of beloved community. When we take the theory, the explanations, and apply them concretely to our daily lives, our experiences, we further deepen the practice of anti-racist transformation" (2003, 36). Similarly, other forms of discrimination based on physical traits, either of gender, colour, ability and so on, are also deeply embodied knowledges that are oftentimes difficult to articulate in words, but are *felt*.

Overcoming the behaviours that are learnt through a lifetime of socialization, such as shrinking oneself to seem smaller in public spaces, requires everyday action in addition to the reading of theory. This process of embodied learning brings together theory and practice in what can be seen as a form of feminist praxis. As educator Paulo Freire writes, "Liberation is praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (2000, 79). Social change, for Freire, is only possible when action and reflection come together, in the process of dialogue. Dialogue, Freire holds, "characterizes an epistemological relationship" that recognizes the social character of knowledge and is "an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing" (1995, 379 quoted in Freire 2000, 17). Much of Blank Noise's work, I argue, can be seen as a form of dialogic pedagogy, bringing together volunteers who dialogue with one another, with the spaces they occupy, and the social structures in which they live, in order to develop alternative narratives to counter existing oppressions.

Online and Offline Activism

Blank Noise runs a series of online and offline campaigns that "cannot be neatly separated into the virtual and the physical" (Mitra -Kahn 2012, 116). Indeed, both physical interventions and virtual discussions have played a significant role in the work of the collective from its very inception. When she graduated from Srishti, Patheja explained, she wanted to find a community to begin addressing sexual harassment, and turned to the online world, starting with a blog. She admits, "I did something not nice, where I would photograph people who intimidated me and harassed me, and I would put those pictures up online" (personal communication, January 2016). These pictures generated a heated conversation on the blog, with many pointing to the dubious ethics of photographing people without their knowledge and consent, as well as critics who pointed out that they were all pictures of

lower class/caste men. Patheja clarified that the collective did not want to create "a normativized framework of perpetrators" (Gupta, quoted in Mitra-Kahn 2012, 124), and put an end to the campaign. In this process, however, Patheja came to realise that "this was the community, already online" (personal communication 2016), and that she did not need to begin anew.

Today, many of Blank Noise's projects have online as well as offline components. For instance, the *I Never Ask For It* project collects testimonials of street harassment accompanied by pictures of what the women were wearing at the time of the incident. These stories are collected online on a blog and a Facebook page, while physical garments are also collected and used as silent installations drawing attention to the pervasiveness of victim blaming, such as the installation in Delhi that first captured my attention. As Elizabeth Losh writes, "the neutrality and mundaneness of the garments shown to the public offers additional evidence of the fact that the women were not instigators of the abuse" (2014, 18). In the adjacent image (figure 15), two young women carry the garments on a rack, wherein the clothes become not only a collection of evidence, but also a literal burden. Reminiscent of Columbia art student Emma Sulkowicz's *Carry that Weight* performance against sexual assault, the two young women appear to carry the burden of sexual harassment through the streets which may also, like the clothes, been witness to those events.

Figure 15: I Never Ask For It, performance and installation, 2010. Image courtesy: Blank Noise.

The project began when Patheja noticed that women telling their stories of street harassment would always remember how they were dressed. It was common to have storytellers say, "I was wearing my favourite shirt," or "I was wearing my school uniform," or "my green skirt, a sari," and so on, which she noticed happening across geographies, ages, and cultures. For her, this indicated not only the vividness of the memory of sexual harassment or assault, but also the internalisation of blame, where victims would ask themselves if it was somehow their own fault. Patheja explains, "I Never Ask For It collects testimonies of clothing, where garments become witness, memory and evidence"

115

(personal communication 2016). Both online and offline, the collection of testimonials indicates how pervasive the problem is and how common the experience of harassment.

Sharing these stories provides users the opportunity to reframe negative experiences of public space in a way in which they are active and empowered participants, capable of certain kinds of agency, authorship and even creative license. The project creates a space for storytelling, conversation, and the sense of community. Moreover, Blank Noise plays a further pedagogical role by providing contributors with a vocabulary and method for telling their stories. The guide for writing a testimonial assists users in telling a story that they may never have told before, helping them frame it as an incident that was not their fault. This can be seen as a form of affective labour, providing its audience not only with a safe space for certain kinds of conversation, but also the vocabulary for participating in these discussions. With subtle additions of hashtags such as #ineveraskforit, #reportingtoremember, or #segregationosolution, Blank Noise "not only marks this content with more metadata but also provides instructions for how to read the text" (Losh 2014, 17).

Another well-known online campaign led by Blank Noise is the Safe City Pledge (figure 16), launched soon after the Nirbhaya case. In an effort to funnel the rage generated by the incident and to start a conversation about how to make urban public spaces safer and more inclusive, the Safe City Pledge encourages citizens to think of ways they could help create safe spaces. A Blank Noise blog post exhorts the reader: "We

Figure 16: Jasmeen Patheja, *Safe City Pledge*, 2012. Image courtesy: Blank Noise.

are all aware of how tenuous this notion of 'safety' is and how dangerous it is for citizens to shift responsibility entirely onto the police or government…We are asking you to examine your role. *What are the small and big ways in which you can help make a city safe? Dream it. Pledge it. How would you like bureaucrats or ministers in your city/state to make your city safe? Ask them to pledge it. Carry it on a placard.*" (Zaidi 2012, emphasis in original). A Twitter search for #safecitypledge provides a glimpse into the network of individuals and organizations that Blank Noise has helped create.

The #safecitypledge hashtag was part of campaign that brought together a group of dedicated volunteers who ran Blank Noise's twitter handle for an hour or two at a time for a period of 24 hours. They asked others to pledge their support, spread the campaign further, and to share information related to safe and inclusive urban spaces. The hashtag trended in India for two days during and following the tweetathon. Karuna Nundy, a Supreme Court lawyer and recently appointed trustee to Blank Noise, was one of those who volunteered to run the campaign for a few hours. Nundy mentioned in an interview that the campaign followed Thomas Schelling's (1960) theory that publicly made pledges are more likely to incite action and to be followed through than pledges made privately. Seen this way, the #safecitypledge tweets are made even more effective because of the public profile of many who pledged their support, including some of India's best known journalists, television anchors and other prominent public figures.

Furthermore, the publicity, or "spreadability" (Jenkins 2013) of these pledges is accentuated by their specific visual composition. They are not solely textual, but rather are photographs of the individual holding up a handwritten pledge and looking directly at the camera. The pledges, taken together, create a striking compendium of images that manifest an "implicit resistance to machine readability by privileging the personal 'character' of those attesting to the veracity of their statements" (Losh 2014, 18). The visual character of the #safecitypledge and #ineveraskforit campaigns follow a kind of script, and the resulting images can be seen as forms of internet memes. They are a collection of texts that are modified and personalized by individual users while retaining specific metadata tags that facilitates content being spreadable and sticky (Losh 2014, 19). Together, they form a repository of testimonials and pledges that can be mobilized by journalists, researchers and activists.

Losh views these subtle and often invisible aspects of Blank Noise's online work, such as hashtag selection and use, metadeta management, collecting pledges and testimonials, archiving news, and other such projects, as form of informational and affective labour (2014, 15). These can be seen are new types of social movement labour that is generated with the rise of online activism. Losh writes, "these invisible forms of informational labor need to be included in discussions about the role of distributed networked technologies in social movements, and infomediaries need to be properly credited for their tacit knowledge and prodigious expertise" (2014, 19). However, even while we acknowledge the important online labour of collectives like Blank Noise, it is imperative to remember that their online networks reach a minority of India's population. Mitra-Kahn writes, "in

117

a country of over a billion people only 12 million women use the internet and most not within their homes...We do need to ask whether the reliance on Internet spaces to do politics is producing regulated, subordinated, and disciplined state subjects who are being afforded a sufficient degree of political agency so as not to engage with structural causality" (2012, 125). Yet, as is evident in the work of Blank Noise (and similar middle-class youth driven activist movements in India), the everyday political work of middle-class women almost always blurs the duality between online and offline worlds. While online discussions are a form of activist praxis in themselves, Blank Noise is not content with its activism being confined to "women like us speaking to other women like us about the problems we face" (Patheja, personal communication 2016). Blank Noise shows a remarkable ability to critique its praxes as it evolves, and is well aware of the class-biases its own work might reproduce. In its most recent projects, it aims to deliberately erode barriers of class and gender by using the activist tools of performance and dialogue.

The **Talk to Me** *Campaign*

In 2012, Blank Noise conducted a site-specific project, *Talk to Me,* near the Srishti College of Art, Technology and Design. Patheja, an artist-in-residence at Srishti, conducts regular month-long workshops with students. *Talk to Me* originated in one of these workshops. Students were mapping Yelahanka for areas that were perceived as safe or unsafe, a process that included interviewing women from the community as well as students at the college. In discussions, Patheja explained, "the action heroes kept referring to this one site as the Rapists' Lane, so we went there on a site visit and realised that there's a public urinal in front, there are street lights that don't work. We see no commercial activity, but at 5 in the evening you'll find factory working women who'll walk really fast to get to their bus/home" (personal communication 2016). While there were no reported incidents of rape, there were several reports of molestation and harassment, and a high degree of fear.

Talk to Me was conceptualized as a way of producing an alternative relationship with the "rapist's lane," then to transform it into the "safest lane," a means of "shifting the fear based relationship women have been taught to have with their cities" (Patheja, personal communication 2016). The premise of the project, conceptualized at the Srishti School of Art, Design, and Technology, was deceptively simple: to engage total strangers, seen as potentially threatening, in an hour-long conversation over tea and a snack. The 17 student volunteers who were a part of the project handed

out multilingual letters to strangers inviting them to have a conversation over some tea and samosas. The letters read:

> *Dear Stranger,*
>
> *Talk To Me.*
>
> *We haven't had a chance to get to know each other.*
>
> *Let's have tea, a samosa and talk over the next hour.*
>
> *We may not remain strangers after this.*
>
> *We could talk about anything; our dreams, hope, fears.*
>
> *Our conversation will not be recorded but we will be photographed.*
>
> *We are Action Heroes; citizens committed to building safe cities.*
>
> *Come be an Action Hero too.*

("Talk to Me" 2013)

They set up five tables—two chairs at each—with tea, samosas, and a small vase of flowers (figure 17). Over a period of a month, they conversed with strangers at these tables, talking about anything except sexual violence. In the end, participants offered their reflections and discussed changes in perceptions about safety and space, if any.

Figure 17: Talk to Me, performance, 2012. Image courtesy: Blank Noise.

While Blank Noise has led numerous public art projects to combat misogyny and sexual harassment in public spaces, *Talk to Me* marked a definite shift in their work, from one of confrontation to communication, from a stance of defensiveness to one of dialogue. Patheja writes, "Being defensive, hyper alert to 'making safe' doesn't ever lead to actually 'feeling safe.' We tend to make ourselves feel safe by building defence. We need to make ourselves safe by making familiar instead. It requires a purposeful unclenching of the fist. Fear creates fear. Defence creates defence. We need to build safe cities with empathy" ("Talk to Me" 2013).

Talk to Me, then, was designed as a response to the particular ways in which urbanization creates rifts between different social classes. These urban changes are deeply gendered phenomena, as I will

show in the next section, and the *Talk to Me* project was created to challenge the internalized prejudices that often define our relationships with urban spaces and the other people who co-occupy them with us. The next part of the analysis will focus on the ways that *Talk to Me* attempted to bridge these gaps of socioeconomic class, language, gender, and education, and create a shared sense of community. Here, I focus on the importance of dialogue, internal and external, that comprises the project. I argue that the processes of external dialogue and internal reflection are intertwined in this project, and together form the crux of Blank Noise's theory of social change. I conclude my analysis of the *Talk to Me* campaign by interrogating the discourse it generated once it was published online and went transnationally viral.

The Dialectics of Space in Urban India

Talk to Me responds to the changing urban environment that marks many cities in India and the tenuous social environments that these changes create. Srishti is situated on the outskirts of the city of Bangalore, in a suburb called Yelahanka, which until very recently was a village. While Yelahanka's original residents were mostly farmers and manual labourers who would commute to the city, the rapid development of Bangalore and its surrounding areas bring in wealthier and more educated residents from the middle and upper classes. The many upscale businesses, residential complexes and educational institutions that now populate places like Yelahanka can be seen as forms of gentrification, which "by definition refers to the displacement of lower-income, often ethnic and racial minority, residents… by upper middle class professionals, managers, and engineers" (Zukin, 1990, 38). Gentrification is commonly justified by invoking the dangers that migrant men pose to the safety of women, a binary construction that disguises the class biases underlying the process of urban displacement. Phadke et al. discuss "Safety and order are prized in the new global city—both of which are presented as the antithesis of what is embodied, literally and metaphorically, by the poor" (2011, 15). Spaces like the so-called "rapist's lane" are used as examples of justifying the exclusion of both men and women from public spaces.

However, as Phadke et al. (2011) argue, if safer public spaces for women are created at the expense of other minoritised bodies (such as those of migrants, Muslim men and "unrespectable" women such as sex workers), or through the increased surveillance, the issue remains far from resolved. Instead "the only way in which women might find unconditional access to public space was if everyone, including those who were not necessarily friendly to women also had unconditional

access" (Phadke 2013, 51). While this position has evoked criticism from a range of actors including feminists, Phadke argues that we must "see violence against women in public as being located alongside violence against the poor, Muslims, dalits, hawkers, sex workers and bar dancers" (2013, 52). Here, she advocates for feminists to engage with the realities "of layered exclusion and multiple marginalisations," wherein the exclusion of one group of people is presented as necessary for the protection of another, but in fact is part of a larger process in which these groups are pitted against one another. Both women and these 'other' men are outsiders to public space, and the exclusion of women from public space is inextricably linked to the exclusion and vilification of other marginal citizens (Phadke et al. 2011, 11).

Viewed in this light, activism to occupy public spaces must view the "right to city" (Lefebvre 1968) as a plural right, and develop an inclusive approach in urban activism, extending to those who might be deemed "unfriendly bodies" (Phadke 2013). In the occupation of public space, Judith Butler notes, "gender politics must make alliances with other populations broadly characterized as precarious" (2015, 66). *Talk to Me* can be seen as an attempt to create alliances between social groups that are normally considered incommensurable with one another in public spaces. As Mitra-Kahn writes, popular and mainstream culture in India has frequently portrayed the issue of harassment as "a matter of class in its frequent caricaturing of incidents where a modern or Westernized upper-class woman is pitted against a lower-caste/class man" (2012, 111).

With *Talk to Me,* Blank Noise offers a counter narrative to this portrayal, seeking to directly address the mutual mistrust between these different groups. Rather than aiming to displace the already precarious bodies of lower-class men from rapidly gentrified neighbourhoods like Yelahanka, *Talk to Me* offers a politics of co-occupation and cohabitation, which functions in this context as a deeply subversive proposition. By inhabiting an "unsafe" space, the volunteers of the campaign produce a new relationship with the space, one that overcomes fear and asserts their right to visibility, but also acknowledges the rights of others to occupy the space. Through a proposal of dialogue and trust, *Talk to Me* hopes to transform the dialectics of the "rapist's lane," converting it to a safer space.

Challenging Biases and Producing Counternarratives

Talk to Me, like most of Blank Noise's interventions, is focused on external change as well as internal transformation. The effort to make public spaces more accessible and inclusive is situated in

confronting and challenging volunteers' internal biases. As doctoral student Kush Patel writes, "the project enabled volunteers … to cultivate empathy by turning their gaze both inward and outward" (2015). *Talk to Me* emerges from the recognition that social behaviours and biases are internalized, highlighting the importance introspection in the creation of social change. Many volunteers' reflections captured their shift in perspectives regarding themselves as well as the young men they were speaking with. For instance, Saasha wrote, "After the conversation I realised that it isn't that tough to talk to a stranger. I was so worried about what I would talk to my partner about but the conversation was so easy and fun! I learnt that my partner was very content with all he had. He loved his life just the way it is" ("Talk to Me" 2013).

Saasha's apprehension about speaking with a stranger is repeated in several volunteers' reflections. Many mention the language barrier as something that they were worried about, but found that it was possible to still find ways to connect with a complete stranger across barriers of language, class, and gender. As Patheja writes, "There was a unanimous sense of having overcome their own fears when they participated in this event" ("Talk to Me" 2013). Through conversation, participants were able to find common ground with the strangers they spoke with, and to build a sense of empathy for the other. Another volunteer, Anjali, wrote, "I learnt that no one is ever an absolute stranger and there is always something to talk about. I also learnt that if I push myself out of my comfort zone like I did for this intervention, there are always pleasant surprises that you find! I learnt that my partner Prajwal wasn't very different from me. He too enjoyed playing with his friends and reading, and he was a very soft spoken person" (ibid.). This conveys the potential power of dialogue, and the ways in which it can be used to overcome fears of that which is unknown, and therefore perceived as unsafe.

Another volunteer, Anamika, writes:

> The guy I had my conversation with was one of those who stalk girls and drink on the safest lane, follow girls on their bikes. I was glad he was honest to me. What I learnt was not all 'such' guys are threatening, as in, yes he does all that, but he wouldn't harm anyone physically, poor fellow is dying for a girl friend. And the fact that I actually made him realize that his way of approaching won't get him any girl and that he genuinely wants to change made me feel really good about myself. ("Talk to Me" 2013)

Anamika's conversation with a young man (figure 18) who typifies threatening behaviour is especially interesting as it reveals the failures of socialization. Her reflections show that the young

man did not think of his behaviour as being problematic, and indeed one only needs to watch a few Bollywood movies to see how stalking and threatening male behaviour is often valorised or constructed as normal. While one cannot know whether and if this conversation changed his means of pursuing women, one can only hope that it gave him an opportunity to reconsider his methods. Patheja reflects, *Talk to Me* helped show to the participants as well as readers, "how we're biased both ways...and how so much of our fear is because of these misinformed biases" (personal communication 2016).

Figure 18: Action hero Anamika, *Talk to Me*, performance, 2012. Image courtesy: Blank Noise.

Talk to Me creates a space for conversation between the two participants at each table, but in doing so creates an alternate discursive arena that enables counter narratives to dominant political and social discourse. Kush Patel uses Nancy Fraser's concept of "subaltern counterpublics" to analyse the project and discuss how participants were able to oppose the language of danger and safety. Fraser frames counterpublics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser 1992, 123; quoted in Patel 2015). Patel writes, "By enacting this oppositional strategy through the medium of talk, they reclaimed their right to political participation. And, by aligning the project with issues of sexual violence in India...the participants maintained congruity between enduring structural concerns, critical academic studies, and specific public-participatory engagements" (Patel 2015).

The campaign, therefore, helps mobilize individual experiences and internal transformations into a larger political project. The political effectiveness of the campaign, furthermore, is enhanced through the widespread publicity that it garnered. In many ways, this was a small, site-specific performance that may have remained a small artistic project that was meaningful for those involved, but had no greater effect. Yet, an article published in *The Atlantic* soon after the Nirbhaya case propelled it into public view, generating extensive conversations and reactions, as well as numerous repetitions of the initiative. In the next section, I will discuss this public phase of the *Talk to Me* campaign, exploring

the ways in which it was received by Indian and international audiences, and the discourse generated by it in these different spaces.

Talk to Me as a Transnational Media Campaign

Talk to Me, Patheja disclosed, took place in 2012, but images and reflections of the project were not published on the Blank Noise blog until January 2013. It was soon noticed by a journalist at *The Atlantic*, Sarah Goodyear, who wrote an article about the project, highlighting how the project helped dispel the climate of fear and create much needed understanding and compassion (Goodyear 2013). The article was shared widely on social media, especially in India, but also abroad, and was republished on several national and international blogs and mainstream news sites. However, it is noteworthy that Indian media coverage was significantly greater than international media reports, and that comments on the project were largely from Indian audiences rather than Western audiences, with some exceptions. Moreover, in comparison to the two other campaigns discussed in this thesis, *Talk to Me* has received far less media attention.

That said, the campaign did reach audiences in different parts of the world, and drew focus to the work of the Blank Noise collective at large, especially evident in feminist, activist, artistic and academic spheres globally. In this section, I will begin with a brief consideration of how site-specific performance art like *Talk to Me* travels through its visual documentation. This allows it to retain its context-specific character and relevance even as it is made consumable as a media object for widespread global audiences. I then turn to an analysis of the discourse surrounding the campaign, examining media reports as well as comments by readers and social media users. Here, I highlight how the project is represented in an overwhelmingly positive light, and acknowledged as an effort for bridging social gaps rather than widening them further.

Talk to Me, as performative art practice, is site-specific and time-specific. The performance, it can be said, existed only while it was happening, and it audience was limited to those who participated and who happened upon the site while the conversations were in progress. Yet, through its documentation, *Talk to Me* has reached audiences all over the world, producing reactions and conversations that reach beyond its initial performance. Many who first encountered the project through its documentation were inspired to replicate it in different contexts, and there have now been several more *Talk to Me* projects in different cities in India. Amelia Jones, writing about the

experience of performance through its documentation, argues that "while the experience of viewing a photograph and reading a text is clearly different from that of sitting in a small room watching an artist perform, neither has a privileged relationship to the historical 'truth' of the performance" (1997, 11). Each experience produces different affective reactions to the performance, but neither is more authentic than the other. In the context of *Talk to Me,* the performance was deeply transformative for those who participated in the conversations, but the images and words that documented the performance produced a different kind of transformative experience for the Internet audiences who encountered them.

The photographs are, in many ways, banal images. They show people sitting at tables along a road, talking, smiling, and laughing. These are just normal people who you might encounter everyday, performing the decidedly unspectacular action of interacting with someone else. Yet they are striking because they show a juxtaposition of genders and classes that are not normally seen together, certainly not as equals. The images are compelling because they show how rare such conversations are, and how rarely we might encounter this scenario, despite its simplicity and the ease of creating such a situation. The textual reflections that accompany these images ("Talk to Me" 2013) underscore the rarity of this scenario, demonstrating that even banal actions of talking to someone can be an act of activism and transgression.

These images also serve as counternarratives to the visual depictions of fear, danger and paranoia that accompanied media reports of the Nirbhaya case, which were being widely circulated at the same time as the *Talk to Me* campaign went viral. *Talk to Me* not only presented an alternative visual narrative, but also an action that could easily be replicated. This was evident in many readers' comments that not only praised the project, but also wanted to get involved. A reader, Toshita Niyogi, commented, "Nonviolence can also solve problems. This is the perfect example. Many more streets need them, not only Bangalore. Hope I can also help in any way" (Goodyear 2013). Niyogi's comment demonstrates that she reads the project as an alternative solution to violence, that she sees that the project can easily be replicated in other spaces, and also that she would like to be involved.

Other readers also perceived the campaign in a positive light, such as ChamatkariChor, who writes, "[This] proves that there is a lot more to be gained engaging with people, understanding their point of view, and letting them understand yours. Once you are doing more than just being angry at them,

people seem much more normal, don't they?" (Goodyear 2013). Implicit in ChamatkariChor's statement is the underlying fear of the unknown, which associates the "other" with danger and strangeness, thereby acting to further distance people on the basis of class, gender, caste and so on. Many users spoke about how the project inspired them and made them feel positive. Inshaku Bezbaroa writes:

> One often looks for such fairy-tale like social activism, since it is so very rare to fight fire with love. But when one comes across a clipping like this, one can't help but feel significantly inspired and positive about the future of our beloved country (ibid.)

Similarly, Virtuous2012 writes "This is the most beautiful thing I have seen in a long time. These students grasped the simple truth that reaching out can work miracles. What wonderful young people! May their example start a wave of goodwill all over India" (ibid.). In both Bezbaroa and Virtuous' statements, one can glimpse that *Talk to Me* gave readers a sense of hope in a time when the majority of news (not only in India, but globally) tends to be bleak. Also evident in their statements is the recognition that the project is a form of social activism that uses simple, everyday actions as a tactic. In this sense, *Talk to Me* can be seen as an example of activist teaching-as-dialogue, one that expands common perceptions of what public activism might look like. Phadke muses, "the idea of setting up sitting spaces is one that has been proved to invite more people to hang out in public space. What if more streets had such spaces inviting all kinds of people to sit, chat and hang out? I would argue that the creation of more spaces to hang out, thus legitimising this 'loitering' would transform streets making them busier, occupied by a variety of different groups and therefore friendlier" (2013, 56). This lesson has not gone unnoticed, and the *Talk to Me* intervention has been repeated several times in different cities, including New Delhi and Kolkata.

However, as Shilpa Phadke points out in her reflections on *Talk to Me*, "Such initiatives, valuable though they are in furthering our engagement with the ideologies of space, cannot but be occasional performances and are thus out of the everyday" (2013, 56). It is important, therefore, to acknowledge the ephemerality of the campaign, and to realise that it is only a momentary intervention. The effects of performances such as *Talk to Me* are hard to measure, since internal transformation or inspiration are difficult to quantify. When I asked Patheja about the impact of the campaign, she mused, "Did it change the site? At that time it did. After that, I don't know. But it changed something for each action hero, and I think *that's* what it did. It might have changed something for the new action hero, who sat across the table" (personal communication 2016). While

the site itself may have returned to its previous state, or transformed into something else entirely, the conversation has clearly had an impact well beyond that temporary moment, and resonated with audiences far beyond the 17 volunteers and their conversation partners.

In 2015, *Talk to Me* won the International Award for Public Art (IAPA), a Sino-American initiative that annually recognizes work aimed at changing civic thought somewhere in the world. The IAPA blog post announcing the award writes about Blank Noise that, "The projects are highly accessible, the image of the action hero being one that lends itself well to positive identification, and the vocabulary of action being immediately comprehensible" (Tan 2015). This statement indicates a kind of cross-cultural readability of the *Talk to Me* campaign, and of Blank Noise's work more generally, especially in the image of the action hero. Jasmeen Patheja, in an interview with a community radio station in Australia, defined action heroes "individuals who commit to ending sexual and gender based violence, who step up against victim blaming, and who commit to saying 'I never ask for it'" ("Blank Noise" 2015). An action hero, therefore, can be anyone who refuses to remain complicit in social structures and behaviours that condone victim blaming and rape culture. However, this definition tends to elide the specific class position of the majority of the action heroes, which I propose plays an important role in rendering this figure so readable.

Action heroes are mostly young women (and some men) from educated, middle and upper class, English-speaking backgrounds. They exemplify, in many ways, "the young, able-bodied, Hindu, upper-caste, heterosexual, married or marriageable woman… [who] is apparently privileged in every way other than gender" (Phadke et al. 2011, 8). I argue that, for international audiences, the middle-class Indian woman is most alike to their own situation, and most readable as a subject with agency. Moreover, the small and everyday actions that constitute Blank Noise's interventions are also what make the work so accessible. Perhaps this is one of the main reasons why *Talk to Me* became so well known: not only did it provide a much needed counter narrative to the pervasive discourse of fear and danger, it also proposed action that is feasible and accessible. Their activism, furthermore, uses the theory and vocabulary of global feminism, drawing from genealogies that were born in global contexts. Work such as *Talk to Me*, therefore, is easily relatable to feminists and activists in different parts of the world who use similar vocabulary and draw their inspiration from similar sources. Its vocabulary of action and heroism, moreover, has cultural resonance with social activism in different parts of the world. Many academics and cultural critics have written about Blank Noise alongside the

127

work of other feminist groups such as *Hollaback!* and *Stop Street Harassment*, not only because they work on similar issues, but also because these groups are constituted with women of similar demographics, albeit in different geographical and cultural contexts.

I draw attention to these similarities to propose that the cultural closeness of Blank Noise to "Western" activists is one reason for its global success. This is extremely positive on the one hand, because of the wide reach that its work can have. Indeed, Patheja often uses her international interviews to stress that Blank Noise's work originates in the specific context of India, but that the problems it addresses are global structural problems. "Rape culture and victim blaming are rampant in India, but also entrenched in different countries and cultures," she stresses, in an interview where her interlocutor repeatedly asks about India as a dangerous place ("Blank Noise," 2015). However, the privileged demographic of Blank Noise action heroes may also result in other kinds of exclusion within the group as well as the invisibilization of other forms of oppression. This is a potential pitfall that Patheja is aware of, and Blank Noise as a collective is working to devise ways of being more inclusive and intersectional in its work.

Conclusion

The *Talk to Me* project marked a shift in Blank Noise's work as a collective. Its earlier projects can be read as confrontational works that sought to occupy space and to challenge those who made the space unfriendly for women. While their works have always used performance, earlier projects were more defensive, and even accusatory at times. *Talk to Me*, on the other hand, began a group of projects that also seek to claim public spaces for women, but through trust-orientated and dialogic tactics. It emerges from the recognition that privileged women are often framed as victim and pitted against underprivileged men, who are framed as perpetrators of violence. The mutual lack of understanding between these two groups widens the rift between them, doing little to advance the rights of either group. *Talk to Me* and other recent projects by Blank Noise, I argue, emanate from a position that recognizes their own complicity in systems of oppression. Their focus on cultivating trust by allowing themselves to be vulnerable is an attempt to directly address this complicity, and to begin forming alliances with different precariously situated groups.

The performance of vulnerability is perhaps most visible in Blank Noise's most recent intervention, *Meet to Sleep*. A simple intervention, it brings small groups of volunteers together in public parks to

take naps. Once again, this is a mundane activity, not typically what might come to mind when one thinks of public protest or assembly. However, in a context where women are told to be constantly vigilant, and their presence in public places is restricted and policed, falling asleep can be a deeply subversive act. It is a form of taking pleasure in public spaces, of refusing to have a purpose or reason to justify one's presence, and of refusing to be fearful. Patheja says, "when you're sleeping, you're being defenseless, you're completely surrendering. And so it's very difficult to sleep. Especially because we've been brought up to be fearful of everything, so when you're sleeping you're challenging that, but you're also learning to trust" (personal communication 2016). Here, there is an internalized learning of fearlessness, of trust, that comes through the everyday act of sleep.

Judith Butler notes that in political demonstrations, protesters who refuse to go or stay home were "not only claiming the public domain for themselves—acting in concert on conditions of equality— but also maintaining themselves as persisting bodies with needs, desires, and requirements" (2015, 97). By sleeping in public, Butler argues, "they were both vulnerable and demanding, giving political and spatial organization to elementary bodily needs" (2015, 97). Thus, "public gatherings enable and enact a performativity of embodied agency, in which we own our bodies and struggle for the right to claim our bodies as "ours" (as we ask, for example, that the state keep off our bodies)" (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 178). This is evident in *Meet to Sleep*, wherein the sleeping bodies in the park not only claim the space for themselves, but also claim their bodies as their own. They stake their political claim by making themselves vulnerable in the act of sleep. Here, the participants' refusal to stay alert and be vigilant in public spaces is a withdrawal from systematized fear, and therefore a refusal to be complicit in a structure designed to restrict their freedom.

Blank Noise, I argue, presents a form of activism where participants are dedicated to acknowledging their complicities with structures of privilege and oppression, even while they perform practices of agency and resistance. Parker writes, "In feminist circles agency is often opposed to complicity and associated with resistance to sexism and patriarchy" (2012, 1). Instead, Parker proposes, these are not mutually exclusive, and many forms of complicity can be present alongside the practice of resistance. For instance, complicity can be found in internalized oppression. As Audre Lorde found, "the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situation which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressor's tactics, the oppressor's relationships" (1984, 123, quoted in Parker 2012, 11).

129

Indeed, bell hooks and others have argued that complicity in the form of internalized sexism, racism, and heterosexism is a major obstacle to developing solidarity among women of color, not to mention coalitions of women of color across other differences (hooks 2000, 3, 10, 14). Blank Noise, I argue, offers a frame of activism wherein agency and complicity are both engaged. In so doing, they offer a politics that is in many ways reflective of the definition of solidarity I provide in the introduction of this thesis.

Solidarity, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and many other postcolonial feminists have argued, is an active, deliberate process based on conscious reflection, recognition and struggle. Here, differences and commonalities "exist in relation and tension with each other" (Mohanty 2003, 242), and the focus is on "mutuality and coimplication" (ibid.). Mohanty proposes a feminist pedagogical model centered on solidarity, which would require understanding the "historical and experiential specificities and differences of women's lives as well as the historical and experiential connections between women from different national, racial, and cultural communities" (ibid.). I offer that Blank Noise, through its activist pedagogy that focuses on both agency and complicity, offers a form of feminist solidarity pedagogy and praxis. The attention to the work of the collective from other activist organizations, academics and feminists indicates the ways in which their approach to social change resonates across a wide range of different spaces. The collective's dedication to introspection and collaboration indicates their willingness to learn, and their recognition that social change is necessarily a collective effort. Moreover, their ability to engage with international audiences using feminist theory and vocabulary bolsters their ability to overturn many of the longstanding prejudiced viewpoints about third-world women in India. Their work, I offer, by acknowledging its own complicity in systems of privilege and oppression, leaves no space for orientalism, and therein provides an example of transnational activism that garners non-colonizing forms of solidarity.

Conclusion

The Nirbhaya case was, in many ways, the event that spurred me to write this thesis, and even to pursue a Master's degree in Communications. As I mentioned earlier, I was deeply affected by how the problem of sexual violence in India became a topic of global conversation. At first, the widespread attention to the case appeared to be a positive outcome of sorts. I imagined that global scrutiny of violence against women in India would incite the Indian government to take more action and be more accountable to its citizens. However, as I read more articles, even months after the case, that repeatedly stressed the prevalence of sexual violence in India in a singular, monolithic narrative, the international attention seemed a lot less positive. I was strongly reminded of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's brilliant TED talk, "The danger of a single story" (2009), in which she talks about her American college roommate's preconceived ideas about her. She says,

> Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.

I realised that, in the wake of the Nirbhaya case, the story of rampant sexual violence and dangerous uneducated men was rapidly becoming the single story being told about India.

International media were repeating this story as a unique tale about Indian society and culture, insinuating the prevalence of tradition, the lack of education, the lag in development, and the failure to adopt liberalism, as the cause. The Nirbhaya case was not mobilized as an opportunity to build solidarity for an issue that is all too prevalent in most parts of the world. Instead, it was used it as a means of pitying Indian women, justifying prejudice against Indian men, and reaffirming the cultural superiority of the "West." This is how you create a single story, Adichie says, "show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become" (2009). Moreover, she notes, "It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power… Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (ibid.). The story of India's brutal men and primitive culture is an old story, told since colonial times, when colonizers justified their presence in India by reforming practices such as *sati,* in many ways the paradigmatic example of "White men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1994).

The single story of India's lack of safety for women, gruesome incidents of sexual violence, and rampant gender inequality is certainly a true story, but it is not the only story. Yet this story has persisted, evident not only media coverage of tragic incidents of rape or violence against women, but also in seemingly positive coverage of anti-sexual violence and activist campaigns. Not only does this tale portray a single aspect of India, it also ignores the fact that this story of violence against women can be told for many parts of the world. The single story, Adichie says, is predicated on difference, and therefore leaves no possibility to see the commonalities between cultures, "no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals" (2009).

It was the desire to unravel this single story, to lay bare the underlying narratives that it disguises, and to offer a more nuanced tale in its place, that led me to this thesis. I began by selecting the *Abused Goddesses* campaign because the unfettered celebration of this work in international media was deeply troubling to me. I wanted to analyse how this campaign, and the discourse it generated, reiterated older narratives of India's traditional culture, its beauty, its passive and exotic women, and of course, the brutality of its men. Next, I was drawn to the *Priya's Shakti* comic book because it offered what seemed like a more nuanced narrative. Although it used the tired trope of divine intervention, it also framed a rape survivor as a superhero, albeit a weak one. More importantly for me, it integrated the voices and stories of real women, telling their own stories. Yet I saw international media discourses blindly celebrate the problematic central narrative of the comic while ignoring the stories of these women.

Finally, desiring not only to unravel the single story but to tell a different one altogether, I turned to the work of Blank Noise. I had known of the collective, and met the founder, Jasmeen Patheja several times, and felt that their work offered a much needed counter narrative to the single story. Blank Noise had evolved and changed considerably since it was first created in 2003, through introspection and reflection, a process that created new narratives as it went along. *Talk to Me* seemed to me to be an excellent example of the kind of initiative that refused to be read along the lines of that single story—after all, it was designed as a means of countering that reductive account of dangerous lower-class men pitted against passive upper class women.

In this thesis, my analysis of three campaigns against sexual violence has enabled me to outline the single story about sexual violence in India, as well as the structures and supporting narratives that

help keep it alive. Yet I did not want to end there, to have my work be yet another narrative that highlights the seemingly insurmountable problem of Western hegemony, and thereby contributes to keeping it alive. To this end, I have strived to move away from that single, reductive narrative, to point to examples of other stories that attempt to highlight our commonalities rather than our differences. As Adichie says, "Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity" (2009).

Stories, in other words, are some of the most powerful and effective means tools for shaping our understandings of the world, and storytelling is a most potent means of either reiterating the status quo, or of enacting social change. In this thesis, the three campaigns I selected all position themselves against sexual violence, and each use compelling stories, and persuasive tactics in order to do so. These are compelling narratives in their own right, and even when they fail in their purported mission, they nonetheless also hold lessons for storytellers seeking social change. In order to reveal these lessons, I have examined these campaigns from the perspective of their creators, to highlight the underlying presumptions that guided the creation of these campaigns, and how the creators envisioned their work effecting social change. To this end, I articulate how these campaigns position themselves with regard to existing movements that work on preventing violence against women, who they claim to target through their work, and the tactics they employ in order to do so.

The *Abused Goddesses* campaign uses the culturally familiar iconography of Hindu goddesses, combined with the tactic of shock advertising, to draw attention to domestic violence. Portrayed in a manner reminiscent of Indian calendar art and the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma, the images that make up the campaign are not only beautiful, they also draw upon the sense of nostalgia that this popular aesthetic style invokes. While repurposing myth and familiar artistic forms are certainly effective tactics, they can offer extremely troubling narratives as well. The *Abused Goddesses'* portrayal of victims of domestic violence as beautiful goddesses, who in all their finery and light skin are clearly upper class, upper-caste, Hindu women, renders the true ugliness of domestic violence invisible. Not only does the campaign use the patriarchal concepts of saving "sisters," it also suggests that only revered, goddess-like, exceptional women are worthy of becoming sisters and therefore, of being saved. In a country where right-wing, Hindu nationalism has been steadily growing, and where violence against minority groups is concurrently increasing, the campaign serves

to reaffirm normalised Hinduism and to justify violence against those who do not fit the narrow ideal of "sisters" and "goddesses."

The *Priya's Shakti* comic book is similar in some ways to the *Abused Goddesses* campaign, in its use of Hindu mythology and its adoption of an aesthetic form that has a history of being deployed in the mission of Hindu nationalism. It draws inspiration from *Amar Chitra Katha*, India's indigenous comic series, which has been widely critiqued for its narrow pedagogic mission that reifies Hindu culture, masculinity, and patriarchy whilst obscuring the history of women, religious minorities, oppressed castes, and more. *Priya's Shakti* unfortunately uncritically uses mythology to reiterate many of the masculinized tropes of Hindu nationalism, portraying its heroine, Priya, in an unsatisfyingly passive light. Yet, *Priya's Shakti* is a complex work that also offers numerous other narratives through its use of augmented reality technology. Therein, it holds lessons for how transmedia storytelling can potentially integrate fictional tales (that can arguably reach wider audiences than nonfictional ones) with non-fictional narratives.

Blank Noise, however, offers a welcome shift from portrayals of India through the lens of tradition and religion. Its urban, modern, middle-class, English-speaking action heroes offer a glimpse of the non-traditional, secular side of India that is rarely reflected in international media depictions about sexual violence. It mobilizes the language and tactics of feminist art practice, drawing on genealogies from different parts of the world, whilst modifying and situating them for the Indian context. What is most useful about Blank Noise, for me, is its dedication to reflection and introspection as an integral aspect of the collective. Here, I refer specifically to how Blank Noise deliberately shifted away from some of its initial works that posted images of street harassers online, recognizing its own complicity in telling the reductive story of lower class men as harassers. The *Talk to Me* campaign takes this recognition of complicity further, to engage, dialogue and develop relationships across the lines of class, caste, language, and gender. Blank Noise's commitment to introspection, to learning from its mistakes, and to transforming its own work to better integrate these lessons, is for me the most valuable takeaway from this case study.

In addition to what can be learnt from the creators of the campaigns, there are also important lessons at the level of reception of these campaigns. Here, I have shown how international media reports—specifically from the U.S. and U.K.—celebrate *Abused Goddesses* and *Priya's Shakti* in an

uncritical way. Not only do they unquestioningly support the use of religious mythology in campaigns against sexual violence, they do not engage with feminists from India who have critiqued these campaigns. In so doing, they ignore the perspectives of those who are most familiar with the context, and do not consider the potential harm of this work upon those who are already marginalised. This, I would argue, is not only an irresponsible form of journalism, but also harmful, mired as it is in differences of power between Western nations and India. It promotes a simplified and flattened view of Indian society, a "single story," and represents violence against women as normative in India, but exceptional in the West. Here is where I locate the failure of solidarity.

However, media representations of the Blank Noise campaign have been significantly more nuanced. Reports of *Talk to Me* have highlighted the discourse of fear that has pervaded media representations of women's experiences of urban spaces in India, and how the project is a deliberate attempt to change the conversation, by means of dialogues. While *Abused Goddesses* and *Priya's Shakti* both used iconography that highlighted India's tradition and difference from the West, thereby framing Indian women and Indian culture as "Other," Blank Noise refuses to allow such portrayals of difference and exceptionalism. Rather, it uses the mundane and the everyday actions of conversation over food and drink, to demonstrate the sameness of people across boundaries of class and gender. In its work, Blank Noise demonstrates that young women in Indian cities are very much like young women in other cities - they face similar problems, they grapple with their privilege, and they are complicit in the oppression of others. In other words, the story that they tell is a story that is familiar to audiences in diverse parts of the world.

Social media has provided us with tools that communication across borders of many kinds, and indeed the transnational circulation of news such as the Nirbhaya case and campaigns such as the three case studies I have discussed is one example of how social media can serve as one step towards circulating stories more widely. However, we need to work collectively towards more than just circulation, to ask for deeper engagement, for a conscious commitment to critically reading the "single story," for the circulation of more stories, nuanced stories. This is, in many ways, the focus of my thesis: an articulation of moving beyond the single story.

The single story does not allow us to see past differences, and therefore solidarity is only possible when we move beyond the single story, and recognize its incompleteness. As storytellers and

creators of cultural narratives, we can be more responsible in the stories we tell, the characters we use, and the tactics we employ. As readers of these stories, we also have the responsibility to seek out more stories, to search further for stories that do not reduce people to stereotypes. As Adichie says, "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete" (2009). Stereotypes might be based in some truth, but they also disguise the numerous other truths. They reduce and flatten people to a single aspect of their lives, essentializing *them* and exaggerating their difference from *us*. They make difference appear insurmountable, and therefore negate the potential for solidarity. On the other extreme, collapsing difference can be equally harmful, negating the specificity of lived experience. Indeed, liberal feminist politics have been critiqued for precisely this disregard for difference, especially with regard to the multiple marginalizations that women of colour and Third World women face on the basis not only of gender, but also race, class, sexuality, nationality and religion.

I end this thesis with the suggestion that the more nuanced and multifaceted our understandings are of one another, the more possible it becomes to find the middle ground, to foreground context-specific and experiential histories even as we draw connections between them. A conscious turn towards solidarity requires an active, inward, introspective gaze into one's own political and social location, and an acknowledgement of one's own implication within the systems against which one is resisting. Paulo Freire writes, "Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture...the oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons...when he risks an act of love" (2000, 49-50). This is the frame of solidarity that I hold is not only desirable, but also essential, for those committed to making the world more just.

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