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I Will Tell Your Story: New Media Activism and the Indian "Rape Crisis"

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Abstract: This article analyzes the mediatized representations of the Indian "rape crisis" that gained global attention in the aftermath of the brutal gang rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey in New Delhi in 2012. While much attention was given to Leslie Udwin's documentary on the incident, *India's Daughter* (2015), which was subsequently banned by the Indian government, there were several other creative responses that attempted to negotiate with the meaning of the event. This article examines two such texts—the multimedia short story *We Are Angry* (2015) and the augmented-reality comic *Priya's Shakti* (2014). Both these texts declare their intention to function as "activist" multimedia pieces that leverage the power of Internet-mediated platforms to raise awareness about the condition of the "Indian woman" in the contemporary moment. This article argues that these texts, in their attempts to portray an essentialized and universalized image of the "Indian woman," reenact certain violent historical erasures along the lines of caste, sexuality, class, and religion. The article undertakes a medium-specific examination of the works, considering their presumed audiences, language, content, and most notably their (failed) attempts at locating themselves within both historical and contemporary Indian feminist landscapes. In doing so, this discussion situates itself within ongoing Indian social justice debates, specifically those pertaining to mediatized narratives of rape, in order to critique the production of "feminism" in *We Are Angry* and *Priya's Shakti*. By considering these texts alongside other, more inclusive online narrative spaces, we underline the importance of multiple feminist voices being heard on the issues in question, as well as the need to question any seemingly universal "we" of these narratives, their audience, or the women they claim to represent.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2012 rape and subsequent death of Jyoti Singh Pandey (also known as Nirbhaya) in New Delhi, the Indian "rape crisis" became the focus of global media narratives regarding India, and more specifically New Delhi. One event that attracted worldwide attention was the ban on *India's Daughter* (2015), a documentary about the incident directed by British filmmaker Leslie Udwin. While the film was criticized by Indian feminists on many counts, from oversimplifying the issue to enacting white saviorism, the ban itself was seen as an overreaction by the Indian state, which, considering that the Nirbhaya case had already drawn spontaneous and widespread protests in 2012, was fearful of the reaction the film might incite (Durham 2015; Kohli 2015).

As a result of this focus, Indian feminist activism's reaction to sexual assault was brought to the forefront of local and global consciousness. At different times, sensationalized media focus on this issue has resulted in the forced in/visibility of historical feminist struggles with regard to the condition of women of different castes and class (as will be discussed in more detail below). In addition, media coverage of the event created the presumption of a universalized "Indian woman," eliding the higher incidence of sexual assault against those marginalized by caste, and thereby repeating Bhraminical patriarchy under the guise of contemporary feminism. This assumption of a large-scale attempt at feminist redress while continuing to leave the caste system unquestioned suggests that this redress has been largely sought only within the bounds of Brahminical patriarchy. Caste-based limitations of feminist representation have been acknowledged and challenged by works such as Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006), which articulates Dalit-Bahujan women's testimonials on the realities of their lives and feminist struggles (often in counternarrative to mainstream assumptions regarding feminisms within India), and Uma Chakravarti's *Gendering Caste* (2003), which looks at historical responses to rape (such as the Mathura case in 1972 and the rape of Phoolan Devi by upper-caste men) as well as brutal responses to intercaste unions (such as the Mehrana killings in 1991).[1] As Chakravarti asserts,

> The tragedy of our times is that this exploitation is so routinized that when incidents of violation of the rights and personhood of Dalit women, including sexual assaults, make it to our newspapers, they do not evoke the reaction that they should in any civilized society. Only a few incidents make it to our newspapers and get taken up by activists—when they do they expose the reality of caste. (2003, 160–61)

In addition to these intersections of gender and caste, the category of the "universal Indian woman" and the concomitant ideals of nationhood, religion, and family also have disparate implications for individual experiences of cultural policing, sexual harassment, and assault. Along with caste, religion, and class, it is also vital to acknowledge the high risk for LGBT individuals within discussions of gendered violence in India and to bring those matters into the scope of "mainstream feminism." Queer issues have rarely featured in discussions of gendered and sexualized violence in an Indian context, despite the fact that communities that identify outside the gender binary, such as Hijras, face extremely high levels of risk. The institutionalized sexual harassment faced by queer individuals, backed by Indian law, has also been largely absent in these considerations (Narrain 2004; Menon 2009). These intersections of identity were also invisible in feminist discourse directly after the Nirbhaya case, as well as in the creative cultural responses that appeared across various multimedia texts (Dutta and Sircar 2013).

Given the local and global scope of this ongoing debate, this paper will analyze two such texts—the multimedia short story *We Are Angry* (2015) and the augmented-reality comic *Priya's Shakti* (2014)—as examples of issue-driven activism within the new media landscape. Here, "new media" stands for digital works that often require the mediation of a computer, being online, dense, interactive, multisensory, and networked. Both works are primarily concerned with the nature of the Indian "rape crisis," suggesting that the content is intended to create, within this digital sphere, a global feminist community that will lead to real-world changes in India with regard to social justice. However, in the debate that arises as a result of these two attempts to intervene in the discourse surrounding the crisis, the digital cannot be held as simply synonymous with the universal because of the specific contextual localization of the cultural production of this cyberspace. Instead, this cultural contextuality suggests the need for a media-specific analysis that places itself within ongoing Indian feminist debates and representations of the state and its people, reflecting the complex production of discourses of sexual assault in India, which are developed within and both reinforced and undermined by multiple institutions spanning the private and the public

spheres. These institutions include but are not limited to caste, class, religion, region, language, sex, and gender, and function within frameworks such as the family, the nation-state, the Indian historical subject, and the media.

This article attempts to situate these works as new media activisms within a feminist digital sphere, which, while produced as a global narrative and created largely in English to be accessible to the presumed universal subject, have specific connotations when viewed within their intended sphere of influence. Therefore, we first provide a brief outline of the historicity of Indian feminist and postcolonial debates in cyberculture as context for the works in question.[2] We contrast them with other activist projects within the localized Indian context in order to demonstrate the problematic manner in which these works recreate structures of Hinduist Bhraminical patriarchy while purporting to advance the cause of gender equality in India.

Examining Indian Feminist Debates in the 1990s

Before analyzing any artifacts that intervene in or reflect on the "condition of women in India," it is necessary to locate them within the broader terrain of the Indian feminist movement in order to link the themes they explore back to key historical processes and social debates. *We Are Angry* and *Priya's Shakti* mobilize specific narratives related to religion, region, language, caste, and class that have been discussed extensively by Indian feminist activists and scholars. It is, of course, not within the scope of this overview to encompass the entire history of the Indian feminist movement, so it will concentrate on the threads most salient to our argument, from pre-Independence to the 1970s and then focusing on the 1990s. During this period, through a number of socioeconomic shifts, the category of the "universal Indian woman" was simultaneously contested and consolidated. The liberalization of the Indian economy, the strengthening of Hindu right-wing discourse in public life, and the introduction of digital technologies into the mediascape were all key influences in this process, the effects of which are also seen in the texts under consideration here.

The history of the Indian feminist movement as conceived of within the independence struggle meant that a largely unified "woman subject" was created as part of that nationalist discourse, and that this subject's interests were framed as parallel to that of the newly formed Indian nation-state. This also meant that the movement's foundations were informed, as Suresht Renjen Bald notes, by "the biases of its urban male, upper-caste, upper-class advocates" (1983, 1). Given its association with mainstream nationalism, this early feminist movement focused on legal mechanisms for redressing gender inequality rather than on more broad-based structural change in society. This focus meant that important steps, such as the inclusion of gender equality in the new Indian constitution, were accomplished, but larger institutional inequities were left in place. Additionally, as Kalpana Misra points out, for political leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, the "post-colonial Indian state [was] the central institution for promoting development and alleviating socio-economic inequities which precluded women and other similarly disadvantaged groups from their exercise of political and civil rights" (1997, 29). However, this focus on "development" through the state as the key building block for gender equity did not adequately take into account the interstices of identity *within* that construction, which resulted in the post-independence Indian feminist movement being dominated by Hindu, middle-class, upper-caste (Brahminical) women who left their own privilege largely unexamined.

In the 1970s, a new wave of feminist activism arose that focused on the failures of the nation-state, from radical groups like Samta, which has published the feminist magazine *Manushi* (1978–present), to Dalit-Bhahujan women's organizations, which pointed to the systemic biases within the larger women's

movement that did not acknowlege their specific axes of oppression (Liddle and Joshi 1986). Despite these interventions, Mary E. John could still point to the "split subject" of the Indian feminist movement in the 1990s, commenting that "feminists eager to represent India's women—in the villages, at the wrong end of development, suffering the injustices of the state or the limitations of leftist politics or so on—have been doing so while rendering their own identities within the dominant culture largely *transparent*" (1996, 137; original emphasis). That is to say, for example, that when analyses of violence against women—including harassment stemming from dowry demands, rape, and domestic violence—were undertaken, the category of the "victim" was still constructed as universal, undifferentiated by markers of class, caste, region, language, and religion. This emphasis on the "universal Indian woman" ensured that stable positions of societal power from which challenges to patriarchal hegemony could be issued—such as education, political governance, and legal reform—remained unavailable to those most disenfranchised by this hegemony (Agnes 1994).

Within this analytical frame, *all* Indian women were understood to suffer equally under patriarchy. Anupama Rao points out that this construction upheld "the possibility of occupying a feminist position outside caste: *the possibility of denying caste as a problem for gender*" (2009, 55; original emphasis). Nivedita Menon notes that the very category of women in India is fraught because "woman" may not be the basis or default marker of a significant identity when communities, ethnicity, caste, and class play a more central role in the process of self-definition of an evolving performative identity. The creation of a hegemonic feminist identity of "Indian women" in the global landscape, then, inevitably privileges representations of upper-caste urban Hindu feminist preoccupations, distinct from the concerns of groups such as Dalit-Bahujan rights activists, Muslim rights activists, groups working in rural areas, and others (Menon 2015, 38–42).

The 1990s saw this dominant framework challenged again by Dalit-Bahujan feminist organizations, which underlined the erasure of the consistent privileging of upper-caste Hindu womanhood and drew attention to the violence these denials were effecting on the very women mainstream movements claimed to represent (Rege 2003; Rao 2009). This erasure was also reflected in the Indian government's suppression of the reality of caste-based violence in international forums such as the 2001 Durban Conference (Human Rights Watch 2009). Dalit-Bahujan women formulate the "three-way oppression" they face as consisting of specific caste-based discrimination, class-based oppression (since many are employed as manual laborers), and patriarchal regulation by men from all castes, including their own (Chakravarti 2006, 142–43). Caste as a major factor in Indian politics also came to the fore in 1990, when the Mandal Commission recommended the increase of reservations (hiring quotas as affirmative action) in the public sector for employees from lower-caste communities. The nationwide upper-caste protests against the implementation of these recommendations saw a large number of female participants, which made very visible the schisms within any notion of a uniform Indian women's movement.

The 1990s were also a watershed decade for the Indian economy, as Finance Minister Manmohan Singh green-lighted a series of deregulation reforms in 1991, ending the long-standing system of governmental control over most sectors of industry and commerce.[3] Trishima Mitra-Kahn comments on the parallel rise of neoliberalism and right-wing Hindu fundamentalism in this period, wherein the "new Indian woman," who was invariably urban, Hindu, middle-class, and had access to a college education, was also placed under considerable pressure not to be "corrupted" by the West. Mitra-Kahn notes:

> Propelled by the idea of gender chaos, dystopic visions of what would happen to Indian culture and
> Indian women as India "opened up" to the West promoted a further normative discourse on womanhood.
> Appropriating the IWM's (Indian Women's Movement) lingua franca of agency and autonomy, right-wing

discourses invoked the power of various Hindu goddesses and called upon Indian women to embody the
Hindu ideal of the chaste, devoted, perfect wife (i.e., pativrata) to resist Westernized modernity. (2012, 112)

Lastly, the 1990s also saw the rise of Internet use in India, particularly in urban centers. While the explosion of connectivity that would come with mobile-based devices was still some time away, young, middle-class, urban India was getting increasingly comfortable with cybercultural technology. The IT sector gained prominence in this period, and the skilled, cheap workforce with a proficiency in English encouraged companies from the United States in particular to set up back-office operations in India. Indian companies also took advantage of these factors, and the sector was positioned as a key player in India's emergence as a "global power" because it was perceived as driving the economy's high growth rate (8–9%) during that time (Sachs, Varshney and Bajpai 1999; Greenspan 2004). Technological proficiency was linked to higher paying jobs domestically and as a way of migrating to the West (the United States in particular). This led to a steady stream of IT graduates forming an economically stable diaspora with strong links back to India, which was facilitated by the use of the Internet. Rohit Chopra traces the rise in the use of digital technologies as interlinked with the use of these privileged virtual spaces to articulate a Hindu right-wing notion of what it means to be "Indian." He notes that

> the possessors of technological skills have historically been vested with the authority to speak for the nation. The associations between technology and nationalism have condensed in ideas about self and other, they have been incorporated in imaginings of the state and the nation, and they have materialized as claims about identity, community, and society. In the present historical moment, this relationship manifests itself, in one form, as an online Hindu nationalism that combines cultural majoritarian claims with technological triumphalism. (Chopra 2008, 5)

Any framing, then, of either the Indian feminist movement or cybercultural technologies as unproblematically or predominantly inclusive, subversive, or secular is on shaky ground from the outset. However, it is these very presumptions that underscore the production, content, and circulation of both *We Are Angry* and *Priya's Shakti.*

The Possibilities of a Postcolonial Cyberculture

The move to relatively new multimodal and multimedia platforms has led to a surge in social participation and interactivity, because such platforms enable different sorts of discussions under the presumed banner of equality within and outside of India. Initiatives like "Digital India" promoted by the current Indian government, which encourage the use of technology to participate in governance, are also motivated by the large numbers (143 million) of Indian users currently on social-media networks like Twitter and Facebook (Dutta 2014; ETTelecom Team 2015). The presumption of equal access subsumes the reality of cyberculture, which is inextricably linked to neo/colonialism—capitalism, language use, and technology functioning within global networks to retain the status quo in favor of the global North (Nayar 2008; Fernández 1999). Interactivity within this sphere is thus dependent upon access to technology, capital, literacy, use of the English language, and media literacy, which indicates that a significant portion of the Indian population may have little to no access to this arena in its current form. Even setting aside the fact that the number of social-media users, while impressive, represents only a fraction of the Indian population, as Nishant Shah (2015) points out, mere access to digital platforms does not mean a dissolution of institutional inequalities.

Yet, as Pramod Nayar (2008) argues, these multimodal interactive digital spaces can be "postcolonialized," if they are used with a view to significant political purposes, as their heterogeneity, contestability, and

contingency create spaces that are polyphonic and open-ended. María Fernández (1999) suggests something similar in her argument, proposing that although the presumed erasure of the body constructs a supposedly egalitarian online sphere, such spaces remain raced and sexed in different ways, indicating that these systemic oppressions can be produced purposefully. The development of an activist digital sphere where the retention of the effects of race, nationality, and sex disrupts any presentation of the universal, creating localized specificities that themselves may open to cross-cultural engagements, could perhaps allow for global activism to be considered respectful of the postcolonial. For instance, the recent digitization of the rural Dalit-Bahujan feminist newspaper *Khabar Lahariya* in partnership with the urban-based digital zine *The Ladies Finger* exemplifies one way of bringing marginalized voices into the cybercultural sphere on their own terms.

As previously stated, both *We Are Angry* and *Priya's Shakti* situate themselves within the Indian "rape crisis," therefore circling issues of sexism, sexual assault, bodily autonomy, class and caste structures, language, Indian cultures, and different feminisms within India, whether or not these are explicitly made present in the works themselves. The use of new media—the augmented-reality image-text production of *Priya's Shakti* and the interactive multimedia mélange of text, images, videos, and sound bites in *We Are Angry*—suggests that the online format contributes to the manner in which this content is framed. As such, these works are positioned to distribute their content widely and to seek amplification through global activist networks. Yet the works themselves reveal problematic biases regarding the authors' own feminisms and privilege. They fail to situate themselves in a manner that truly engages with the historical and cultural context of Indian feminisms.

We Are Angry

We Are Angry is a multimedia short story by Lyndee Prickitt that undertakes issue-based storytelling in a format it terms "360 degree digital fiction" as an alternative to traditional linear narratives. The mixed-media story describes, in retrospect, the fictional abduction and gang rape of a middle-class woman in New Delhi. In full view of various passersby, the male attackers, pretending to be relatives or friends upset at the woman for ignoring her family's needs and being a "wayward wife and mother" who is out late, force her into a car. She is then gang-raped in the car and ultimately abandoned by the side of the road. The text shifts between the intimacy of the victim's first-person account and the distanced third-person accounts of the discovery of her unconscious body, her treatment by doctors, the police investigation, media activism on her behalf, and the reactions of her family. These multiple viewpoints work as narrative nodes to which hyperlinks with additional information, images, sound files, and real-world and fictional news articles are affixed. Although the rape is revealed to be an attempt by a business competitor to force the protagonist to sign papers in their favor, the police wrongly accuse a contentious ex-employee of the victim (implied to be of a lower class) and beat him violently in an attempt to obtain a confession, despite evidence of his innocence.

The victim as narrator is simultaneously voiceless—as a head injury, sustained when she was thrown from the car following the rape, left her in a coma and presumably dying by the end of the piece—and the work's primary voice. Because the coma prevents the victim from speaking for herself externally, the user's access to her internal monologue elicits not only the events of the rape but also the sociocultural sexism inherent in contemporary Indian society, which has shaped her experience of family and her workplace, producing as well the threat of sexual assault as a means by which to discipline and control women. This fictional act of rape is tied in the narrative to the issue of women in the workplace and specifically to the

term "Emerging India," which touts the country as an emerging global economy. In this manner, the digital mixed-media space of the text is joined not only to the woman's narrative and to her abused body, but also to her country. These spaces are interconnected so that her rape is distinctly linked with sexism and globalized Indian power in a capitalist landscape.

The contents can be viewed in two ways: either "read" as a book in paged format, with hyperlinks present, or "experienced" as a series of Internet pages with the same hyperlinks to scroll through. In this manner, the viewer is led to believe they may experience the contents in different ways: the implied distance of reading about the victim's narrative in a book, where the media content is only accessible by the viewer's control of the hyperlinks, or the seeming immediacy of experiencing it in a space where the mixed-media text incorporates and activates embedded files automatically. The narrative thus seemingly begins with the user's own choice of the manner in which they will experience the aftermath of the fictional rape, navigating the text's single plotline as it spirals outwards through the hyperlinks into related topics. While the creation of this agency on the part of the user appears intended to recreate the immediacy of the fictional assault and its aftermath, it does so by problematically acting in counterpoint to the violently disregarded agency of the victim, positioning the event as spectacle.

The choice of a multimedia text for the short story is clearly tied to its concerns, which are those of educated middle-class women pursuing a livelihood within the sexism of different industries and patriarchal Indian society at large. New Delhi, the seat of political power that has also been dubbed "India's rape capital," forms the backdrop to these concerns. At various points, the narrative indicates the woman's own systemic privilege and oppression in accordance with her education, her ability to travel and be educated abroad, her position as "modern" yet restricted by her own family, her running of her own business, and her choice to speak English rather than a local Indian language. The precarity of her failing health is repeatedly underscored by the soundtrack of a jazz piano, which additionally, within India, is indicative of cosmopolitanism. Her own privilege is reflected in her eventual pleas for her life when she states, "And I promise, God, I will speak out not just about my case—who cares if no one marries me—but I will help other women too. And not just those in the privileged class. I promise, God, I will campaign till the end. Just let me live" (Prickett 2015, 19).

The nameless protagonist, who speaks in the first person, is generalized in the additional third-person account voiced by her family, in which, despite the details provided by the story, she remains a "beti" (female child), a "behen" (sister), or "chhoti" (younger female). The reasons for this lack of naming may be twofold. On the one hand, the first-person narration may be seen as an invitation to invest in the conversation with a dying protagonist so that the user remains privy to her last thoughts; on the other hand, the victim's namelessness is possibly a nod to the existing Indian law that forbids disclosure of the names of rape victims, so as to encourage them to come forward and to prevent harassment by the media. Additionally, the anonymity of victims of sexual assault is tied, within the Indian context, to the supposed shame felt by the family of the victim and the possibility of social ostracism if the event becomes public, as the notion of family honor is still strongly associated with the "purity" of its female members.

Although the narrator of the story remains anonymous, the content itself sets up a system wherein middle-class privilege defines the feminist experience of *We Are Angry*. The universal "we" of this angered collective (either the media company that produced the work, Digital Fables, or the people they interviewed) remains a fallacy because the constructed narrative ignores the classist, casteist, and linguistic privilege that remains implicit in its contents. The universalizing "I" of the narrative or the seemingly open "we" of the producers and users implies a shared anger. Yet this construct of citizenship, which the narrator connects to

India's role as an emerging global power, is specifically linked in the narrative to capitalism's privileging of a particular subset of Indian women within upper-caste feminisms or Bhraminical patriarchy. The default position in the text is that of an upper middle-class urban Hindu female subject, which marks out bounds of exclusion for those who do not fall within this worldview.[4]

The connections between the themes of India's emergence as a global power, the default "I" within this narrative representing itself as a subject of middle-class urban Hindu privilege, and the issue of rape play out in a worldwide arena through the use of multimedia technology. Both Partha Chatterjee (1993, 120–21) and Sangeeta Ray (2000, 3) note that as India emerges as a global economic power, prevailing gender binaries and nationalist fault lines shape distinctions between respective meanings of inside and outside, India and the world, and women and men. Men are allowed to function as citizens of the world while women are to remain as a safe, homely embodiment of Indian culture and its traditions. Women are socially positioned as inherently chaste and pure and thus representative of an uncontaminated national culture that is preserved by this segregation. Given the convergent relationship between India's patriarchy and the country's economic progress, and the traditional casting of women as representative of the nation, the rape in *We Are Angry* is a consequence of resource appropriation that ties the universalized Indian woman's body to her role in global capitalism. That is, her sexual assault is intended not only to police her presence in the "masculine" business sphere but also to benefit her competitor by forcing her to accept his business deal.

As such, this narrative frames sexual violence as policing women's agency within capitalist frameworks, while also locating itself within a global landscape that sees capitalism as a means of potential feminist progress. In the narrative, the rape results in the protagonist specifically locating herself as a female worker no longer capable of working in the global marketplace, and therefore, logically, hampering India's chances for economic growth. The identification of women's agency with what Kumkum Sangari terms "direct or conscious political action … with direct participation in the capitalist labor process" (1993, 867) and the celebration of this agency as reformative work to obscure the means by which ostensive progress is used consensually to perpetuate patriarchal hierarchies. This notion of female agency works alongside consistent reformulations of patriarchal structures (as patriarchies themselves are not static) to produce social stratification that is, at least partially, based on the role one holds in the capitalist enterprise and that factors in caste, class, and potential disability. *We Are Angry*'s concern regarding the loss of a female worker's agency is thus intermeshed with capitalism's patriarchal structures, even as it presents itself more broadly as advocating women's agency.

The manner in which the narrative links feminist progress with female agency in capitalism divorces it utterly from capitalism's own historicity wherein postcolonial nations such as India have experienced systemic cultural and economic inequalities (resource appropriation in particular) at the hands of colonizing nations. The text's neoliberal refusal to engage with the fact that India's role in the global marketplace is reliant on its cheap labor and rapid industrialization elides genuine engagement with the problems engendered by capitalist feminism itself. For example, it ignores the manner in which the developmental process for this global emergence has been undertaken by the Indian state by forcefully reallocating agricultural land from already deprived communities to private national and international corporations. These communities have no voice in "Emerging India" and their women would likely find no space within the middle-class urban feminist concerns of *We Are Angry*. Capitalist feminism by itself can hardly be used as an approach to empowerment in an Indian context, given that issues of structural inequality in India are not divided purely along gendered or sexed lines, and global capitalist concerns are unlikely to benefit those who are already systemically disadvantaged and disenfranchised.

The manner in which the plot is centered around a heavily stylized account of a middle-class woman's potential death echoes recent choices within the Indian media to co-opt the mantle of "feminism" through heavily sponsored, publicized, and market-driven initiatives that incorporate the concerns of the middle-class mainstream consumer into their marketing strategies. For example, the recent campaign by Unilever for its Dove brand of soap encourages Indian women to "Break the Rules of Beauty" by rejecting standards of attractiveness that emphasize conventionally valued attributes like fair skin. However, the same brand also, ironically, owns the "Fair and Lovely" line of skin-lightening products that espouse an entirely different worldview. *We Are Angry* reflects a similar clash between the neoliberal capitalism of its narrative and a projected concern for a universalized Indian woman.

One of the ways in which this clash is exemplified in the text is in its reproduction of current media representations of rape-as-spectacle, the additional multimedia content doing more to bolster the story's fictional rape account than to mobilize the user's investment in effective change. The protagonist reinforces her connection to capitalist India by stating that she would have been the face of an "Emerging India," yet her focus on her current "soiled" state leads her to question her marital prospects; her question is hyperlinked to the comments section of the work where a written response is invited. This question, while likely intended to emphasize the traditional concerns of a woman in Indian society, seems problematic at best. Tradition as marriage is mobilized against the protagonist in the process of her staged abduction and again in her consequent fears of shaming and social ostracism, yet the role of traditional marriage in the reinforcement of exclusionary structures remains unquestioned in the discourse of the work. The narrator's potential for marriage is one of only two attempts at the "conversation" that *We Are Angry* claims to want to continue. That this is being asked of the user right after the events of a brutal sexual assault and while the narrator is still barely conscious is jarring and ill-considered.

The only other comment thread on the piece invites general discussion, and neither of the two threads appears to have resulted in sustained conversation with either the author or other respondents. As such, it is hard to see how *We Are Angry* contributes anything new to the ongoing conversations about rape in different Indian contexts, outside of its unusual format as a multimedia text. The awards and reviews displayed on the site, with larger quotes privileging international coverage outside of India, and the use of cyberspace in general suggest that its content, far from educating middle-class Indian youth, who are exposed to much of the same information through ongoing, sustained and sensationalized media narratives, is intended largely for an international audience. Despite its claim of intervening as an Indian feminist narrative, *We Are Angry* provides no suggestions regarding local aims to change existing laws, potential campaigns for awareness, links to local organizations for volunteer work or donations, or any other concrete real-world action. By failing to connect to local initiatives for action, it confers upon itself a mantle of exceptionalism, exacerbated by its "universalized" feminist and digital form.

The Indian urban experience is produced as universal in *We Are Angry*, and local issues are subsumed in favor of a uniting middle-class female voice, employing cyberspace as the arena for conversations about feminist anger. The hyperlinks in the narrative often acknowledge certain localized Indian concerns, such as the high percentage of female infanticide and feticide, rape statistics, marches for women's empowerment in New Delhi, and ongoing problems with the Indian police force.[5] Yet all of these issues, while interconnected, are distinct in their effects upon different factions of the population. The urge to universalize them in *We Are Angry* aligns with the agendas of transnational feminisms, and this is not without merit as it suggests the vastness of the concerns and their global scale. However, the outcome remains representative of only a fraction of the Indian population.

The universalized "we" of its title materializes at the conclusion of the piece, but only as the roar of a privileged middle class that itself is a focused and pre-existing concern for the corporatized Indian media. The finale depicts multiple women and a few men speaking about their anger, and most are educated, middle class, and expressing themselves in English, with a token number of lower-class women speaking in local Indian languages—however, theirs are not the faces we close on. The promise of support for the less privileged is offered in the narrative, yet they are already excluded and made invisible within the activist storytelling of the project. Those less privileged rarely have mainstream representation, and consequently no media voice to contribute as a contrasting narrative to the fictional narrator's own. The lack of coverage, by the mainstream media, of the issues faced by those not within the purview of Brahminical capitalist feminisms works to assure that systemic hierarchies are reinforced by this marginalization. However, the less privileged voices are present within the larger Indian activist cybersphere and therefore could easily have been included among *We Are Angry*'s hotlinks. The choice not to include them undercuts any claim of promised solidarity made in the work.

Priya's Shakti

Priya's Shakti is a digital project in the form of a comic that functions as a standard text-and-image-based narrative (available in open access on the website http://www.priyashakti.com/), and as an augmented-reality text in which pages may be scanned with a free smartphone app, Blippar. The app provides access to additional content such as comics, videos, and anonymized testimony from rape survivors. In a section of the website titled "motivation," the site is described as an "innovative social impact multimedia project" that "helps illuminate attitudes" towards violence against women in India. Further, the website's text explains that

> The project centers on the Goddess Parvati and Priya, a mortal woman devotee and survivor of rape, and is rooted in ancient matriarchal traditions that have been displaced in modern representations of Hindu culture. It creates an alternative narrative and voice against GBV [Gender-Based Violence] in popular culture through the Hindu mythological canon. Through its message, this project can reach wide audiences in India and around the world—anywhere GBV is an issue.

This description mobilizes a number of presumptions about the nature of violence against women in India, chief among them an understanding of the matriarchal traditions of Hindu India as somehow inhibiting gender-based violence, a modern misrepresentation of a liberal religious and philosophical tradition. In response to this assessment, it then moves on to conceptualize forms of effective intervention in public and private discourses on gender-based violence. Finally, it articulates the makeup of its target audience, imagining "Indian" and "Hindu" as belonging to the same demographic, which can then be universalized.

To summarize briefly, the plot follows a girl, Priya, who lives in an unidentified village somewhere in India. She faces sexual harassment from the other villagers and is ultimately attacked and raped by a group of them. As a result, she is ostracized by her family members, who see her rape as having shamed them, and is hounded out of the village into the forest. Destitute, Priya prays to the Hindu goddess Parvati for Shakti. In the Hindu mythos, the concept of Shakti, or strength, is seen as intimately connected to the divine feminine energy of the cosmos. Parvati hears the girl and decides to intercede, descending to the earth and becoming incarnated in Priya's mind and body. She then seeks justice through appeals to village institutions like the *panchayat* (village council), which advocates marriage to her attacker as a form of redressal. In a confrontation with one of the attackers, she reveals herself to him as the goddess Parvati.

Just as she is about to curse him, her husband, the Lord Shiva, learns of her experiences and in a divine rage curses the human race so they are "no longer able to procreate."

This punishment is seen as unjust by both Parvati and the other gods, but Shiva is resolute and soon the earth is beset by war on both the human and astral planes. The destruction ends only when Parvati summons Kali (the aspect of Shakti that symbolizes divine rage), who manages to stop Shiva's rampage. Parvati returns to a devastated earth where Priya is still hiding in the forest and tells her that she has been chosen to spread a message of change. She gives the girl a mantra (a Hindu sacred invocation) to help her in her quest, exhorting people to "Speak without shame, and stand with me … bring about the change we want to see." Priya gains strength from this and returns to the village.

As is evident from this summary, *Priya's Shakti* is overwhelmingly Hindu. But it is necessary to be more specific about what this identification means for the text, because the term "Hindu" functions as a descriptor for a remarkable number of polytheistic practices. These differ radically from each other across region, language, community, and caste, not only in India but also in the other countries these practices have spread to over the centuries. The comic does not spell out its notion of Hinduism in its immediately visible text (seemingly presuming a basic knowledge of the Hindu pantheon), but when it is viewed through the augmented reality app, a definition is supplied. Through the centering of the Sanskrit epics and the focus on the male trinity of gods, one can infer that the text is following a mainstream interpretation of the Hindu pantheon, codified in part, at the behest of the East India Company in the early colonial period, by upper-caste Brahmins. The British colonial powers felt the need to streamline pluralistic practices that resisted any central authority for their legitimation in order to expand their political control (Chakravarti 2003, 114–38; Sangari and Vaid 1990).

As Romila Thapar notes, this process was also given impetus by the activities of Christian missionaries in the colonial period who regarded polytheistic religions as "primitive." It was further buttressed by the Orientalist scholarship in the same period, which attempted to fit the theology into a "comprehensible whole" (Thapar 1989, 218), leading also to an artificial privileging of certain texts as sources of religious authority. These "standardized" versions of the mythos have been mobilized repeatedly to form a notion of Hindu nationalism that retroactively posits the Indian nation as Hindu in *origin*. Moreover, the standardization has had the effect of both naturalizing the superiority of the higher castes and framing the adherents of all other religions as "outsiders" (Hansen 1999). The marginalization of non-Hindu affiliations has particular resonances for any discussion of the modern Indian nation-state that is declaratively "secular"—purporting to treat all its citizens equally regardless of religion, caste, etc.—but whose functioning is increasingly influenced by the Hindu right-wing forces that believe in their primacy based on the aforementioned texts.

Priya's Shakti may simply be using the most popularized form of the Sanskrit narratives to tell a story, but their historical conditions and effects persist when mobilized in this manner. Rather than problematize the codification of the Hindu belief system, the text unquestioningly expands it, and explicitly names the site of its intervention as the modern nation-state of India. For instance, in one panel, Priya's act of returning to the village and beginning her campaign is connected to other events deemed to be significant in order to formulate the image of an "ideal" Indian woman. The events blend the mythological (the story of Savitri) the historical (the contribution of women to the Independence movement), and the contemporary (the Gulabi gang).[6] The juxtaposition of all these events in a single panel has the effect of creating a false sense of historicity, a rhetorical flourish that reproduces the machinations of Hindu nationalism.

The manner in which *Priya's Shakti* centers this Hindu nationalism by conflating different axes of the mythology, history, and the contemporary reality of India echoes the ideology of the popular mainstream

comic series *Amar Chitra Katha*. As Nandini Chandra notes in *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha, 1967-2007* (2008), the comic series visibly pursued Hindu communalism, anti-Muslim and anti-Dalit sentiments, and pro-Bhraminist ideologies. Indeed, the choice to employ the graphic-novel format and a central Hinduist narrative for *Priya's Shakti* (even with a dark-skinned protagonist, in seeming contradiction with *Amar Chitra Katha*'s more racist delineations, which almost always equate darker skin with likely villainy) suggests an awareness, if not direct invocation of, the ethos of *Amar Chitra Katha* and, consequently, an appeal to its associated readership. Indeed, while Priya's dark skin *is* an interruption of dominant beauty standards for women in India (coded specifically along upper-caste and class lines, with fairness as aspirational), it is not sufficiently contextualized as such, leaving this aspect of the text rather free-floating. As we explicate below, this lack of contextualization also undercuts *Priya's Shakti*'s other moments of potential subversion.

The text's protagonist is, then, posited as representative of the "Indian woman" and becomes part of that totalizing narrative, in effect dismissing the need for the modern Indian nation-state to take into account non-Hindu women in debates about gender violence at all. In addition, Priya's placelessness adds to her probable identification as upper-caste: we are not told her last name or the region of India she is from, and she is dressed in generic clothing and has no linguistic markers in her speech that would code her as belonging to a specific caste or region.[7] As discussed earlier, this universalization of a privileged subject position only serves to reify discursive blind spots in activist movements to the detriment of those most vulnerable to gender-based violence.

The two elements that complicate this formulation are Priya's location in a rural and forested setting and one of the anonymized testimonies of rape survivors that can be accessed through the app. In a rural setting, Priya's interactions with local institutional bodies, like the panchayats, accurately portray their often violently patriarchal nature. However, in the real world, these interactions are also heavily influenced by caste affiliations, and so again Priya's "universal" status becomes an obstacle to situated and sustained critique. One of the recorded testimonies, however, is specific about the narrator's caste as central to her experience, not only of the attack itself but also its effect on police action, media coverage, and help given by mainstream feminist organizations. It is here that the text comes closest to Nayar's formulation of how a postcolonialized, polyphonic, and interruptible digital space may function. However, the relegation of this recording to the margins of the text limits its efficacy considerably. It is placed on the last panel of the comic, with nothing to differentiate it from other links, and is made accessible only through the specialized app.

The text's collapsing of sex into something only associated with procreation is also a dangerous rhetorical moment, which not only delegitimizes any nonreproductive heterosexual contact but also excludes all nonheterosexual sexualities. While Parvati's objection to Shiva's decree attempts to engage with its problematic assumptions, the basic linkage of violence against women to only heterosexual activity is not questioned, and neither is another effect of the mediatized Indian "rape crisis," i.e., the utter disregard of any violence suffered by women that is not sexual in nature. Limiting the discussion of rape to heteronormative procreation also brings up the ways in which caste affiliation is policed on the site of the female body in modern India. As the testimony about caste-based retributive sexual and social violence referenced above shows, revenge for any perceived slight by Dalit-Bahujan men is invariably exacted on the bodies of the women of that community. Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran cite several such cases, pointing out that any intimacy between Dalit men and upper-caste women becomes an incendiary event "only when the caste norms are openly flouted by elopement, pregnancy, or discovery" (1991, 2133).

The authorial claim that the text "centers" the experiences of women and attempts to revive Hinduism's "matrilineal roots" also fails to hold up to scrutiny. The concept of Shakti (divine feminine power) is a key part of Hindu religious practice in many communities, often cutting across caste affiliations. The trope of women drawing power from that connection is also a common one in popular cultural productions, like Bollywood films. Parvati's direct response to Priya's prayer could be seen as a subversive act in view of the fact that access to temples is often heavily policed by patriarchal and casteist regulations. However, Priya's implied positioning as upper-caste nullifies part of this subversive potential, which is also undercut by the comic's other narrative choices.

Firstly, goddess Parvati is an aspect of Shakti most closely associated with the domestic space of the home and the figure of the ideal wife.[8] Within the text, she is introduced as the "wife of Shiva" and that remains her primary affiliation. If the purpose of the narrative is indeed to recenter female deities as a response to their displacement in modern Hindu practices, Parvati is an odd choice. Shakti manifests in a number of other forms, most notably those of the goddesses Durga and Kali, both of whom function without deferring to male authority. Durga and Kali do appear in the narrative—Durga is represented by the tiger that Priya rides in her triumphant return to the village, while Parvati prays to Kali to stop Shiva's carnage—but both are prefigured as secondary to Parvati. The primacy of Parvati clearly sets up a hierarchy of appropriate divine feminine qualities, even within Shakti. Secondly, far from centering Parvati, the narrative shifts focus extremely fast from her actions to the effects of Shiva's rage. It is ironic that a text supposedly about female aspects of divine power devotes most of its narrative to the effects of male rage. While the intent of this shift may have been to show the destructive nature of patriarchal structures, the female goddesses are, in effect, once more relegated to the margins (in this case, literally to the margins of the comic's page). Thirdly, even when Parvati takes the form of Kali (the most fearsome aspect of Shakti), it is only to stop Shiva, which once more frames her actions as responses to his. When seen in the context of previously discussed societal processes in which Hindu middle-class women are conscripted into embodying ideal womanhood, this framing becomes more intelligible as a reification of Hindu nationalism.

With respect to the comic's intended readership, the introductory blurb claims that the aim of the project is to provide an "alternative narrative and voice" that can reach "wide audiences" in India and around the world. As pointed out in the discussion of its website, "social impact" is the key metric that the project attempts to leverage. The site buttresses its claims of accessibility and reach in several ways. The comic itself is freely available in open access, as is the augmented-reality app (though the use of the latter presumes a high degree of comfort with technology). Theoretically, the embedded content interrupts the single-author model of the comic, opening it up to polyphonic voices and experiences. It also locates the project in physical spaces; for instance, one video follows the painting of a mural of Priya in Dharavi, a slum neighborhood in Mumbai. As an attempt to show the impact of the comic on the "ordinary Indian," this illustration fails, as we only see passersby stare at the installation in curiosity. They are not asked for their opinions on the project, nor is there any explanation of what the art has achieved in being placed there. There are no other videos of the artwork displayed in public spaces, the other display venues being special exhibits in art galleries. Indeed, the only public space named specifically is Dharavi. This specificity, then, is suspect as it locates the artwork within a particular notion of the "real India" and as a specularization of poverty that does not go beyond a surface engagement. This specularization is also linked to the marketing of such locales to wealthy foreign (mainly white) tourists as an opportunity for "slum tourism," especially following the popularity of the Oscar-winning film, *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008).

The site also links to over three hundred news and commentary pieces that the comic has generated since its launch, presumably to prove the "worldwide" aspect of its impact. A scan of the articles indicates that it has been framed most often as a "comic book with a rape survivor as hero/heroine/superhero," with an occasional reference to the fact that she "rides a tiger." As we have shown here, however, most of the comic is not about Priya at all, and the narrative reinforces patriarchal structures at almost every instance.

Conclusion

The unproblematized amplification of texts such as *We Are Angry* and *Priya's Shakti* by global media networks and private international funding bodies with no access to local knowledge only serves to further entrench Hindu nationalist ideology within Indian activist spaces. This entrenchment weaponizes both the language of feminist movements and the technologies of their dissemination against those sections of society that suffer the most under oppressive structures. Both activist projects create a specific conceptualization of sexual assault in an Indian context through their choice to reinforce heterosexuality as a precondition, either by linking sex to procreation (as in *Priya's Shakti*) or by privileging the traditions of marriage in their discourse (as in *We Are Angry*). Moreover, these aspects are implicated in the texts as a means through which their narrative is "Indianized." This centering of heteronormativity sits in contrast to graphic novels such as *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back* (Bertonasco, Bartscht and Kuriyan 2012) and *The Gaysi Zine: Queer Graphic Anthology* (Gangwani, Biswas and Sur 2015), which have sought to address urban heteropatriarchal practices in India that have arisen since discussions of the 2012 "rape crisis."

Problematic constructions of rape-as-spectacle lie at the forefront of both these projects, and, as we have shown, the nebulous outlines of their goals leave open little chance of effective real-world change. It is worth pointing out, however, that this is not always the case. Pinki Virani's 1998 book (though not a graphic novel) *Aruna's Story* used interviews conducted by Virani to recreate a biographical account of the 1973 rape and subsequent coma of Aruna Shanbaug. The return of this narrative to the public's consciousness incited public support for Shanbaug's care following her lapse into a persistent vegetative state and drew attention to the implicit shaming evident in the choice to withhold information regarding the rape from the police by order of the Dean of King Edward Memorial Hospital (where Shanbaug worked and was attacked). Additionally, Shanbaug's vegetative state and Virani's active campaigning led to a law in favor of passive euthanasia being passed in 2011. Virani's second book, *Bitter Chocolate* (2000), provided anonymized transcripts of cases of child sexual abuse in India and suggested means by which to combat the issue. Against the background of sexual abuse of children being regarded as a particularly taboo subject in India, Virani's mobilization of the media through sensationalist reactions to the book led to The Protection of Children Against Sexual Offenses Act being passed in 2012. While Virani remains a singular example, her interventions do indicate that mediatizing sexual abuse narratives in ways that are cognizant of the sociocultural issues at hand and espouse clear, localized goals can result in genuine real-world effects despite (or even through) the use of rape-as-spectacle.

While the focus of this analysis has been the failure of *Priya's Shakti* and *We Are Angry* to create effective feminist digital texts and spaces, our critique is not meant to foreclose the possibility of postcolonial uses of cyberspace. There are many instances where cybercultural platforms, especially social-media tools, have made significant interventions that interrupt mainstream media narratives. Nayar (2008) posits that "a democracy of registers" is required to create a truly new public space. Twitter is one platform that seems to have the potential to be polyphonic: it is currently being used by a large number of local Indian feminist

organizations to amplify the specific issues that affect them, as well as to create networks of solidarity. For instance, Rekha Raj, a Dalit feminist and poet, affirms that, "In Kerala, the voices of subaltern groups are very prominent on social media, especially sexual minorities and Dalit groups. On social media, all of us are publishers. Only some communities get the space to get published in mainstream media. Social media allows marginalized voices the possibility of being heard in the public sphere" (Subramanian 2014).

While hierarchies of visibility still remain in place, organizations like Round Table India (http://roundtableindia.co.in) and The National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (http://www.ncdhr.org.in) use Twitter to boost their analysis of mainstream events from a Dalit-Bahujan perspective. There are also multimodal cyber projects underway like Dalit Camera (http://twitter.com/dalitcamera), a collective of students and activists who upload videos of panel discussions, protest meetings, and performances on Dalit-Bahujan issues. While there is a tendency to disregard the power of cybercultural spaces for rural activism, projects like *Khabar Lahariya*, which is a rural newspaper written, produced, and distributed by local Dalit-Bahujan women (http://khabarlahariya.in), are leveraging the exposure they get from their presence on the Internet quite skillfully.

There is a continued proliferation of projects that stress the need for a multisited and multivocal analysis of structural inequality and patriarchal structures in various locations and registers. This provides hope for a vibrant and truly postcolonial cyberculture that can create a viable alternative public sphere where these concerns are voiced and can be engaged with on their own terms. However, these spaces are precarious and in flux, and it is vital for global activist networks to recognize specific local concerns so that their efforts towards solidarity are not subsumed within oppressive ideological frameworks. The complex uses of new media to approach the Indian "rape crisis" suggest that the creators of these activist projects intend to effect knowledge production in new ways, yet the content they produce must remain attentive to their own historicity and pluralities even within these new landscapes. To do otherwise would be to end up telling the same old story.

Notes

1. It is worth noting here that while Rege's and Chakravarti's works remain important, Dalit-Bahujan theorists, such as the writers at Savari, have noted that these books still function within the privilege afforded to upper-caste feminists in India. As such, Chakravarti's and Rege's names are cited and the names of the Dalit-Bahujan women whose narratives form the basis of the books continue to be elided. For further reading on this, see Savari Editorial Team 2015.

2. The continued relevance of postcolonial critique to intervene effectively in issues affecting marginalized populations within nation states, like India, that continue to perpetuate neocolonial hegemonies in concert with globalist financial organizations has been questioned by theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Critiquing the Fourth World Conference on Women (held in Beijing in 1995), Spivak argued that in this event the category of "Woman" became "global theatre, staged to show participation between the North and the South, the latter constituted by Northern discursive mechanisms" (1996, 2). What is left out of this performance is any acknowledgement of the women thus represented as critical agents able to articulate their own material conditions. We believe that a self-reflexive and dynamic cybercultural sphere might offer postcolonial theorization one way of navigating this particular construction.

3. In 1991, the longstanding policy of protectionism that had governed the Indian economy since independence was put aside. A process of liberalization, which included a reduction in import tariffs, deregulation of markets, reduction of taxes, and greater foreign investment, was initiated and continues to the present day. Proponents of liberalization policies credit them with driving the Indian economy's high growth rate in the 1990s and the 2000s. However, the process has also been seen as exploitative, as the benefits of those growth rates have not been adequately distributed throughout society.

4. Jyoti Puri notes that sexual violence against Indian Muslim women is policed differently in India, particularly in the Hinduized national state (2004, 147). Similar issues are also present with regard to other religions present in India, but given that the narrator self-identifies as an "apsara," the reference to Hindu mythology suggests Hinduism.

5. Notably, the text's use of the term "female infanticide and feticide" is itself indicative of the author's lack of familiarity with ongoing feminist activism in India, as recent years have seen sustained campaigns to clarify this term to "sex-selective abortion." These campaigns have attempted to dislocate the issue from more generalized abortion debates, as well as from larger contextual frameworks of inheritance, dowry, and the like, so that all of these issues can be considered in their individual specificity even while their interconnectedness is recognized.

6. The tale of Savitri is found in the Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*. Savitri is seen as the ultimate devoted wife as she manages to reclaim her husband's life from the clutches of Yama (the god of death).

The Gulabi Gang is a rural women's collective, with a significant presence of Dalit-Bahujan women, located in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. It was formed by Sampat Pal Devi in response to the widespread domestic violence in the villages of the area. Dressed in pink saris (as "gulab" means pink in Hindi) and armed with sticks, the women intervene in cases of domestic abuse using a variety of strategies, including public shaming.

7. The lack of a last name may in some cases indicate an act of protest, as this is the primary method by which caste affiliations are identified. *Priya's Shakti*, however, does not seem to fall into this category.

8. The story of Sati recounts how Shiva's first wife won his approval and interest through acts of meditation. Sati's father, Daksha, was against the match, but she did not pay him any heed. However, because of the bad relations between them, Shiva was not invited to a grand *yagya* (religious celebration) that Daksha organized. Sati was very upset at this insult to her husband and immolated herself on the ceremonial pyre. This led to great devastation as Shiva's rage ran amok, and he ultimately retreated from worldly affairs. Sati is reborn as Parvati and, once again through acts of meditation and penance, wins Shiva's favor, and they are married. The practice of Sati, which was followed in some parts of India up till the nineteenth century, requires that widows commit suicide by immolating themselves on their husband's funeral pyre and is patterned on this myth as well.

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