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The (Counter) Politics of Digital Comics in India: Reading Literature of the Digital Space

By Debadrita Chakraborty¹

Abstract

In her 1984 essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway envisioned that digital technology would introduce a utopian space which would liberate women from gendered power dynamics. Despite such optimism shown by third and fourth wave feminists in India, political inertia and juridical failure to implement laws and justice for victims of gender violence, be they domestic violence or sexual assault, have manifested how the digital sphere has failed to become a post-gender space. On the other hand, the pervasiveness of online gender-based violence in social media and other interactive web platforms exacerbates women’s exclusion from the public political sphere. Against representations of gender violence and injustices online, Indian female comic artists have created counterpublics as a way of countering mainstream politics and the technologies of governance that have othered, ostracized, and discarded gendered victims of violence. Using the theoretical frameworks of Foucault’s biopolitics, Mbembe’s necropolitics, and Fraser’s “counterpublics,” this article aims to examine the representations of sexual violence, stalking, and gender discrimination within cyberspace. It focuses on how the feminist webcomic format in India is challenging female subjugation and advocating against the lasting physical and psychological trauma of gender violence through web comics such as *Dodderama*, *Sanitary Panels*, and *Priya’s Shakti*. The article also analyses how the digital space in India has become a male-dominated, brahmanical space of surveillance, control, and discipline that offers limited agency and voice to women in India, and how female illustrators are reclaiming the digital space by creating their own counterpublic spheres of resistance.

Keywords: Comics, Digital Media, Feminism, Counterpublics, Foucault, Mbembe

Introduction

Rejecting the patriarchal tenets of essentialism, naturalism, colonialism, capitalism, and polarity between the public and private, Donna Haraway, in her seminal essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” imagines a utopian non-binary, non-hierarchical world where the concept of identity is not burdened by multiple associations based on class, culture, religion, ethnicity, and gender that are hegemonic and repressive in nature. Haraway envisions how in a hybrid animal-machine world, identity would not be ruled by taxonomy and hierarchisation but by affinity and fellow-feeling wherein individuals would be able to construct groups by choice, thereby creating a “post-modernist identity out of otherness, difference, and specificity” (Haraway, 2016, p. 17) as a way to counter “Western theories of identity” (p. 23). Over the years, Haraway’s vision has not only influenced scholarship in the field of postgenderism but also scholars examining representations in the digital sphere. In fact, Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*, a hypertext work, embraces Haraway’s conception of a cybernetic posthuman being

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through her physical multiplicity and the fantasies that create and sustain reproductive politics (Latimer, 2011).

Similar to Jackson, hyper-textual works written by women in the early 21st century facilitated the unfolding of a liberated femininity in a non-linear, non-hierarchical, and decentralized way in the digital sphere. However, the same cannot be said about the digital space itself, which has shown digital gender gaps, sexual violence, stalking and discrimination based on gender intersecting with the categories of ethnicity, caste, class, religion, and culture. The digital space in India is also ridden with gender violence and women's exclusion from the digital public sphere. Threats of sexual assault and murder are routinely doled out to women who dare to voice their opinions in public, thus creating a hostile environment that disallows free-expression, where privacy is constantly invaded, and dignity and agency are undermined. Such injustices and gender biases are further promoted by biopolitical and necropolitical technologies of governance that divest the victimized (who are automatically relegated to a marginalized status) of political status and "reduce [them] to bare life" (Agamben, 2005) and juridical failure to implement laws and justice for women affected by their caste, class, religious, and ethnic positions. In the past decade, however, the Indian digital space has seen a new influx of women writers and illustrators who, by using a combination of language, visual images, interfaces, and sometimes audio and video, have been producing digital counterpublics as a way of countering (1) digital patriarchy, (2) cyberbullying, and (3) the technologies of biopolitical and necropolitical governance and state of exception practiced by policymakers and judiciary that fail to implement laws and justice for victims of domestic and sexual violence in India. The growing number of these female writers in the digital medium implies the creation of new female techno-cultural identities and the emergence of feminist digital literature, granting more space to feminist discourses within the digital public sphere. Sharing a common feminist intentionality, writers and illustrators have been using digital technology in a more combative way to unmask the feminine condition in cyberspace. Some of these include the use of literary devices such as irony, play, parody, exaggeration, deconstruction, or over-identification to subvert stereotypes of femininity prevalent in the form of online memes, social media narratives, and twitterfiction.

This article aims to examine the representations of sexual violence, stalking, and gender discrimination within cyberspace using the theoretical frameworks of Foucault's biopolitics, Mbembe's necropolitics, and Fraser's "counterpublics." The framework of biopolitics and necropolitics manifests how sovereign power proliferates those conditions in which individuals marginalized by race, class, and gender configurations are "stripped of political significance and exposed to murderous violence" (Ziarek 2008, 90). In other words, both the theoretical paradigms aim towards understanding how state and societal mechanisms of power that ideally should administer and foster life, guaranteeing health and productivity of populations, instead push them into precarious living situations and confer upon them the status of "living-dead" (Chakraborty, 2021).

In particular, the article aims to explore how the feminist webcomic format as a digital counterpublics is challenging female subjugation and advocating against the lasting physical and psychological trauma of gender violence through web comics such as *Doodlerama*, *Sanitary Panels*, and *Priya's Shakti*. Some of the themes that will be examined in this article are the concepts of marital rape, female sexual desire, female body image, female childhood abuse, psychological trauma, and acid attacks. In doing so, this article aims to show how technologies of governance have othered, ostracized, and discarded gendered victims of violence; how the digital space in India has become a male-dominated, brahmanical space of surveillance, control, and discipline that offers limited agency and voice to women in India; and how female illustrators are reclaiming the digital space by creating their own counterpublic spheres of resistance.

Graphic Representations of Gender Then and Now: Comics in the Pre-digital Era

The comic narrative genre in India is synonymous with childhood nostalgia. Nearly every Indian household has memories of growing up reading *Amar Chitra Katha*, *Champak*, *Tinkle*, and *Indrajaal Comics* for their soulful illustrations and vivid storytelling. However, most of these narratives focused on mythological characters, Indian superheroes, and anthropomorphous animals in children's comics, with little attention to female characters, who were positioned as secondary, marginal, and powerless. A case in point is R. K. Laxman's *The Common Man*, which voiced the struggles and aspirations of the common man in India without addressing gender issues and often turning the woman in the comic strips into a mouthpiece, a shadow of his male counterpoint. Moreover, the visuals of the female body and their outfits ranged from obese housewives to young women with relatively unattainable body types to cater to the Indian male gaze. According to Nayek, the primary reason behind the idealization of a certain type of body, the glorification of upper caste men and women, as well as the stigmatization of sexuality, was that the characters in these comic narratives were depicted by male creators, largely Brahmanical Hindus (2020). The comic book industry of India was initiated and dominated for years by male authors, illustrators, producers, and even consumers. Moreover, since the plotlines of the comic books pivoted completely on the traditional stories, fables, and folklore of a male-dominated society, the narratives were simply reflections of how the Brahmanical society viewed women. However, the rise of graphic novels in India in the 1990s—a medium used by artists and writers to tackle nuanced sociopolitical discourses and voice societal issues—changed all of that. Gender politics occupied a significant space in these plotlines. Orjit Sen's *River of Stories* and Srividya Natarajan's and S. Anand's *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* focus on the identities and socio-economic predicaments of the tribal in the Narmada Valley and the prejudices suffered by the untouchable community, respectively. One of the well-known graphic narrative works that address gender violence in India is writer and illustrator Prateek Thomas' work, *Hush* (2010), which narrates the plight of a schoolgirl assaulted by her father. Thomas deftly addresses this social predicament with wordless visuals and a somber background to engender the pain, fear, physical and emotional trauma, and subjugation of the protagonist, Maya.

Since the 2000s, women writers and illustrators, who have long been a minority in the comic book industry, have made a notable impact by writing and illustrating gender through the lens of sexuality, caste, class, ethnicity, and religion. The works of Amruta Patil, Rachita Taneja, Aarthi Parthasarthy, Kaveri Gopalakrishnan, Priya Kuriyan, among others, have espoused a subversive literary movement that has merged into a digital counterpublics against patriarchal hegemony. Through instruments of self-expression and resistance to patriarchal structures, the female characters resist the male gaze and sexualisation of their bodies. By embracing their body type, their sexuality, and their socio-cultural and gendered identities and subjectivities that transcend superficial and narrow definitions of femininity and relationships, these women “strengthen the ‘collective identity’ of Indian women and propel their ‘movement’ of self-assertion and expression further” (Showalter cited in Nayek, 2020, p.7).

Comics within the Indian Digital Space – An Overview

The digital era in India ushered in a paradigm shift in the literary composition, representation, and dissemination of comics. The first phase of Indian digital literature began with the introduction of India's first SMS (Short Message Service) novel, namely *Cloak Room*, by RoGue. Later, two more SMS novels, namely *Neelakannukal* and *Deaf Heaven*, were published in the years 2006 and 2009, respectively. Although this phase failed to capture the readers' imagination, the fusion of digital literary aspects such as interfaces (text, images, and videos), static and dynamic elements, and collaborative production created an opportunity for

the reader to participate in the story and interact with the author. The second wave ensued with the popularisation of digital platforms such as Twitter, Youtube, and Facebook, and the growing market demand for smartphones post 2009. Android technology, web 2.0, social media platforms, and advanced software technologies have all had a significant impact on the genre of digital literature. Social media literature incorporates several sorts of literature, such as poetry, video poetry, fiction, Twitter and Instagram fiction, among others, consumed by millions of people all over the nation. For instance, some Facebook groups are dedicated to the creation of literary works such as Terribly Tiny Tale (ttt), English Poetry in India, and Paperless Postcards (PP). ttt is a genre of flash fiction that brings together a diverse pool of digital writers to create one tweet-sized story every day. Recently, ttt creators also initiated a small animated video of flash fiction which imitates the chat application WhatsApp, a relatively new digital communication platform. Similarly, the premise of the PP is a postcard design that brings the nostalgia of physical, letter-based communication to its readers. Narrating a story through 140 characters is a genre on Twitter called “twitterfiction.” The author builds stories for his or her followers in a particular format. These kinds of short narratives may be traced back to their origins, such as the Japanese keitai shosetsu (cell-phone fiction) or forms of fanfiction wherein users are restricted to writing a story of no more than 140 characters (Bronwen 2014, p. 95). Chindu Sreedharan’s epic retelling of the Mahabharata in 140 characters, which he began in July 2009, is a serialized form of twitterfiction. The second phase thus clearly manifests how “communication technology and the internet in postcolonial India have deprovincialized and decentralized the notion of creativity, circulation, reception, and publication of creative works” (Thangavel & Menon, 2018, p. 160).

Likewise, comic books too have advanced within computer-mediated environments. Webcomics in India have moved beyond print, exploiting the features of the new medium. For instance, Graphic India, a digital comics company, combines digital comics and animation to develop home-grown superhero narratives targeting the 550 million Indian youth under the age of 25 and the 900-million-person mobile market. Leading the new wave of Indian digital comics and animation have been superheroes like Chakra, generated by the legendary Stan Lee, applying the successful Spiderman formula with the inventive genius of Iron Man to create a fourteen-year-old whiz tech from Mumbai with an invincible superhuman alter ego. Using the power of great storytelling and unbridled imagination, the character entertainment market in India has been entertaining superhero fans all over the world with Indian themes and culture.

Apart from digital comics that make explicit use of digital technology through hyperlinks, animation, or sound, many print comics are now created using digital software. There are e-book versions of comics available, as well as apps such as comiXology, which provide a digitally mediated reading experience. Some digital comics are created intentionally to be read in digital format (digital-born), while others are adaptations of print publications (print-born) (Aggleton, 2019). Some of these comics make explicit use of digital technology through hyperlinks, animation, or sound, while others strongly resemble print comics but have been published on digital platforms (Aggleton, 2019). Apart from the digital comics and gamer comics markets catering to the character entertainment market and the gamer genre comic demography, respectively, there are feminist voices digitally attempting to create a definition of webcomics in India. Employing combinations of techniques, both by hand and through digital creation, women webcomic illustrators have formed artistic and fan collectives for empowerment and awareness of gender marginalized people who are not represented in the growing web community. The chosen web comics, *Doodlerama*, *Sanitary Panels*, and *Priya’s Shakti*, represent feminist activism through the creation of a space to fight biopolitical and necropolitical oppression within a representational form enacted by the characters in the strip. As activists, illustrators, and writers, they not only cater to web comics fans interested in plot lines and the importance of visual storytelling, but they also criticize the male-dominated

digital space; toxic gamer culture that identifies with sexism, racism, heterosexism, and classism, among other things; unequal gender power relationships; and the male controlling presence, also known as the male gaze. Women comic illustrators and writers in India have formed their own collectives online—counterpublic spaces where the license to speak and act freely is instated not merely for the therapeutic purposes of voicing personal experiences but also to take radical action concerning the socio-political, cultural, and economic predicaments of women. The safe space or “submerged network” organized by women activists who could meet outside the public eye to discuss social issues, develop frameworks for interpreting them, and organize collective action accordingly has been translated online as subaltern counterpublic spheres or “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). The article aims to examine and reflect on how the chosen web comics—*Doodlerama*, *Sanitary Panels*, and *Priya’s Shakti*—have constructed accessible discursive spaces where female consumers of web comics can develop feminist identities and alternative feminist histories through personal reflections and interactions with one another, forming a “networked counterpublics” (Fraser, 1990, p. 80). Whether this online feminist counterpublics is able to launch interventions into the broader public sphere will be examined by analyzing the narratives of resistance and accompanying illustrations in the chosen web-comics.

Digital Counter-Narratives as Digital Counterpublics: Reading *Doodleodrama*, *Sanitary Panels*, and *Priya’s Shakti*

In response to the exclusionary politics of the Indian digital public sphere that led to crises in gender subjectivities and identities associated with class, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion, the digital counterpublics established by feminist web comics in India bring to the fore issues that might have been overlooked, purposely ignored, or suppressed by the dominant public. Mounica Tata’s *Doodleodrama*, for instance, has captured the imagination of almost 105,000 social media users on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter with her illustrations that advocate for a number of feminist causes, the primary among them being menstrual stigma and female body politics, which are repeatedly featured in a variety of panel-style comics. Drawing on her personal experiences, Tata builds a digital feminist counterpublics that generates social action through the concept of consciousness-raising. Through humorous storytelling that centers on embodiment and raises information about the female body, Tata enables her audience to understand the gendered dimensions of their own experiences of oppression, thereby empowering her female audience to forge a connection with feminist politics in the digital space. In a panel published on August 23, 2020 titled “Women: fragmented and fractioned,” Tata engages in social critique of the mainstream representation of the Indian woman who is “stamped with labels everyday” (see figure 1). She questions the male gaze that has thus far constructed images of women in an attempt to control them physically, psychologically, and socio-culturally. Tata ensures correlation between the panels, the gutters, word balloons, and the “Doodleodrama” page at large as a formal and intentional composition system. According to the British Library digital comics collection, digital comics should be “published in a digital format; must contain a single-panel image or series of interdependent images; visible frames; and iconic symbols such as balloons” (Aggleton, 2019, p. 404). However, what most definitions of digital comics fail to include are the digital hashtags that contribute to the language of comics and the understanding of the text. Tata uses the hashtag #playingthecardsIwasdealt to criticize the brahmanical public sphere discourse of “victim playing” among women victims of violence. Using a deck of cards as frames for her panels, Tata portrays how women are “given a card one at a time to play [their] roles” (Tata, @doodleodrama). By illustrating women as damsels in distress, waiting to be rescued, and

goddesses and queens worshipped on pedestals, Tata initiates feminist discourse on biopolitical and necropolitical technologies of governance that idealize women who contribute to the socio-cultural, political, and economic structures instead of rebelling against the brahmanical, patriarchal system that discards the victim section of the population. In another panel, using bold earthy colours to delineate the feminine, Tata deliberates on women's predicament in the public sphere. Using bold captions, she portrays how women are constantly objectified, stalked, gazed at, and fetishized by men when "walking down on the road" (Tata, @doodleodrama). In another panel, Tata ruminates on India's obsession with skin colour by illustrating a young girl displaying deep angst over conforming to the brahmanical casteist notions of beauty. As postcolonial theorists observe, brahmanical casteist notions were reinforced during the colonial period by British colonialists who, through colonial biopolitical technologies, segregated populations on the basis of colour, whereby the fairer skin tone became synonymous with purity and the darker skin was associated with caste impurity, poverty, and deficiency. Such segregation has persisted after independence, with populations being hierarchically divided on the basis of color, which is frequently intrinsically linked to caste and class categories.² Tata's panel on colorism is thus a grave reminder of contemporary India's prejudices where one's colour could be an overt determinant of one's caste and class.

In one of her panels, Tata asks her social media followers to claim ownership of the word "fat" like "any other word [...] like any other adjective" (Tata, @doodleodrama) so that individuals can accept their bodies without boxing them under prejudices. Through a series of sketches, Tata underscores the trauma and bullying that women have to deal with by biopolitical social actors³ who, like the state, can ostracize women if they do not meet the Indian beauty standards as manifested within the Indian entertainment industry. Resisting the male gaze and the societal constructs of beauty formulated by patriarchal social actors, Tata formulates a "life hack" whereby she requests women to form a collective to cleanse the word "fat" of its many connotations, including hatred, embarrassment, guilt, bias, and shame. In doing so, Tata creates an online counterpublic space for her female followers, who are finally able to psychologically purge themselves from the baggage that comes with fat shaming and are able to "claim" and "own" the word. Another webcomic strip by the illustrator directly addresses the predominant problem of rape with an image of a young girl scared by a crowd of phallus-like hands attempting to physically brutalise and torture her. The final panel in red depicts the girl's mouth wide open in pain. Tata's sketch points towards the physical and psychological trauma of rape victims, who are, in Agamben's words, *homo sacers*, or bare lives, victimized and dismissed by the country's juridico-political system that politicizes the woman's body for political lobbying and gain but fails to provide justice, and the biopolitical/necropolitical communities (social actors) that treat victims of abuse as abject objects, socially ostracizing them for losing their own honour (*izzat*), which women are required (according to hegemonic patriarchy) to safeguard in order to uphold the manhood of male members of their families. Tata questions such state and societal technologies of governance wherein women are found safe only in sacred texts, glorified and worshipped, while women are marginalized, broken, and raped every minute as per surveys in India. In another of her illustrations, Tata portrays the harrowing experience of marital rape, a violent tool to disempower and marginalize women in the domestic sphere, and the various reactions, often negative, that women receive from their in-laws and sometimes even from their parents and relatives. While section 375 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) considers forced sex in

² The caste system associated upper caste Brahmins with white skin, the Kshatriyas with red, the Vaishyas with yellow, and the lowest of all, the Shudras with black skin in the colonial period. Such hierarchies continued post-independence.

³ According to the biopolitical system, different social actors often make it easier for the state to control, confine, and possibly kill the "liable" or weaker parts of the population.

marriages as a criminal act if the woman is below 15 years of age, women above this age group have been reduced to individuals who exist to serve their husbands. Using bold colours, fonts, and frames, Tata underscores the motives behind women's objectification and gender violence that is neither identified nor acknowledged within the public sphere. Tata critiques the biopolitical and necropolitical technologies of governance that have permeated within societies that force victims of rape, marital violence, and abuse to compromise on their fate and live as *homo sacers*. Tata builds a counterpublic space for the women who follow her on social media, and Rachita Taneja's drawings show the same thing.

Figure 1: Mounica Tata, *Doodleodrama*



Like Tata, Taneja in her webcomics *Sanitary Panels* critiques the socio-cultural, economic, biopolitical, and necropolitical injustices that the class, caste, gender, religion, and ethnically marginalized have to undergo on a daily basis. *Sanitary Panels*, which has over 150,000 followers on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, uses a stick figure art style to critique not only public sphere discourses that fail to engage with victims of harassment, violence, homophobia, and discrimination, but also online discourses on right-wing politics, governance technologies, state surveillance, and gender abuse on social media. However, what is most interesting about her webcomic page *Sanitary Panels* is that it dares to represent and thus begin a public discourse on one of the most taboo topics in India—menstruation. In her comic panels, Taneja tries to form a connection between India's cultural value systems and enduring menstrual restrictions. In one of her interviews, Taneja highlighted that she intended to break the taboo and give the impression that the web-comic is feminist in nature and is going to speak about topics that are stigmatized in Indian society (Aswini, 2019). For Taneja, comics are a “powerful form of art” due to the audience's connection to visually oriented messages (Aswini, 2019). According to her, “An author may write a long article on the op-ed page to convey a message on social issues, whereas [she] can express the same thing in two simple panels of a comic” (Aswini, 2019). Through her illustrations, Taneja calls for a collective response to the breadth of menstrual experience, including menstrual health and shame in India. Her comics dissent against the Kerala court's verdict that the “sexual harassment complaint will not prima facie stand when a woman is wearing a sexually provocative dress” (Taneja, @Sanitary Panels, 2022). Using her humble stick figure art, Taneja attempts to deconstruct the verdict. A confused

figure re-reading the ruling as “we won’t protect you from sexual violence unless you dress in a way we deem acceptable” (Taneja, @Sanitary Panels, 2022) is Taneja’s way of embodying the ways in which the technologies of biopolitical governance have been trivialising women’s safety and the female body, transforming them into “bare lives” or *homo sacers* whilst defending the male gaze. In another of her illustrations from January 14th, 2019, Taneja requests awareness and sensitization around menstruation. Providing three out of many instances of the female predicament during menstruation whereby a section of the female population suffers from “relatively pain-free periods,” another from “cramps” (Taneja, @Sanitary Panels, 2019), and some who show severe symptoms such as fainting, vomiting, and needing to visit the hospital for pain relief, Taneja requests the patriarchal public sphere to recognize a woman’s physical and psychological pain during menstruation instead of mocking and shaming them.

Through her webcomics, she hopes to create an online menstruation activism that prioritizes victims of menstruation stigma, including those who are underserved, such as the incarcerated, disabled, trans/non-binary, homeless, low-income, HIV-positive, refugees, rural, and those who have undergone forced sterilization. In her web comics, it also becomes clear that Taneja is keen to focus on priorities other than menstrual products, which include hygiene, cultural critiques, and educational changes as means to promote menstrual literacy. She focuses not only on menstruation, but like her contemporary Tata, Taneja also emphasises how society continues to ignore female desire by wrapping her up in a gift box to be presented to her husband and in-laws on her wedding day, forcing her existence within the walls of the private sphere. An important aspect of the biopolitical technology of governance is the institution of marriage that is used politically to discipline and administrate the population. Within Indian society, the population is segregated between those who follow the institution of marriage and those who don’t. While the former receives rights and benefits, the latter is denied the privilege that allows them to survive. In a series of frames, Taneja represents a stick figure of a young girl who is told to “compromise,” to be “agreeable and adjusting,” and “be flexible” (Taneja, @Sanitary Panels, 2020) as she is wrapped into a box. As the illustrator sarcastically reveals, Indian girls are seldom allowed to have goals and dreams since they are required to reproduce and sustain the biopolitical management of life (see, figure 3). Taneja’s July, 22, 2020 post is not only meant as a reminder of Indian society’s expectations of young girls and the toxic institution of marriage used as a biopolitical tool of governance, but it is also a critique of the Netflix show *Indian Matchmaking*, which aired first on July 16th, 2020 and was met with disapproval due to the objectification of women in the Indian marriage market. On a similar note, Taneja, in another post, takes a dig at society’s appropriation of the Indian bride. In order to be marketable, a girl should be “fair-complexioned” and “always smiling” (Taneja, @Sanitary Panels, 2020). She should be virgin, capable of bearing children, earn significantly less than the husband in order to protect his ego, and finally, should be dolled up like a decked out Barbie doll (figure 2).

Figure 2: Rachita Taneja, *Sanitary Panels*

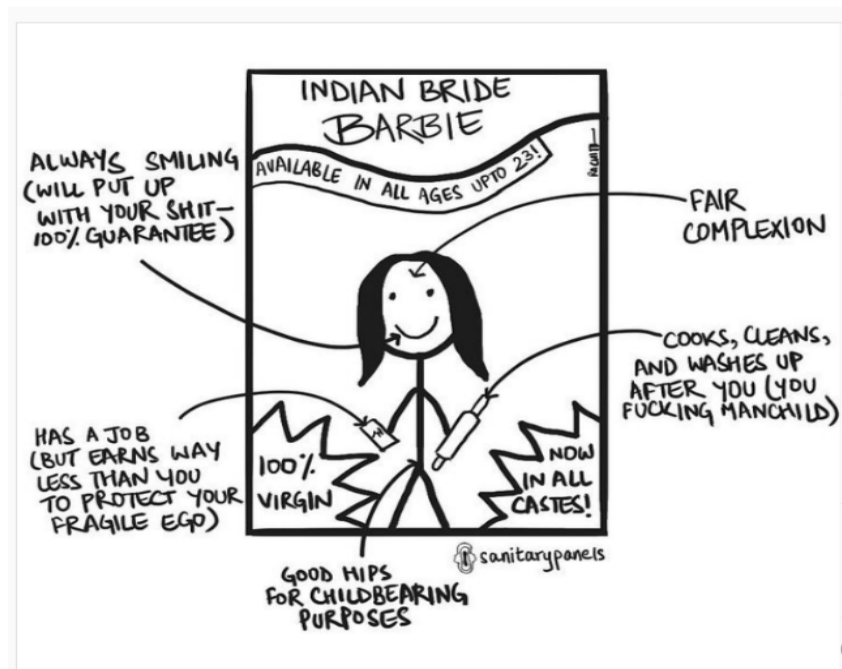


Figure 3: Rachita Taneja, *Sanitary Panels*



In one of her panels, Taneja takes a step ahead to help women unlearn mythologies that have been used as a specimen to define womanhood in India. Replicating the famous *agnipariksha* or the trial by fire scene from the epic *Ramayana* (where Sita was asked to undergo the fire test to prove her chastity and loyalty towards her husband, Lord Ram, upon their return from Lanka), Taneja re-writes Sita's reply, who reprimands her husband for making such an outrageous demand when it was Sita who had been kidnapped by Ravan and it was the loyal wife within her that decided to follow her husband during his exile. Following this, she chose to walk out of the toxic relationship. Taneja's illustrations have not only given way to an online feminist counterpublics, an inclusive collective platform that empowers women to begin

discourses on the body and the mind, but is also a space of inclusiveness for the marginalised who have suffered from hate speech, religious, caste, and class discrimination, and have been victims of government technologies of biopolitics and necropolitics. For instance, in one of her panels, she clearly illustrates the hierarchies of segregation that separates the low rungs of society who are made redundant by technologies of necropolitics, while those higher up in the socio-cultural and religious orders are allowed to thrive. Under the right-wing government in India, only a high caste, high class, Hindu heterosexual man who is the symbol of the Hindu *rashtra* is “cultivated for life,” for reproduction, whilst others are systemically marked for both literal and metaphorical death. In another instance, Taneja also critiques the Indian media and centrist politics that have permitted fascism to thrive in India. Taneja shows in two frames how the media pretends to wear the cape of truth and honor by presenting themselves as journalists who are “brave and speak truth to power” (Taneja, 2020), but in reality they work with the government to discredit protests of the poor in India.

Like Taneja and Tata, there are male illustrators who have been struggling to transform the digital space from a “space of surveillance” to a space of inclusion, equality, and resistance against patriarchal strictures. *Priya's Shakti* is one such project, which, although it is designed as a graphic novel by American filmmaker Ram Devineni and American comic book designer Dan Goldman, uses augmented reality to take readers into a world of animation, real-life stories, films, and other interactive elements that pop-out of the pages each time pages from the book are scanned by readers. *Priya's Shakti* is a cultural response to the brutal bus rape of 2012 that caused a huge furor and outcry in India against gender violence and in favour of women's safety. In response to the need for a cultural shift, especially views towards the role of women in modern society, a new Indian female superhero was created who is a rape survivor and who rides a flying tiger. The project is rooted in ancient matriarchal traditions that have been displaced in modern representations of Hindu culture. It creates an alternative narrative and voice against gender-based violence in popular culture through the Hindu mythological canon.

When read through a feminist theoretical lens, the protagonist Priya's transformation into a superhero, especially her determination to erase gender boundaries and sexual differences through education and awareness, is a reminder of Haraway's post-gender world that she advocates for in *A Cyborg Manifesto*. The book narrates the story of Priya, a village girl who is sexually assaulted by men from her village. Her family, relatives, and the entire village fail to help her when she seeks justice against her perpetrators. It is only through divine intervention, when goddess Parvati descends to help Priya that the latter understands her true potential as a superhero, who then decides to champion women's rights as she flies around her village on her tiger called “Sahas” (which translates as courage). However, unlike Haraway's cyborg—a hybrid between a human and a machine—Devineni and Goldman's Priya transform into a hybrid between the natural (human) and supernatural (divine inheritance). Like the cyborg, Devineni and Goldman's protagonist, as a cross between the natural and the supernatural, is able to blur the lines between nature and culture and resist essentialist understanding of gender differences and roles within Indian society. Devineni and Goldman's attempt at enabling Priya to take control of her own narrative by following the mantra “Speak without shame and stand with me and bring about the change we want to see” (Devineni & Goldman, 2014, p. 25) resonates with Haraway's concept of cybernetics that provides humans the liberty and agency to construct themselves and their roles on every level that is neither hierarchical nor patriarchal in nature. Just like Haraway's theory that portrays the ability of technology to increase the scope of human limitation, the supernatural in *Priya's Shakti* too opens opportunities for individuals to construct themselves away from gender, race, caste, and class stereotypes. Haraway mentions that the cyborg is also a creation of virtual reality since the internet has catalysed changes in human consciousness. Comic illustrators such as Devineni

and Goldman have attempted to raise gender awareness by launching social media campaigns such as #standwithpriya and #selfie in an effort to help the online audience reconsider the construction of their identities and identity biases.

What is most interesting, apart from the addition of the Hindu mythology and the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic-esque illustration, was the augmented reality application that enabled readers to understand Hindu mythology, through its representation in popular culture in the form of street art. The visual discovery application also allows the reader to turn *Priya's Shakti* into an interactive, 3D experience using image recognition and augmented reality to animate everyday objects and images. The application also includes layers of social awareness, including information on gender-based sexual violence, audio interviews with real rape survivors that Devineni conducted during his research, and an option to insert oneself into an image with the protagonist and share it with the words "I Stand with Priya." Projects such as *Priya's Shakti* using augmented reality have helped readers get insight into the closed world of the victims of sexual violence. Following a sexual assault, it is the woman who is cast out of the home, ridiculed, shamed, and ostracized by society. Victims of domestic and sexual violence internalize ridicule and humiliation and suffer societal injustice alone and hidden from the world. *Priya's Shakti* is an important project reflecting back on India's unjust socio-cultural norms, thus creating a counterpublic discourse against gender violence and inequality both within the online space and in the public sphere.

Conclusion: Towards a Cosmopolitics of Gender in the Digital Space

The works of Mounica Tata, Rachita Taneja, and Ram Devineni are just a few examples of how web-comic artists and illustrators have been resisting systemic and systematic oppression of the marginalized class, caste, color, and gender. Unlike the characterisation of women in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series and the Indian superhero comics of the 1980s and 1990s, women portrayed in Tata's, Taneja's, and Devineni's works are not coy, dutiful, obedient, and sacrificial but are always ready to resist patrilineal narratives that promote female objectification and gender inequality. By engaging with theoretical concepts pertaining to gender, caste, class, sexuality, and religion, the illustrators of these web comics dwell on the essential question about which lives are deemed worthy of recognition and inclusion in contemporary regimes of power and which lives are considered disposable, and how biopolitical and necropolitical forms of governance have affected power politics in the Indian digital space. While both Taneja and Tata's comic panels use literary and illustrative resistance strategies in the form of puns, metaphors, and bold colours and props to resist hegemonies of caste, class, ethnicity, and religion on gender, it is Devineni's webcomic *Priya's Shakti* that employs more-than-human (supernatural) agency to re-imagine politics and a cosmopolitical world of equality that is "beyond colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist [regimes] of objectivity, rationality, and truth." Thus, Indian web comics have attempted to create a cosmopolitical world that resists asymmetrical power relations, cultivating and promoting bodies, identities, and subjectivities that do not conform to hetero-normative, gender-normative, hegemonic, and state-generated biopolitical and necropolitical networks and assemblages that assign life-and death-giving force. Moreover, the interactive stories in the digital space of these webcomics make interpretation, communication, reading, and composing more advanced, both in terms of creativity and intellect. What it means to be human is taking a new turn in India with the constant use of new technology, which results in the boundaries between binaries, identities, and the human and non-human realms becoming increasingly blurred, leading to "openness, pluralism, and indefiniteness" and thereby justifying Haraway's notion of the cyborg.

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