

## Article

# Mobilizing Shakti: Hindu Goddesses and Campaigns Against Gender-Based Violence

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**Abstract:** Hindu goddesses have been mobilized as powerful symbols by various groups of activists in both visual and verbal campaigns in India. Although these mobilizations have different motivations and goals, they have frequently emphasized the theological association between goddesses and women, connected through their common possession of Shakti (power). These campaigns commonly highlight the idea that both goddesses and Hindu women share in this power in order to inspire women to action in particular ways. While this association has largely been used as a campaign strategy by Hindu right-wing women's organizations in India, it has also become a strategy employed in particular feminist campaigns as well. This article offers a discourse analysis of two online activist campaigns (*Priya's Shakti* and *Abused Goddesses*) which mobilize Hindu goddesses (and their power) in order to raise awareness about gender-based violence in India. I examine whether marginalized identities of women in India, in relation to caste, class and religious identity, are represented in the texts and images. To do so, I analyze how politically-charged, normative imaginings of Indian women are constructed (or maintained). This analysis raises questions about the usefulness of employing Hindu goddesses as feminist symbols, particularly in contemporary Indian society, in which communal and caste-based tensions are elevated.

**Keywords:** Hindu goddesses; activist campaigns; Shakti

References to Hindu goddesses and their power (Shakti) have appeared across a variety of political campaigns in India. Likewise, references to the association between goddesses and human women appear across both the right and left of political activism in India. While past scholarship has offered a substantial critique of the right-wing mobilization of goddesses, in this article, critical analysis is directed towards various feminist mobilizations. This article examines two recent online campaigns that employ Hindu goddesses to address gender-based violence. This examination underlines important critiques emerging out of minority communities in India (particularly Muslim and Dalit women) to highlight the ways that references to Hindu goddesses in activist rhetoric and imagery often re-inforces notions of Indian identity as synonymous with the middle-class (often upper-caste) Hindu, ultimately contributing to a problematic Brahminization of the Indian Women's Movement. Specifically, I ask how are particular politically-charged, normative imaginings of the Indian woman constructed or maintained in these campaigns? Are marginalized women, in relation to caste, class and religious identity, represented in the texts and images? Through an examination of feminist campaigns (in contrast to right-wing campaigns), this thesis will expand the scholarly attention on the political use of Hindu iconography outside of Hindu nationalist politics.

This analysis is primarily concerned with tracking examples of the ways these two campaigns reference the woman-goddess relationship to deliver their respective messages. In order to examine the ways that this relationship is presented in these two campaigns, it is essential to unpack the notion of Shakti itself. The theological concept of Shakti signifies a variety of Hindu notions of power and energy.

This power is often connected to the power of Hindu goddesses in a variety of ways. For instance, goddesses are considered to hold the power to sustain (the universe, one's health, world order, etc.), but also to destroy. In the text *Devi-Mahatmya*, while the entire cosmos is considered a manifestation of the Goddess, she is also particularly identified with human women (Sherma 2000).<sup>1</sup> Because of this, in certain Hindu traditions women have been able to access a special religious power and status. For example, the Shakti of the Goddess can be thought of as a power that can be harnessed (in Tantra for instance), and, in some instances, particular women have been thought of to be or channel the goddess herself.<sup>2</sup> But while women are considered to hold this power, it is often men who have the ultimate control and authority in Indian society. A group of scholars have explored the relationship between women and goddesses, and the relationship's potential for empowerment, in the volume *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*. Importantly, in the introduction to the volume editors Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl note:

By virtue of their common feminine nature, women are in some contexts regarded as special manifestations of the Goddess, sharing in her powers. Thus, the Goddess can perhaps be viewed as a mythic model for Hindu women. [...] Nevertheless, some feminists and scholars of religion have argued that the existence of the Hindu Goddess has not appeared outwardly to have benefitted women's position in Indian society. The question of the relationship between Indian (primarily Hindu, but including Buddhist and Jain) goddesses and women in multifaceted and complex, frequently leading to contradictory answers, depending upon how the question is framed and who is doing the asking—and answering". (Erndl and Hiltebeitel 2000, p. 11)

This statement addresses the complexities of the woman-as-goddess equation and argues that the status of human women, and their association with the shakti of divine females, is contextually shifting.

The Brahmanical tradition in particular views sexuality as a form of Shakti, but the uninhibited expression of sexual desire is seen as potentially dangerous, and inappropriate for women, as desire could lead a woman to engage in sex outside of socially-sanctioned situations. Therefore, marriage is considered a way to control and direct a woman's Shakti by controlling and directing her sexuality. Although all women are born as manifestations of Shakti, their Shakti can increase or decrease depending on specific actions. Motherhood within marriage is a way to direct women's sexuality and power into a productive and auspicious expressions of Shakti.<sup>3</sup> This societal expectation has resulted in a prominent cultural association of ideal Indian womanhood with motherhood in marriage, marginalizing women who fall outside of this category.

This article examines the ways that political campaigns speak to women about their own power to act publicly by depicting or referring to the actions of Hindu goddesses. In these two campaigns in particular, goddesses are mobilized to communicate to women about their own Shakti, for instance, as a form of social and political power that they can tap into, or as an individual worthy of worship in her own right. The first online campaign, entitled *Abused Goddesses*, depicts Hindu goddesses Lakshmi, Saraswati and Durga in the style of classic calendar art,<sup>4</sup> but as victims of domestic abuse with graphic

<sup>1</sup> Rita DasGupta Sherma notes that this identification is found in the *Devi Mahatmya* 11.4, but she also highlights that the identification was not emphasized in the Shakta tradition, and that it is only in Shakta-tantra that "the Goddess-woman identification is stressed, and women's right to religious self-determination is affirmed" (Sherma 2000, p. 33).

<sup>2</sup> For an example of practices of possession in lived Hindu traditions, see, Erndl (2000) For examples of women's roles in tantric texts and practice, see Loriliai Biernacki (2007).

<sup>3</sup> This emphasis on motherhood possibly contributes to the way that society heavily values women through their relational roles (mother, wife) rather than as individual women. The two campaigns I discuss remind both men and women of the value of the individual woman outside of her relationships.

<sup>4</sup> Taproot India, the Mumbai-based ad agency which produced these images, states, "Hand-painted posters of Gods and Goddesses can be found in every place of work, worship and residence (in India). Hence, we recreated the hand-painted poster style to emotionally communicate to the target group" (Manas 2015, p. 50).

bruises and black eyes (Figure 1). The copy at the bottom of the poster reads, “Pray that we never see this day. Today, more than 68% of women in India are victims of domestic violence. Tomorrow, it seems like no woman shall be spared. Not even the ones we pray to.” This draws the reader’s attention toward the fact that although goddesses are revered in much of Indian culture, instances of domestic violence against women in India is staggeringly high. This campaign was first released in 2010 by NGO Save the Children India, but it received little attention at the time. In 2013, however, the campaign was picked up by *ScoopWhoop* and it quickly went viral, receiving a great deal of domestic and international media attention.

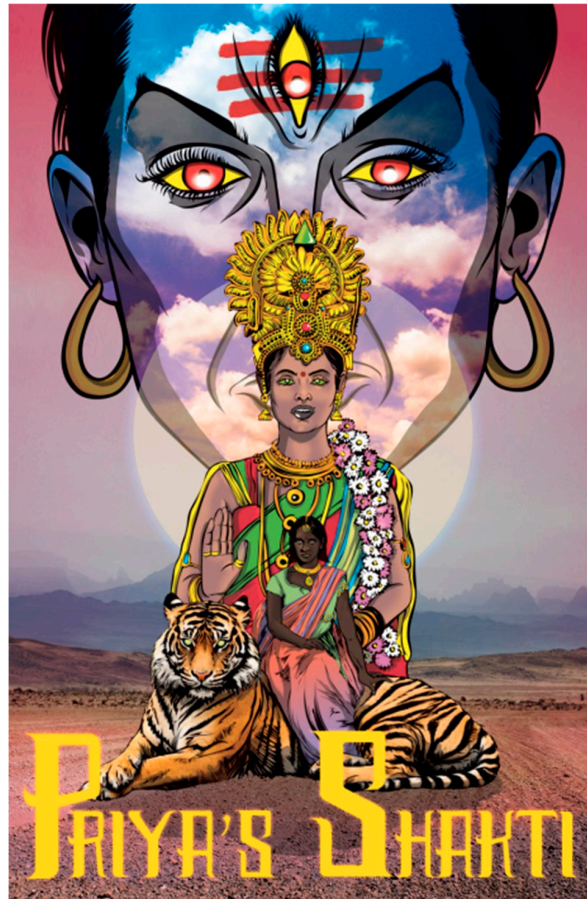


**Figure 1.** One poster (of three) from the *Abused Goddesses* campaign depicting the goddess Saraswati. Image Courtesy: Taproot Dentsu.

The second campaign is a digital comic book and outreach campaign titled *Priya's Shakti*, released in 2014 (Figure 2). This comic book features the story of Priya, a rape survivor who becomes a female superhero after she encounters the goddess Parvati. The goddess helps Priya realize her own Shakti, and the girl travels the country spreading awareness about gender-based violence. With the use of an augmented reality app, readers can see stories of real life gender-based violence survivors appear throughout the comic. Creator Ram Devineni partnered with NGO Apne Aap Worldwide on an outreach program, in which the comic book was distributed in Delhi school systems, and streets in Mumbai were decorated with street art featuring scenes from the story.

These two campaigns mobilize the belief in women as goddesses in two contrasting ways. The *Abused Goddesses* campaign clearly employs the association between goddesses and women, but rather than the depiction of a woman or goddess wielding visible power, the female figures in these campaigns are goddesses depicted as passive receptors of abuse. In contrast, *Priya's Shakti* outlines the story of a girl whose own power appears before her eyes after an interaction with a goddess, and who

subsequently is able to transform her own conditions and change cultural attitudes towards gender relations. While both campaigns emphasize the link between goddesses and human women (through their common possession of power); what differs are the borders around where and how this power may be expressed.



**Figure 2.** The cover of the *Priya's Shakti* digital comic book depicting Priya seated on a tiger with the goddess Parvati in the background. Image Courtesy: Ram Devineni.

This article's focus on the politics of representation of women in Indian media is grounded in an examination of how imagery and specific symbols are employed to reproduce the normative image of Indian womanhood, most often presented as middle-class, upper-caste, and Hindu. This is a specific understanding of an idealized Indian womanhood which appears prominently in Indian media. It is noteworthy that both of these campaigns emerged in the aftermath of the 2012 gang rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey. For example, many protests which occurred after this incident contributed to creating a normative female identity for the victim of the assault. Initially anonymous, protesters mobilized around Sanskritic, and therefore Hindu, female names assigned to her, as discussed by Krupa Shandilya:

"In the absence of information about the rape victim's identity, her story struck a chord with protestors because what happened to her could have happened to any of the protestors: her story represented the perils faced by 'everywoman' in India. While the notion of 'everywoman' served as a potential tool for solidarity, bringing together disparate activist groups as well as citizens from all walks of life to the protest, the category was co-opted to mean a Hindu, upper-caste, middle-class woman. (Shandilya 2015, p. 468)

Shandilya explains that, alongside the Sanskritic Hindu names, media narratives and chosen images continued to isolate aspects of her story that reinforced a middle class identity (her education,



her light-skin), and her innocent nature.<sup>5</sup> Shandilya critically analyzes how these narratives actually contributed to a Brahminization of Pandey's identity, feeding into right-wing Hindu discourses about the protection of the chaste Hindu woman (Shandilya 2015). Subsequently, she argues that these representations actually result in the marginalization of Dalit women in legal and social reform (Shandilya 2015).<sup>6</sup> As both the *Abused Goddesses* and the *Priya's Shakti* campaigns also employ normative Hindu imagery in an attempt to address violence against all types of Indian women, it is necessary to consider the ways that the 'every woman' in Indian media is often depicted with a very specific Hindu identity.

I begin with an analysis of the *Abused Goddesses* campaign. I first discuss the various media<sup>7</sup> and scholarly responses to this campaign, and then through the method of discourse analysis, I further examine the campaign images and texts in order to decipher which types of women are represented through the employment of Hindu goddesses, and which types of discourses are drawn on in order to communicate these representations. I then continue with an examination of the *Priya's Shakti* campaign, in which I offer a critique according to the problematic aspects identified in the *Abused Goddesses* campaign. Importantly, it is impossible to divorce either of these campaigns from the media platforms through which they are distributed. Therefore, in the next section I analyze the accessibility of both campaigns, highlighting the intended audience for each campaign, and who is excluded from this intended audience.

## 1. Campaign Distribution and Public Responses

Angered by the responses of authorities to the 2012 gang rape, *Priya's Shakti* creator Ram Devineni says he realized that "the problem of gender-based violence in India and around the world was not a legal problem, but a cultural problem." (Devineni 2015, 9:29). He traveled around India speaking to rape survivors, and their stories comprise the framework of *Priya's* story. Devineni then partnered with the NGO APNE AAP, and the Lion's Club International Foundation helped distribute the comic book through some English-language schools in and around Delhi (Dickson 2019).<sup>8</sup> The *Priya's Shakti* website states that the goal of the NGO is "to increase choices for at-risk girls and women in order to ensure access to their rights, and to deter the purchase of sex through policy and social change" (*Priya's Shakti* 2013). Upon release, the online comic book became an international sensation after it was featured at the 2014 Mumbai Comic Con (with over 500,000 downloads worldwide in the months following the release, half of these in India).

<sup>5</sup> This idealized Indian womanhood became the symbol of the Indian nation in Nationalist politics pre-Independence (visually depicted by the goddess Bharatmata), and continues to this day in Hindu Nationalist rhetoric and imagery. In Nationalist political rhetoric, human women are often conflated with Bharatmata, as they are both depicted as bearers and protectors of tradition. While women are consigned to the role of the protectors of the nation, the Nationalist movement's invocation of the goddess did, in some sense, legitimize women's participation in activism in ways that had rarely been available to Indian women in the past. Stephanie Tawa Lama argues that the translation of political activism into religious terms transforms the nature of political activism, opening it up to women as well (Tawa Lama 2001). Debates concerning the empowering potential of the goddess continue today with a focus on Hindu Nationalist mobilizations of the goddess symbol to encourage female participation. For instance, scholars like Sarkar (2001) and Anja Kovacs (2004) have argued that these mobilizations do open up space for public participation and empowerment in some sense, but that it is a bounded notion of empowerment. Kovacs (2004) notes that while Hindu Nationalist women often gain status in their families and communities, in general, Hindutva diverts Indian women's attention and wrath away from their own oppression towards a vilified 'other, and in the end patriarchy prevails.

<sup>6</sup> Anand Teltumbde has similarly questioned why atrocious rapes against Dalit women, such as that of Surekha and Priyanka Bhotmange in Khairlangi just days before the Nirbhaya incident, have gone unnoticed by progressives and the media despite Dalit protests (Teltumbde 2013).

<sup>7</sup> I have surveyed references to these campaigns on online blogs, international newspapers, and English-language Indian newspapers.

<sup>8</sup> In my personal communication with Ariel Dickson, the Lion's Quest Program Specialist, *Priya's Shakti* had a limited distribution in schools, while the comic's sequel, *Priya's Mirror*, had a more extensive distribution. The gender-adapted Lion's Quest Program which distributed these books is currently only in English and targeted specifically towards students age 11–12 (Dickson 2019).

Shortly after the release of the comic book, several street artists were commissioned to paint murals of Priya in Mumbai and Delhi (Figure 3). After an interview with Devineni, *Huffington Post* journalist Mallika Rao explained:

Devineni hopes to spread the parallel between Durga and Priya on the streets of India. Working with a non-profit community organization, he enlisted the skills of Bollywood sign painters who live and work in Dharavi, the sprawling, self-sufficient slum inside Mumbai. On walls inside the slum, they produced the comic's key image: Priya seated atop her own tiger, with a beatific smile not unlike Durga's. Because of their proximity to the works, the painters—all of whom are men—act as local “representatives” of the cause, Devineni says, fielding questions from local passersby and seeing that the paintings stay untouched. (Rao 2015, p. 1)

Concerning the murals, Devineni has stated, “We want to make this an iconic image, a reinterpretation of Durga, the ultimate feminist goddess” (Rao 2015, p. 1). The comic book campaign has received many positive accolades across various media channels, both domestic and international, and in 2015 UN Women named Priya “a gender-equality champion” (UN Women 2015, p. 1).



**Figure 3.** One poster (of three) from the *Abused Goddesses* campaign depicting the goddess Lakshmi. Image Courtesy: Taproot Dentsu.

In contrast to the positive reception of *Priya's Shakti*, the *Abused Goddesses* campaign has received mixed reviews. Mumbai-based advertising agency Taproot India first designed the campaign, and

then approached the organization Save Our Sisters<sup>9</sup> (the women's empowerment initiative of the international non-profit Save the Children India) which decided to release the campaign in print. Although the campaign received little attention when it was first released in 2011, when it re-appeared later on *ScoopWhoop*, an international media company which tracks news and entertainment, it went viral. Within 11 days the article generated over 830 thousand views and almost 400 comments<sup>10</sup> (Suri et al. 2014). While many international media sites hailed this campaign as “powerful” and “genius” (Buzzfeed, *Girls Globe*),<sup>11</sup> within India the campaign met several different types of criticism.<sup>12</sup> Several Hindu organizations were critical of the depiction of Hindu goddesses with marks of abuse and for framing Hindus as abusers. The Hindu Nationalist organization Hindu Janajagruti Samiti proclaimed:

It is known that non-Hindus too, are perpetrators of atrocities against women in India. However, this ad campaign specifically blames the Hindu society for the atrocities. To get their message across, the ad-makers have depicted Hindu Deities in a disrespectful manner. This reeks of sheer anti-Hindu bias! (Hindu Janajagruti Samiti 2013, p. 1)

Similarly, in an interview with *Al Jazeera*, a Hindu activist of the Universal Society of Hinduism accused the campaign of the “trivialization of highly revered goddesses” (Tilak 2013, p. 1). Both of these responses emphasize the sacrilegious nature of the depiction of beaten goddesses; they imply that through this depiction, the ultimate divine power of the goddess is belittled.

In contrast, Indian feminists had an entirely different critique of the *Abused Goddesses* campaign. Most are critical of the deification of women that this campaign espouses. Vaishna Roy argues that “Deification conveniently places the woman on an impossible pedestal from which it takes very little to fall off and thus invite abuse” (Roy 2013, p. 1). Brinda Bose has also highlighted that by depicting women as goddesses, further abuse can be justified whenever women “fall short” of the assigned roles of domestic goddesses (Bose 2013). Additionally, one of the most illuminating critiques of this campaign comes from the sociologist Sanjay Srivatsava, who makes connections between this campaign and previous depictions of goddesses in Indian mass media:

The deification of prominent and powerful women from fields of movies, music and politics stems from a goddess-worshipping culture<sup>13</sup> ... This is a comfortable image for men and women, not necessarily a feminist strategy. A brand of feminism that is consumer driven and the deification of women as a goddess who is chaste, virginal, and domesticated and clothed, sweeps under the carpet the poor women of those who don't dress in traditional Hindu attire. (Tilak 2013, p. 1)

This statement draws our attention to the way that this campaign may fail to represent particular types of women. In general, each of these feminist responses present the argument that this process of deification strips women of the ability to have shifting opinions and flaws and it could be equally as damaging as portraying them as sex objects. For as Praneta Jha observes, Trapping women into images of a supposed ideal is one of the oldest strategies of patriarchy—and if we do not fit the image, it is deemed alright to ‘punish’ and violate us (Jha 2013, p. 1).

As the poster copy refers to domestic violence against “women in India”, referencing a general and large category, it would appear that the campaign is highlighting statistical domestic violence

<sup>9</sup> Save Our Sisters (SOS) works to prevent the sex trafficking of young girls.

<sup>10</sup> The original *ScoopWhoop* article is no longer available online, but there were a variety of comments on the *Buzzfeed* article ranging from “praiseworthy” to “blasphemous”, cf. (Jha 2013).

<sup>11</sup> For an example of this type of praise, cf. (Jha 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Additionally, to date, I am not aware of any coverage of this campaign in Indian language news media aside from English channels.

<sup>13</sup> The deification of powerful women in media and politics can be clearly witnessed in the examples of Jayalalitha Jayaram, who served as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu until 2016 and who was revered as Nadamadum (Walking Goddess) and Adi Parashakti (The Primordial Power), as well as the media confluences of Indira Gandhi with the goddess Durga in the 1980's.

faced by women across caste and caste communities. Therefore, in my own analysis, drawing on the above feminist evaluations, I will interrogate the choice to employ Hindu goddesses in order to speak to a generalized category of woman. In the following sections, I examine the media platforms upon which both *Abused Goddesses* and *Priya's Shakti* were released, and subsequently unpack the representational capacity of the Hindu goddesses depicted.

## 2. Internet, Media, and Representation

At the advent of the internet, many scholars were optimistic about the democratizing nature of the internet and its potential to reduce inequality.<sup>14</sup> As an activist platform, digital media transcends many traditional barriers of communication and has the potential to bring immediate attention to a political issue, but generally scholars today challenge the idea that the internet holds the capacity to transcend traditional social hierarchies of power. For example, Jason P. Abbott argues:

First, the Internet is both a representational space and a representation of space. In terms of accessibility and usage it is patently clear that vast discrepancies exist in terms of gender, education and wealth and between a wired core and a less wired periphery. Secondly, the internet has become increasingly commercialised and privatised, transforming the universality of the medium. Both these trends threaten at best to reduce the progressive potential of the internet and at worst to reinforce existing structural inequalities within the global political economy. (Abbott 2001, p. 100)

Additionally, in their analysis of racism and digital media, Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow White state:

Digital media technology creates and hosts the social networks, virtual worlds, online communities, new (plat)forms of economic and social exclusion, and both new and old styles of race as code, interaction, and image. (Nakamura and White 2012, p. 17)

While Abbott's statement encourages us to consider digital media as another representation of already existing offline social hierarchies, Nakamura and White outline how digital media can serve to perpetuate forms of exclusion even further.

Although this analysis of the *Abused Goddesses* and *Priya's Shakti* campaigns is not quantitatively examining the reception or readership of the campaigns, these critical perspectives of digital media are engaged in order to question the accessibility of the two campaigns. First, *Abused Goddesses* is only published in English, and while *Priya's Shakti* is said to be translated into Hindi, Portuguese, Italian and Spanish, only the English version is present on the website where the comic book is available for download. While it is unclear from the comic book exactly which types of women the campaign is targeting, in the PR and media interviews with the creator generalized terminology like "violence against women", "Indian women", "young girls in India" is often used.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the project seems to be addressing violence faced by all Indian women, but because of the lack of translation, the online book appears inaccessible for Indians who do not speak English or Hindi. Additionally, while most Indians have some sort of access to computers, varying socio-economic backgrounds will determine which type of digital content they are likely to access. For instance, they may be less likely to browse the English website *ScoopWhoop*, and may not have the bandwidth to download an entire comic book. Therefore, at the outset, even if many Indian women could potentially see themselves and their experiences represented in these campaigns, the potential inaccessibility of the medium itself significantly speaks to who will be interacting with these campaigns, and who will not.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For examples of optimistic attitudes towards the democratization of the internet, cf. (Castells 1996) and (Rheingold 1992).

<sup>15</sup> For examples, see interviews with Ram Devineni on the *Priya's Shakti* Press webpage, c.f. (Priya's Shakti 2013).

<sup>16</sup> In her comments on an earlier draft, Patricia Dold highlights that as the *Abused Goddesses* campaign is now only available online, and only in English, it most likely has primarily reached a middle class audience. This risks the reinforcement of the middle class's "claim to represent all other Hindu and Indian culture" (Dold 2019).



### 3. Abused Goddesses: Portraying the Conventional, Neglecting the Marginal

Adopting the popular visual style of Indian calendar art,<sup>17</sup> the *Abused Goddesses* campaign consists of three separate posters each depicting one of three popular Hindu goddesses: Saraswati (the goddess of music, culture and education, Figure 1), Lakshmi (the goddess of prosperity and abundance, Figure 3) and Durga (the warrior goddess, Figure 4). The iconography and backgrounds<sup>18</sup> are all common and would be familiar to the Indian viewer aside from, of course, the cuts and bruises which mark the goddesses' faces. The goddesses are standing or seated directly facing the viewer, inviting direct eye contact. Christopher Pinney notes that "the prevalence of eyes in Indian popular imagery is a reflection of the importance of seeing, and being seen by the deity" (Pinney 2004, p. 9). Here Pinney is referring to the Hindu notion of *darshan*, and while this exchange of sight theologically implies an interaction with the divine in which a blessing is offered, in this campaign the deity is asking to be 'seen' in an additional way, for the act of seeing is also the act of witnessing the marks of violence. Interestingly, the posters also contain small sidebar images which depict the campaign photoshoot, in which real women are being dressed as goddesses. Perhaps this is to further emphasize the connection between goddesses and human women in a more explicit way.<sup>19</sup>

Rajewswari Sunder Rajan argues that not all goddesses get written about equally (Sunder Rajan 2000), and in this campaign, not all goddesses get mobilized equally. The posters depict three specific Hindu goddesses who individually and as a group come from an elite, Sanskritic, Brahmanical Hindu context.<sup>20</sup> Offering an alternative perspective on this popular imagery, Kancha Ilaiah, a political theorist and Dalit activist comments on Brahmanical goddesses like Saraswati, and her association with education, by contrasting her with pioneering Dalit bahun figures from history:

The first woman who worked to provide education for all women is Savithribai Phule, wife of Mahatma Phule<sup>21</sup> in the mid-nineteenth century. To our Dalitbahujan mind, there is no way in which Saraswathi can be compared to Savithribai Phule. In Savithribai Phule one finds real feminist assertion. She took up independent positions and even rejected several suggestions made by Jyotirao Phule. Saraswathi, the Goddess, never did that. Her husband, Brahma, is a Brahmin in all respects—in colour, in costumes—and also in the alienation from all productive work. He was responsible for manipulating the producers—the Dalitbahujanas—into becoming slaves of his caste/class. Though [Saraswathi] was said to be the source of education, she never represented the case of Brahmin women who had themselves been denied education, and of course she never thought of the Dalitbahujan women. She herself remains a tool in the hands of Brahma. She becomes delicate because Brahma wants her to be delicate. She is portrayed as an expert in the strictly defined female activities of serving Brahma or playing the veena—always to amuse Brahma". (Ilaiah 1996, pp. 74–75)

<sup>17</sup> This style of calendar art was pioneered by Raja Ravi Varma during the colonial period. Christopher Pinney discusses how Ravi Varma's images animated the new voice of the emerging nation imagined by Nationalists at the time (Pinney 2004). Therefore, this style of depiction has always been embedded with a form of Nationalist politics which has articulated a specific type of acceptable femininity.

<sup>18</sup> The goddesses are depicted in the beautiful and lush background that is characteristic of calendar art (this perpetuates notions of the perfection of the god realm). The picturesque background drastically contrasts with the brutal marks of violence on the faces, and while this evidently emphasizes the shock value of this campaign, these backgrounds potentially also serve to glamourize violence in particular ways.

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps through the shifted gaze onto the women in the side bars, the viewer is further confronted with the question of why the image of the beaten goddess induces shock differently from that of the sight of a beaten human woman (Dold 2019).

<sup>20</sup> These three goddesses are commonly depicted together, as they are seen in many Shakta contexts as the counterpart to the trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. The *Devi-Bhagavata Purana* in particular identifies Maha-Lakshmi and Maha-Saraswati (along with Maha-Kali) as the three revelations of the power of Devi, the Great Goddess of the *Devi-Mahatmya* (Brown 1990). Dold highlights that this choice of goddess speaks to the creator's choice to use images that would specifically resonate with a Hindu audience (Dold 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Jyotirao Phule was a 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian social reformer and anti-caste activist who is considered a hero by the contemporary Dalit movement.



**Figure 4.** One poster (of three) from the *Abused Goddesses* campaign depicting the goddess Durga. Image Courtesy: Taproot Dentsu.

I do not include this statement to debate its historical veracity, nor to propose that Savithribai Phule be mobilized in these campaigns in the place of Saraswati. Instead, this statement offers a glimpse at how Dalit experience may interact with the symbol of Saraswati. The statement exposes how, for Dalits, the goddess Saraswati holds in her body a particular image of patriarchy that could not serve as inspiration for the masses. Subsequently, in this passage Ilaiah also associates the god Brahma with the Brahmin community and therefore the god is reprehended for Brahmin exploitation of Dalits, and Saraswati is equally held accountable as his wife.

In *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, Ilaiah contrasts Hindu goddesses with Dalitbahujan goddesses (offering a political statement that Dalits do not consider their deities “Hindu”):

The cultural, economic and political ethos of these Goddesses/Gods is entirely different from Hindu hegemonic Gods and Goddesses. The Dalitbahujan Goddesses/Gods<sup>22</sup> are culturally rooted in production, protection and procreation...There is little or no distance between the Gods and Goddesses and people . . . To whatever extent it exists, and contact is needed, the route between the deity and people is direct. Barriers like language, sloka or mantra are not erected . . . The Hindu Gods are basically war heroes and mostly from wars conducted

<sup>22</sup> Ilaiah offers the examples of two South Indian goddesses: Pochamma, who demonstrates a gender-neutral, caste-neutral and class-neutral relationship to human beings, and Polimeramma, who guards entire villages from illness, irrespective of the class or caste makeup of that village (Ilaiah 1996).

against Dalitbahujans in order to create a society where exploitation and inequality are part of the very structure that creates and maintains the caste system. (Ilaiah 1996, pp. 92, 95)

In this passage, Ilaiah directly attributes Dalit oppression to the actions of Hindu gods and goddesses in Hindu mythology. Additionally, he highlights the direct connection that devotees are able to have with the Dalitbahujan goddesses/gods in contrast with the Brahmanical gods who often require specialized intermediaries, which further entrenches hierarchical relationships between caste groups. Ilaiah's critique forces us to consider the ways that the goddesses mobilized in this campaign might ostracize low-caste women, a problem that has been labelled as the 'Brahminization of the women's movement'. Indeed Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran note that the campaign:

... raised the question of whether the feminist movement itself has been subsumed within a dominant, upper-caste identity that has become complicit in consolidating majoritarian hegemony by virtue of ignoring differences and excluding dalit and minority consciousness. The contradictory deployment of dominant Hindu icons such as Durga and Kali as empowering symbols and images reflects this majoritarian positioning of a radical movement that has these very symbols in recognition of its own alienation from the cultural needs of the people. (Kannabiran and Kannabiran 1997, p. 87)

A challenge is issued here for the ways that images of Hindu goddesses and their Shakti potentially marginalize Dalit women.

Another element of the *Abused Goddesses* campaign that drew criticism is the choice to represent auspicious, benevolent goddesses rather than fearsome ones. In contrast to fierce goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, Saraswati and Lakshmi in particular are symbolic of righteous, normative behavior and purity (see Kinsley 1986). The choice to depict these goddesses only serves to further propagate particular examples of femininity that are worthy of our attention and sympathy. Even Durga, whose mythology specifically describes her as a powerful, and aggressive form of female divinity, is tamed in this image. While she does carry her weapons, nowhere is her battlefield or victory present; instead, she appears in her more domesticated form as beautiful and fragile, a passive receptor of violence who is in need of protection. The fierceness of Durga is noticeably absent, as the goddess is not depicted in fury or in any response to violence, but instead with a blank look of passivity, reinforcing notions of the submissive female.<sup>23</sup> As Puhup Manas observes about the representation of Saraswati, "There is a certain blankness in the face of the abused goddess who sits adorned with the pretty dress, makeup, and the Veena. Her face is not one of anguish, nor of anger, but one of silent acceptance" (Manas 2015). This depiction of passivity also serves to further entrench the binary between victim (the goddess) and agent of violence (unnamed perpetrators), without any recognition of the complex ways women receive and respond to assault.

In these particular portrayals, the goddesses are all modestly clad in the national style of sari which continues to primarily represent the respectable middle-class, upper-caste Hindu woman. Sumathi Ramaswamy notes that, "Although this manner of wearing the sari accompanied by a stitched and sleeved blouse is deemed 'traditional,' it was itself fashioned in the latter half of the nineteenth century through the joint interventions of European missionaries and modernizing Indians and soon became the sign of the authentic and well-bred Indian woman" (Ramaswamy 2010, p. 66). Markers like clothing and jewelry have historically held symbolic significance; for certain women, these markers emphasized their status, but for others, the rejection of these markers were a mode of protest. For instance, in her introduction to the historical underpinnings of Dalit feminist theory, Sharmila Rege offers an example of a political action undertaken by certain Dalit women:

Ambedkar asks the dalit women to give up their excessive metal jewellery, and dress patterns that were both public markers of brahmanical caste and gender codes. Giving these up was

<sup>23</sup> It is not the goddess calling out for recognition of violence in the copy, instead a third-party narrator.

at once an assertion against the brahmanical and intra-caste patriarchies that deny women the right to exit. (Rege 2006, p. 58)

This example highlights an instance of a Dalit recognition of the stereotypical nature of normative markers of status, and it additionally offers an example of response and action undertaken by Dalit women in rejection of these stereotypes.

Skin colour is another marker of status in India. In *Abused Goddesses*, like most calendar art depictions of goddesses and heroines, the female figures are all depicted with light skin. This is important to consider as this campaign emerges within a media culture that is largely devoid of representations of dark skin, and dark-skinned women in particular.<sup>24</sup> Not only does this serve to marginalize dark-skinned women, who are often from lower castes and classes, but the binary between dark and light is also easily appropriated and mapped onto another binary: divine versus demonic, in which artistic depictions may choose to depict any specific enemy (a Muslim for instance) with darker skin. Because the binary between light and dark skin already holds positive and negative connotations in Indian culture, skin colour also becomes an important marker for the dissemination of ideology.<sup>25</sup>

The depictions of these specific Hindu goddesses in the above examples uncritically perpetuate traditional norms of femininity including upper-caste clothing and jewellery, fair skin and the qualities of passivity and submissiveness. This campaign also does not draw attention to the fact that women across India are subjected to violence in different ways depending on varying identity markers (like class, caste, religion, physical ability, occupation, etc.). For instance, it ignores the ways that caste interacts with gender, which, as Gopal Guru highlights, “makes sexual violence against dalit or tribal women much more severe in terms of intensity and magnitude” (Guru 1995, p. 2548).<sup>26</sup> While this campaign attempted to mobilize goddesses in order to bring attention to the plight of human women, by mobilizing particular goddesses who epitomize only the markers of middle-class and upper-caste Hindu identity, marginalized women are left out of the depictions. Therefore, their own stories of violence remain hidden.

By contrast with *Abused Goddesses*, the *Priya's Shakti* campaign employed text and image that could have broader representational relevance and power, but still relied on distinctively Hindu symbols to convey its messages. In the next section, I use the critiques raised around *Abused Goddesses* to analyze if and how *Priya's Shakti* negotiated the issues that arose in the former campaign.

<sup>24</sup> Radhika E. Parameswaran and Kavitha Cardoza offer the following examples of this dominant media culture: “Matrimonial classified advertisements in Indian newspapers specify routinely that prospective grooms prefer women with “fair” or “wheatish” complexions. A majority of the Indian female actors in Bollywood are light-skinned women, and the few dark-skinned women actors who have overcome the restrictive norms of skin color wear thick make-up to conceal their dark facial skin. Interweaving colorism into a seamless package of physical attributes, the faces of Indian models in advertisements are almost universally light-skinned with smooth complexions, shining black hair, and slim bodies. The most lucrative products in the Indian cosmetics sector since 1998, a decade after India’s initial incorporation into the global economy, are chemical and herbal products that promise to reduce darkness and preserve light skin by preventing further tanning” (Cardoza and Parameswaran 2009, p. 22).

<sup>25</sup> As a counterpoint, recent years have seen the mobilization of several social media campaigns addressing the under-representation of dark skin in media including Dark is Beautiful and “unfairandlovely”. Furthermore, 2018 also saw the release of the photo campaign “Dark is Divine” that portrays gods and goddesses with dark skin in order to both provide an accurate depiction of the divine, and to challenge views that see fair skin as superior (BBC News 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Additionally, Gabriele Dietrich highlights the difference in the way women from different castes are subjected to violence, and the difference in how their cases are received in court: “It is true that violence against women cuts across caste and class, especially in an urban context. However, the circumstances differ. Cases of dowry connected with torture and murder are more frequent among upper castes and it is probably not exaggerated to say that family violence among upper castes tends to be quite systematic. This type of systematised family violence occurs much less among backward castes and Dalits unless they have become economically prosperous and try to imitate upper caste values, which is rare [ . . . ] However, they face the collective threat of physical harm from upper caste forces all the time [ . . . ] At the same time, such violence is often taken as “normal” and rape cases tend to be compromised or cheaply compensated in an overall bargain to settle the caste issue” (Dietrich 2003, p. 58). Anupama Rao additionally highlights that verbal and physical violation of the female Dalit body is often used as a method of anti-Dalit violence enacted by upper-castes to protest the state’s legislation of Dalits as exceptional bodies (Rao 2009, p. 29).



#### 4. *Priya's Shakti*: Depicting Violence, Questioning Agency

In the comic *Priya's Shakti*, creators Ram Devineni and Vikas K. Menon tell the story of Priya, a young girl who has been sexually assaulted in her own village, and subsequently banished from her home because of the shame brought on her family. Distraught, Priya prays to the goddess Parvati, who, equally distraught, relays Priya's troubles to the god Shiva. Disturbed by the state of gender relations on Earth, the gods convene to decide how to intervene. In a fury, Shiva prohibits further procreation on Earth. Recognizing that Shiva has now punished women as well as men, Parvati begs him to reconsider. When he refuses, Parvati incarnates as the fierce goddess Kali who is said to transfix Shiva with her energy until he revokes his decree. Meanwhile, Priya, who is in hiding in the forest, comes face to face with a tiger. In the midst of her fear, Parvati appears to Priya and instructs the girl to utter the following incantation (Figures 5 and 6):

Speak without shame,  
And stand with me.  
Bring about the change  
You want to see.  
Like Savitri<sup>27</sup> who outwitted death,  
Like the women who helped India gain independence,  
And continue to vote their conscience,  
And the women who have taken on the struggle.

Internalizing the power of the goddess, Priya recognizes the tiger in front of her as her own form of Shakti.<sup>28</sup> Riding her tiger throughout India (reminiscent of the goddess Durga and her mount the lion or tiger), Priya chants her incantation, attracting followers and beginning a movement for social change (Figures 7 and 8). The story ends with Shiva congratulating Parvati but questioning whether or not more people will choose to stand with Priya. Turning the page to a back cover, readers are instructed to download the app Blippar, with which they will be able to see the pages of the comic book come to life with real-life stories of survivors of sexual violence. Finally, the readers are instructed to post photos of themselves standing in solidarity with Priya to social media channels in order to help fight gender-based violence around the world.

There are several clear differences between the *Abused Goddesses* and *Priya's Shakti* campaigns. Rather than the abstract reference to the act of violence against women in *Abused Goddesses*, in *Priya's Shakti*, the reader is forced to confront the act of violence itself. In this story, the attackers are visually depicted, directing readers' attention to the perpetrators themselves. Additionally, *Priya's Shakti* outlines the cultural stigma that follows survivors of sexual assault and rape when Priya's family sends their own daughter away in shame. In contrast to the passivity of the goddesses in *Abused Goddesses*, Priya's agency is evident both in the way she responds to her attackers and in the ways she strives to bring attention to her trauma and to enact social change. Therefore, *Priya's Shakti* paints a much more realistic image of violence against women by shining a spotlight on the actual act of violence without collapsing the complexity of the survivor's reactions and experiences into the figure of the passive victim. Finally, perhaps one of the most distinct differences between the two campaigns is the way in which the *Priya's Shakti* story includes calls for specific actions for readers (encouraging readers to call out harassment they witness, and to support education about violence against women, while simultaneously emphasizing the usefulness of public protest). Additionally, unlike the *Abused*

<sup>27</sup> Savitri is a famous female figure from the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata. Specifically, she is famous for outsmarting the god of death Yama in order to bring her husband Satyavan back from the dead. She is most prominently revered as the epitome of a faithful and dedicated wife, although feminists tend to emphasize her cunning and courageous behavior over her obedience.

<sup>28</sup> Devineni explains that the tiger represents Priya's fear (which is then transformed into her own form of Shakti when Parvati tells Priya she needs to look the tiger in the eye and turn fear into power) in a Tedx talk (Devineni 2015) (Figure 7).

Goddesses campaign, the *Priya's Shakti* comic book was coupled with a concrete outreach program to distribute the book and the stories of real-life survivors through schools.



**Figure 5.** A panel from the *Priya's Shakti* comic book in which Priya is assaulted and subsequently the goddess Parvati is incarnated into the girl's mind and body. Image Courtesy: Ram Devineni.



**Figure 6.** Parvati reaches out to a frightened Priya. Image Courtesy: Ram Devineni.





Figure 7. An empowered Priya returns to her village riding a tiger. Image Courtesy: Ram Devineni.



Figure 8. Priya begins a social movement across India drawing attention to the ways that society can address gender-based violence. Image Courtesy: Ram Devineni.

Gracing the cover and the ending as a form of super hero, the comic offers several details about Priya's identity that are significant to consider. While the text does not explicitly say that Priya comes from the village, the setting of both her home and her assault features thatch-roofed huts and dirt roads, indicating she comes from a rural community. The coloring of this setting is darkened in comparison



with the colorful, light-filled abode of the gods, serving to emphasize the earthly nature of the village (Figure 5). In contrast to the images in the Abused Goddesses campaign, Priya's skin is darker and she wears a basic and subdued sari which appears to be cotton rather than silk. While Priya's appearance is potentially much more relatable to a wider audience of women, her skin color, clothing and lack of jewelry significantly contrasts with the gods and goddesses in the story, who are still depicted with fair skin and extravagant adornments. Additionally, although Priya is the hero of the story, she is missing from a large part of the plot, which instead features the debates between this collection of Brahmanical deities (Figure 9). The question remains, how redemptive the representation of Priya's image really is when ultimate authority is derived from the fair-skinned, ornately-decorated figures? In addition, the choice to center ultimate female power on a figure like the goddess Parvati should be noticed, as Parvati is considered an example of wifely behavior in traditional Hinduism through her consistent dedication to her husband.<sup>29</sup>



**Figure 9.** A panel from the *Priya's Shakti* comic book in Parvati is frustrated that cannot convince Shiva to intervene. Image Courtesy: Ram Devineni.

It is significant that in contrast to the other images of female divinity presented in the two campaigns, the goddess Kali appears with dark skin, and she is clearly enraged at the male Shiva. Her anger even ultimately convinces Shiva, who is read as the head of the gods in this story, to revoke his initial unjust decree. Even so, it should be noted that even Kali, who is perhaps one of the most visually frightening of all Hindu goddesses, appears in a much more sanitized form (Figure 10).<sup>30</sup> For example, her usual necklace of skulls and mouth dripping with blood are missing from this depiction. Her depiction therefore offers an alternative image of femininity for viewers, but it is still presented through

<sup>29</sup> David Kinsley notices that Parvati is primarily known in her role as 'a wife' and that she is not worshipped independently, in contrast to the goddess Durga (Kinsley 1986).

<sup>30</sup> Several scholars have exposed the ways in which the symbol of Kali represents both the status of women in India during the Modern period, and the changing attitudes towards the diverse sectarian forms of religion found in the country, cf. (Humes 2003; Urban 2003; Banerjee 2009). Throughout the years, whether it is the sweetening of her image into that of a mother, the demonizing into that of the devilish whore, or the possessing that of the weakened and thirsty, the diverse re-imaginings of the goddess Kali expose the various constructions of ideal Indian femininity propagated by both the British and Indian reformers. Therefore, I consider this sanitized depiction of Kali as a continuation of this project.



relatively normative imagery without reference to many of the unconventional aspects of Kali and a variety of other non-elite goddesses.



**Figure 10.** The goddess Kali persuades Shiva to intervene and end the war. Image Courtesy: Ram Devineni.

Devineni has openly explained that he chose Hindu mythology as the framework to deliver his message because Hinduism is India's majority religion (Pandey 2014). Not only did Devineni choose to ground his story in the religious language of the majority, he also chose a medium well known to Hindu communities, comic books. There is indeed a link between the *Priya's Shakti* comic book, and another popular series of comic books in both India and the Indian diaspora, the *Amar Chitra Katha* (meaning "immortal picture stories," referred to as ACK from here on). Devineni himself chose the comic book format for *Priya's Shakti* because he grew up on the ACK series (Ansair 2014). Since their inception in 1967, these English language comics feature the stories of India's heroes, mythological gods, and leaders. The founder of ACK, Anant Pai, created this series as a way to teach "Indian themes and values to middle-class Indian children enrolled in English-medium schools" (McLain 2008, p. 298). It is easy to see parallels between the use of ACK as an alternative to textbooks, and Devineni's outreach campaign to distribute *Priya's Shakti* in urban schools.

However, scholars have been very critical of the ACK series and have highlighted how these comics served to disseminate particular understandings of Indian identity and history which resonate with Hindutva propaganda.<sup>31</sup> Frances Pritchett and John Stratton Hawley were the first to argue that ACK tends to fuse Indian identity with Hindu identity by exposing the lack of representation of figures from minority religions (Pritchett 1995; Hawley 1995). Karline McLain builds on this work by highlighting how the Hinduness that is emphasized in these depictions is a very middle-class, upper-caste (and predominantly Vaishnava) strand of Hinduism which is often contrasted against the evils of Muslim orthodoxy (McLain Karline 2009). Notably, Nandini Chandra adds:

<sup>31</sup> Karline McLain also highlights how prominent Hindu nationalist politicians were quick to endorse the ACK series (McLain Karline 2009).

ACK's patriotism selectively drew from a reified Hindu past, and could at best claim a trans-regional Hindu purview based on its down-playing of caste and class divisions, yet it aspired for something more. ACK sought to project a secularism, which was defined along Hindu lines. This Hindu secularism is not viable, both because 'its mode of toleration has historically included absorption, subjugation and marginalization of religious minorities' (Tharamangalam) and because its expanse is so large that it threatens to lose sight of itself unless it is defined against some 'other'. This 'other' conventionally takes the form of Muslims and Dalits. (Chandra 2008, p. 206)

Here Chandra is linking the discourse at work in the ACK series with a larger discourse of Hindu secularism (masked as 'Indian secularism') at work in much right-wing political rhetoric today.

While each of these scholars take a particular lens to analyze the ACK, they all expose the normative nationalist project at work in the pages of this series. Devineni not only used the ACK as inspiration, but he did not engage with the critiques of the homogenizing project foundational to the series in order to take his own project in a new direction. This is evident in the choice to use a very particular type of Hindu mythology as the foundation for the *Priya's Shakti* storyline, and in a project which attempts to combat violence against a generalized category of Indian women. While it is important to recognize the differences between the two comics, it is still necessary to position *Priya's Shakti* within a particular lineage of the comic book medium in India which perpetuates majoritarian identities.

Significantly, while caste/class and religious divisions are also downplayed in the story of *Priya's Shakti*, through the augmented reality technology the reader is exposed to stories of survivors of violence that do cut across caste lines. Several women appear in animated form<sup>32</sup>, but their real voices tell the stories of their assaults, and the difficulty they faced in attempts for justice afterwards. One voice in particular recounts how she was attacked by four men who called her a "low caste whore" before they raped her. This story indicates that the creator's engaged with stories of low-caste women as well. While this is a noteworthy addition to the project, there is not any reference to the ways in which caste influences both statistics of gender-based violence, as well as the structural inequalities of the legal system when survivors attempt to seek justice.

While this campaign can be considered successful in many aspects, several of the feminist critiques which highlight the problematic deification of women in the *Abused Goddesses* campaign also apply to the *Priya's Shakti* campaign. Although the comic book may serve to teach children about some of the realities of sexual violence, it is lacking a fully intersectional analysis of these issues. Additionally, while the project offers some solutions to the problem of sexual violence, it fails to acknowledge the barriers most women (especially those who are marginalized) face in attempts to receive justice and retribution post-assault. While I can only speculate, I imagine most survivors of violence could read the ending to this story as idealistic. Nevertheless, it would be nearly impossible for one comic book to comprehensively represent sexual assault, and in comparison with the *Abused Goddesses* campaign, *Priya's Shakti* takes steps to further communicate the realities and responses to violence against women in India today.

## 5. Conclusions

My analysis of these two campaigns comes to two general conclusions. First, while I consider *Priya's Shakti* more successful in its attempts to represent a less-bounded notion of 'woman' than *Abused Goddesses* (both in depiction and outreach), this article has offered a critique of both campaigns for their mobilizations of particular Hindu goddesses. The specific goddesses chosen, and the ways in which they are visually depicted and embedded into specific normative Hindu storylines, risk perpetuating hegemonic ideas of the ideal Indian woman as worthy of sympathy and protection. Second, just

<sup>32</sup> Alongside these stories, animations highlighting statistics and resources concerning violence against women also appear throughout.

as Sunder Rajan has critiqued the mobilization of Shakti by feminists because it essentializes the notion of ‘woman’ (Sunder Rajan 2000),<sup>33</sup> these mobilizations represent the experience of being ‘violated-as-woman’ without drawing our attention to the ways that different identities are subjected to violence differently. As Farah Naqvi asks:

How does one begin to acknowledge many forms of violence faced by women in identity-based terms? Failure to engage adequately with the complex issue of identity in the context of violence against women was hideously highlighted in the Gujarat carnage of 2002. Scores of women were brutally raped and sexually assaulted in myriad ways because they were Muslim, not just because they were women. (Naqvi 2010, p. 39)

In addition, campaigns like *Abused Goddesses* and *Priya's Shakti* participate in a very specific project within the borders of India, but it is important to think about the way in which digital campaigns and media also travel into the West. Both the *Abused Goddesses* posters and the *Priya's Shakti* comic book can also be considered examples of media which produce specific imaginings of both India and Indian women for Western audiences. While *Priya's Shakti* simultaneously depicts an Indian woman reacting to assault and taking action in response (giving her a degree of agency that many orientalist depictions of Indian women do not give), these images also risk further propagating ideas of India as depraved, full of men who abuse women, and families and communities apathetic to the resulting trauma.<sup>34</sup> In Western news sources *Priya's Shakti* (and often *Abused Goddesses*) is always dramatically framed as a powerful response to “India’s problem”, with little attention given to the ways that violence against women is not just an Indian epidemic, but also a serious issue in the West. These news articles do not make an effort to link the issues highlighted these campaigns to larger global systems of gender-based violence.<sup>35</sup>

The digital media platform upon which *Priya's Shakti* appears enables the campaign to travel transnationally, but also served to divorce the campaign from its original political context. In an analysis of the international media coverage of the 2012 gang rape, Maitrayee Chaudhuri argues that the instant access to news offered by digital platforms “does not necessarily spell either equal or informed access to content (Chaudhuri 2015, p. 22)”, and additionally, the lack of diversity of original sources which spark the virality often produce a “dominant, homogenized and effectively mediatized narrative that can travel instantly and spread everywhere even as ‘unequal ignorance’ in key sites of knowledge production persists” (Ibid., p. 25). This dominant narrative subsequently ignores the nuanced nature of conversations and experiences<sup>36</sup> concerning violence against women in India today, and potentially risks presenting these issues through a problematic orientalist lens.

In contrast to *Abused Goddesses*, the *Priya's Shakti* comic book contains several alternative representations of women’s identities and experiences. The campaign engages with certain realities surrounding gender-based violence in an Indian context on a more complex level than *Abused Goddesses*, and it presents a storyline which features an active female agent responding to oppressive circumstances. Even so, I have argued that the use of a very specific Hindu mythology as a foundation for the storyline must be questioned. Similarly, I have questioned the use of elite Hindu goddesses in feminist campaigns. In response to the mobilization of the goddess symbol by the Indian Women’s Movement, several

<sup>33</sup> Nandini Deo also addresses the notion of ‘woman’ as a category: “The difficulty in mobilizing women qua women is that they are divided in exactly the same ways their societies are. Caste, class, religion, language, and ethnic cleavages in a society are mirrored among women. The experience of being a woman is never isolated from all the other characteristics of a person” (Deo 2016, p. 10).

<sup>34</sup> This can be seen, for instance, when Priya’s family and community reject her in shame after she is assaulted.

<sup>35</sup> For example, the popular cultures news blog *The Mary Sue* notes that the comic book offers a “deep understanding of the issue of sexual violence”, yet in its headline and body, the blog emphasizes specifically “India’s rape culture” without any mention of the ways that sexual violence and rape is a global issue, and women from many countries are able to access the pages and messages of this comic book (McNally 2014, p. 1).

<sup>36</sup> For example, this narrative potentially ignores the notable successes of the Indian Women’s Movement and the way it has effectively influenced policy and law-making.

scholars including Flavia Agnes have pointed out that the use of Hindu figures and concepts like Shakti ignores the “history of a pluralistic society” of India (Agnes 1995, p. 139). Agnes argues that because the propagation of Shakti can be easily appropriated for a communal cause, the women’s movement must counter this by framing their positions, ally-formations and strategies through a secular framework (Agnes 1995). While it seems unnecessary, and potentially counter-productive, to ask Indian feminists to completely abandon their cultural images, it is essential to critically interrogate the use of Hindu goddesses as feminist symbols, particularly in contemporary Indian society, in which communal and caste-based tensions are elevated. India has seen a recent surge in the popularity of right-wing political action and propaganda which rely on Hindu symbols to communicate to the masses, while simultaneously persecuted individuals from minority communities have raised their voices in opposition. It is therefore crucial to seriously consider these voices and take an analytical eye to the current mobilization of religious symbols in contemporary Indian politics and social activism.

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