The Construction of Patriarchal Attitudes Through the Use of Violence: The Influence of Ancient Indian History in Establishing Contemporary Messaging on Acid Violence

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ABSTRACT

This monograph is a product of a decade long study which examines mainstream Indian news sources to theorize media representations of acid attacks against women and girls. This research is a focused extension of that. The primary emphasis of this study is on reviewing the lineage of contradictory and inconsistent messaging produced within ancient Hindu scriptures and multiple texts—to decipher how similar methodologies of messaging is recreated in modern-day news media. The goal of this research is to analyze how a cultural lineage of contradictory and inconsistent messaging is influencing modern-day news media, resulting in acid violence coverage that invokes and maintains ancient traditional codes of Hindu Brahmanical masculinity. By analyzing historical literature through a feminist lens that highlights socio-cultural and religio-political inconsistencies and contradictions, this study seeks out similar rhetorical tropes used in modern-day news to examine how media conveys Hindu Brahmanical, patriarchal, masculinist messaging. Through conducting close readings of over a hundred news articles on acid attack cases between 2018-2022, I examine how the coverage invokes and maintains ancient traditional codes of Hindu Brahmanical masculinity and conceptions of patriarchal honor. Like many other countries, India too maintains a legacy of a cultural past, and this study reflects on the past to make transparent how the toxicity of an enamored cultural past continues to influence and shape modern Indian practices and attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

My first memory of questioning violence against women stems from a childhood experience. I was awakened to the shrieking cry for help by a young woman living across the street in New Delhi, India. People in all directions stepped outside listening to her cries in sheer horror, only to find out the following morning that the woman was proclaimed dead. Media narratives based on statements by her husband and mother-in-law revealed that the young bride was in the kitchen cooking dinner and her sari *accidently* caught on fire. My 5-year-old ears understood pain, and that memory paved a platform for questioning why violence against women occurs? It is this childhood scenario which built a pyramid of new inquiries: Why is violence, especially against women often proclaimed as accidental, a cultural and social obligation, sometimes a religious ordinance, or even a necessity? Why does justice for violence committed against women and girls materialize into blame-oriented (victim-blaming and blame-shifting) justifications? These questions have deepened ever more so since beginning my study on the history of mutilation and acid violence against women and girls in South Asia since 2005.

It is only in the past decade that my focus has shifted on developing a conceptual understanding of acid violence in India, which is not merely an analysis based on perpetrator motives and victim narratives, but how ancient Hindu texts influence modern-day media narratives on cases of acid attacks. My interest in studying the historical basis of gender violence within Hindu texts stems from the need to theorize if certain forms of violence were justified while simultaneously condemned, and if so, how they were issued and dealt with. This knowledge has the potential for generating a better understanding of how messaging on violence against women is generated by the media, and how such messaging can be an influential culprit for a justification for many practices today.

The role of women in Indian history has been a compositional mélange of Goddesses, witches, seducers, preservers of men's desires, virtuous wives, mothers (of child[ren], Earth, and the constellations), ones who encompass all non-human elements of earth, sun, water and fire, wise women, the souls of their

community, and simultaneously, whores, tricksters, seducers, a burden to the family, and transgressors in need of disciplining. Much like the ironies expressed with Gandhi's introduction of non-violence (*ahimsa*), while simultaneously insisting on the importance of celibacy and sleeping beside young girls to prove his own quasi-magical powers to maintain celibate control (Doniger 404), India exists as a country submerged in complex hypocrisies and a state of mystification. But to fully grasp the complexities of the polarity within India, especially in the context of violence, the perceptions of violence and the justification of it in everyday life and media, it is critical to draw on history to theorize a contextual lineage.

Diving into historical narratives of Hindu scriptures and scholarly analysis of ancient Hindu texts, mythologies, and poetry divulges similar methods of revelations around contradictions and inconsistencies in the treatment of women, and these issuances and interpretations on violence are utilized in much of contemporary Indian modes of communication. As stated by the anti-caste movement pioneer B. R. Ambedkar on the *Manusmriti,* "This *Dharma* [codes of conduct] of Manu, by reason of the governing force which it has had for centuries, has become an integral and vital part of the customs and traditions of the Hindus…As law it controlled the actions of the Hindus. Though now a custom, it does not do less. It molds the character and determines the outlook of generation after generation" (Jaiswal, 2016). Thus, as suggested by Dev Nathan et al. there is an intersection between ancient belief structures and contemporary capitalist socio-economic processes. Nathan et al. writes, "The argument is not that Brahminical practices of ancient India continue unchanged into the contemporary capitalist socio-economic formation, but that they still continue to substantially influence new processes of education and knowledge acquisition and use" (Nathan et al. 3).

Contradictions and inconsistencies are present in all religious texts globally. However, this study is not based on the goal of isolating Indian texts, but rather I utilize ancient Hindu scriptures based largely on my familiarity with it, and to build on an analysis to better understand violence against women on a country for which I share a deep-rooted concern and admiration for.

HINDUISM: A HISTORY SUBMERGED IN INCONSISTENCIES AND CONTRADICTIONS

In her book *On Hinduism,* Wendy Doniger, who is regarded as one of the most well-versed scholars of Hinduism, suggests that the Indian-Hindu system of governance concerning women is often based on the concept of *apad* (an instructed code of conduct permitted only during calamities) and largely designed as a double-edged sword for human fallibility and people who disobey the Vedas[1] (266). She refers to one of India's ancient texts *The Laws of Manu*[2,] understood as the legal pillars of Hindu society. The concept of *apad* as per Manu (the author of *The Laws of Manu*) is an elaborate set of legal codes that sets a rationale for punishments while also maintaining religious restoration. *Apad* is loosely understood as a set of circumstances where a person is stuck between a rock and hard place (*The Hindus* 335). Doniger expands on an example of *apad* where Manu both condemns and recommends a widow to sleep with her dead husband's brother as her duty. Hence, as poignantly put forth by Doniger, in the *Laws of Manu* "Every knot tied in one verse is untied in another. The constrictive fabric that he weaves in the central text, he unweaves in the subtext of *apad*" (*On Hinduism* 267). Instances such as these inconsistencies appear in abundance throughout the *Laws of Manu* despite the reason for their subscription as being practiced in times of "emergencies." What is striking is that many codes of conduct that are to be maintained by predominantly women and girls, suggest that their lives are composed of endless extremities, where the rationalization of committing immoral actions also become faith ordained allegiances. Hence, though highly condemnable and tabooed for a woman to

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[1] The *Vedas* are the earliest scriptures of Hinduism, believed to have been written around 1500 BCE. They are a set of four revealed scriptures (sruti in Sanskrit) which were originally an oral tradition believed to have been declared by God and memorized by ancient sages/ rishis. The four scriptures of the *Vedas* are the *Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda,* and *Atharveda* The Vedic culture is believed to have entered the Indian subcontinent around 1700 BCE.

[2] *The Laws of Manu* is believed to be India's first legal text written by Manu. Written during the Vedic period between 1700 BC- 500 BC, the numerous ancient texts that were compiled during this period were known as the Vedas (knowledge). *The Laws of Manu* is also known in Sanskrit as Manusmriti or the Mānava Dharmaśāstra.

sleep with any man even after her husband's death, as her servitude to him transfers into the afterlife (262), *The Laws of Manu* simultaneously emboldens condemnable acts especially towards women. A widowed woman who chooses to refrain from engaging in sexual desired of her brother-in-law [or for that matter any man] is condemned for not following the codes of Manu (hence challenging the Vedic codes of conduct) but is also condemned to live the rest of her life as a widow as a form of punishment, sanctioning her to the bottom of the socio-structural order for women (Bandyopadhyay 152). Therein lies the contradiction between acts of condemnation and righteousness. Doniger's statement simply suggests that in order to maintain religious codes of conduct (especially those prescribed to women) it must be restored through rationalized punishments –which would arguably also suggest that since *The Laws are Manu* stands as the pillars of Hinduism (as understood by dominant Brahmanical groups), Hinduism vindicates punishments directed towards women, explicitly and implicitly. Punishments can be imposed through isolation (widowhood), in a form of limitless servitude, and/or emotional and physical violence (Shirin 5). Whether they be legal codes or basic normative rules, known as *shastras,* Hinduism is compiled of numerous belief system that are full of contradictions and escape clauses that are offered for the select few of the revered caste—but again, with limitations (*The Hindus* 334).

Though Hindu scriptures and ancient texts are full of contradictions and inconsistencies, for the purposes of this study, I have selected alcohol consumption as an example as it has explicitly appeared in numerous texts through the ages and has had a tumultuous fluctuating history tied in with violence. Manu twice equates the drinking of alcohol as one of the major three sins alongside Brahmin-killing and sleeping with a *guru's* wife. But simultaneously encourages the consumption of alcohol to be used as a weapon against enemies or weakening of enemies through intoxication, adversely resulting in the enemy becoming a possible ally. But for women, Manu instructs that those who consume liquor are equated within a milder category to those who keep bad company, who are separated from their husbands, sleep and live in other people's homes, and wander aimlessly (*On Hinduism* 367). However, what is striking is the use of the term "milder." Hindu customs and codes carry with it strong stigmas against women who drink liquor, who engage in bad company, who live separately from their husbands, sleep in other people's homes, and who

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wander aimlessly. Therefore, what Manu may categorize as "mild" he implements the use of *apad* in other references where women are harshly punished for engaging in the deeds listed above. *Apad* oriented inconsistencies and contradictions were highly dangerous for women, and these customary laws continue to burden women in modern India.

Alcohol consumption and drug use intoxication is one of the biggest justificational clauses issued by perpetrators of acid violence and other gender-based violence crimes in India. To this day, it remains one of the greatest contradictory marvels of Indian history. Though forbidden within ancient texts (largely since the *Vedas*), India suffers from widespread alcohol consumption according to the National Library of Medicine (Eashwar et al. 2020). As elaborated by VM Anantha Eashwar in "Alcohol Consumption in India: An Epidemiological Review," it is believed that the reason for such high levels of intoxication are due to "various socio-cultural practices across the nation, different alcohol-related problems among the community, false mass media propaganda about alcohol use, various alcohol drinking patterns among the alcohol consumers, and the emergence of social drinking as a habit because of the widespread urbanization across the country" (49). But as elaborated by Eashwar et al. the high intoxication levels in India are primarily due to the lack of knowledge on alcohol consumption. I would further add—as majority of consumers are male[3] alcohol consumption is also closely tied to the ignorance of gaining knowledge on the links between intoxication and toxic masculinity, as that would imply that there is something fundamentally wrong with the practice, as with the consumers (Biswas 2020). This realization would be a direct challenge and a critique of male masculinity. Ottilingam Somasundaram et al. posit that from the more recent historical return of Gandhi in 1916 abolishing the "drink evil," Indians truly are not well versed in the repercussions of alcohol consumption.

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[3] One third of Indian men in modern day India consume alcohol. Though consumption does not necessarily mean intoxication, over 11% of Indians binge drink, against the global average of 16%. The World Health Organization (WHO) has studies suggesting that unrecorded alcohol (counterfeited and contraband) makes up for over half of the alcohol consumed in India According to the International Alliance of Responsible Drinking (Biswas 2020).

The *Rig Veda*, one of the oldest texts in Indian history, praised Gods for their daily consumption of *soma.[4]* But soma also appears as a regularly consumed drink by the Aryans in the *Vedas;* often drank in overabundance. It is believed that the excess drinking of soma during the *Vedic* period is what caused for its later prohibition. The ancient scriptures that followed, such as the *Manusmriti* glaringly frowned on the drinking of alcohol, but simultaneously permitted it in isolated circumstance. Likewise, we see references to frequent drinking in both the epic tales of India—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata. Baladev, Krishna,* and *Arjuna* are all seen drinking in the company of their wives, daughters, and sisters, though drinks were never projected as being consumed by women. Hindu imageries are consistent in depicting male Gods, deities, sages in complete rapture under the influence of alcohol, while simultaneously engaging in immoral practices such as gambling, and humiliation of women while under the influence of *soma*. The age of *Manu* brought with it the preventative alcohol consumption requirements—especially towards twice-borns for who it was a mortal sin. It is believed that *Manu* rigorously counseled the king for branding liquor drinkers with the sign of a tavern[5] on their foreheads, suggesting that all seller and consumers of liquor should be deemed as low persons.

But despite these historical inconsistencies and fluctuational contradictions, what remains consistent is that alcohol consumption has never thoroughly disappeared from the lived discourse. One theory may suggest that while some ancient scriptures unwaveringly abolished the consumption of liquor, because the representative imagery projected to the public was contradictory to that of proclaimed scripture, it's the lack of congruence in the messaging that caused for the high levels of social and public drinking among men. But an additional theory would propose that the imagery behind the social constructs of masculinity (deities and other men in power engaging in activities (drinking, gambling, deceiving, and mistreating women) is what became the justificational

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[4] Within the *Rig Veda Samhita* there are numerous hymns that reveal that Indian ancestors from 1500- 1000 BCE the consumption of *soma* was a commonplace. Endless passages inscribed in Sanskrit praise the regular drinking of soma—later to be incorporated in the worshiping of *Soma*, otherwise known as the Moon God. Believed to be a part of the milk-weed family, soma is the nectar that is released through rigorous pressing of the plant, which is later fermented to cause high levels of intoxication when consumed.

[5] *Manu* rigorously demanded that all consumers of alcohol should be branded with a symbol of a tavern. A tavern symbol mimics that of a wine cup (Somasundaram 2016).

basis for the public to practice the same, despite scriptural mandate banning them. These representations practiced by men in power and perceived by the public were the some of the defining constructs of masculinity. In her paper titled "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State," Uma Chakravarti writes

> […] the subordination of women is a common feature in of almost all stages of history, [...] the context and form of that subordination has been conditioned by the social and cultural environment is which women have been placed. The general subordination of women assumed a particularly severe form in India through the powerful instrument of religious traditions which have shaped social practices. A marked feature of Hindu society is its legal sanction for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence" (EPW 579).

In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Paulo Freire writes on "fear of freedom." He states that to truly obtain a sense of freedom, one has to be able to risk it or life itself; and those who have not done so have not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness (36). When we have a collective group, primarily men in power engaged in a set of practices, attitudes and beliefs that define the standards of status quo (maintaining the constructs of masculinity and the history of patriarchy) they present themselves as defenders of freedom and a status quo national identity. But as Freire would say "they confuse freedom with the maintenance of the status quo" (36)—in other words, questioning the status quo is thereby a threat to their freedoms.

This is precisely why Brahmanical patriarchy has continued to propagate a culture of toxic masculinity, because to challenge it would mean to risk the freedoms it presents to the dominant classes. Brahmanism provided religious rationale for inequality, thus erecting a society based on hierarchy that served the interests of the dominant classes (Jaiswal 2), and the privileges it also granted were to be able to indulge in activities that were otherwise frowned upon. Suviraj Jaiswal states this best, "Divergent and contradictory beliefs and customs posed no threat if the practitioners could be fitted into a hierarchical structure in which

power, rank, and 'purity' went hand in hand, in opposition to those who were considered dependent, subaltern, and 'impure'" (4). Hence, Hinduism, and for that matter all religions within India have had no rigid boundaries, because exclusivity and fragmentation were all enforced in a social level (Jaiswal 4). Thus, issuing an answer to why this "chaotic jungle" that we call Hinduism, as termed by Friedhelm Hardy consists of an array of contradictions and inconsistencies. Hence it is important to review how social representations were created and depicted, because dominant representations were the true catalysts of messaging social order and attitudes. Hence, scriptural messaging can indeed convey oppositional implication that that practiced socially.

Historian Gerda Lerner, who is also referenced by Chakravarti, pioneered the methodology of exploring patriarchy and its connections with other structures within a historical context. Therefore, this study utilizes a similar methodological approach in drawing on an analysis between visual and textual representations in historical texts and developing a conceptual framework for what types of dominant rhetorical tropes were conveyed, as it can lend a hand in understanding how similar patterns of messaging are crafted in today's media.

The language of cultural past contradictions is important for this body of work because it helps us understand how mutilation-disfigurement-based violence against women is represented within textual language, vocabulary usage, visual language, and rhetorical tropes in modern day analysis—all of which play a systemic role in constructing a dominant narrative. These representations also disclose how deeply embedded the language of contradictions are in the fabric of daily lives. As stated by Pranjali Kureel, much like Aryan-Hindu-Brahmanical patriarchy dictating everyday codes of social conducts, behaviors, and attitudes in Indian history, the hegemony of dominant castes in Indian media are catalysts in inflicting epistemic violence across the nation (97). As mentioned by Nathan et al. the media today plays a critical role in shaping dominant popular culture and perceptions of people through manipulative representations of reality, and one strategy is through the depiction of contradictions (98).

According to David Berliner et al. human beings are full of inconsistencies and contradictions. Critical thinkers specifically are steeped in contradictions, "Passionately defending a cause, they might ignore inconsistencies…" (2). As

expressed earlier, within Hindu scriptures and texts, there are numerous examples of inconsistencies. French sociologist Roger Bastide who studied contradictory behaviors suggests that contradictions and inconsistencies are not opposing factors but are separate (Berlinger 2). I partially disagree with Bastide, because based on my own research on gender-based violence within Brahmanical-Hindu patriarchy, inconsistencies amongst dominant groups are conveniently ignored to advantage the hegemonic patriarchal meta narrative, leading to the cause of contradictions. Berliner gives a poignant example by stating that a Catholic can also be a fetishist, or an environmentalist can be a frequent flyer (1). But what I am suggesting is that within this appearance of a division, there are grey areas with levels of gradations of hierarchies that connect the two (inconsistencies and contradictions). Furthermore, with new ideas forming, challenging hegemonic expectations with the modernization-[Westernization]6 of India, levels of contradictions are growing alongside ideas of upholding ritualistic and traditional values influenced by ancient scriptures. Hence, I would like to argue that contradictions and inconsistencies are equal influencers in the growing polarization of the nation. In other words, they share common entanglements. For example, as suggested by Jayawardana and De Alwis in "Marking Bodies, Reproducing Violence: A Feminist Reading of Female Infanticide in South India," "…the focus should be on how violence reconfigures women's experiences, facilitates the formation of particular identities, and positions women vis-á-vis their communities" (Hegde 508), however, throughout Hindu scriptures a woman's, especially a wife's identity is shaped around the belief system of her father, her husband, her son, and her God (*The Laws of Manu*). There is very little room for the consideration of the woman's own experiences. Hegde suggests that cultural expectations for women speak with a stronger voice than the individual experience (509), leaving the female experience coerced to servitude in the circulation of patriarchal power. Therefore, for example, though new laws condemn certain forms of violence cast upon girls and women, the generational scriptural meta narrative (constructed by dominant Hindu Brahmanical influence) continues to be deemed as a legal code

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[6] I use the term Westernization reluctantly because not all aspects of modern India are derived through Western exposure. Much of what I perceive as modernity in India is a culmination of India's own creations through the melting-pot of influences from outside worlds and the recreation of their own identities with the incorporation of new economic infrastructures existing alongside the fast-growing Hindu right-wing conservativism.

far superior to modern efforts. But as stated earlier, scripture alone is *not* the guide for the constructs of Brahmanical praxis as poignantly stated by Jaiswal, but rather scripture is a convenient tool for generating a message as deemed fit for the benefits of the dominant classes. Hindu scriptures consist of no consistent messaging, but it is the lack of inconsistencies that can also be utilized as a means of creating a dominant narrative.

THE INDIAN MALE AS GOD AND KING: THE INFLUENCED OF ANCIENT IDEOLOGIES ON MODERN LIVED REALITIES

Like most children, my childhood was comprised of multiple phases of questioning my identity, even in my short 8-years of residing in India. I was adopted by a divorced, single mother in her late 30s, who came from a Brahmin feudal family. I remember my classmates inquiring who my father was—I would tell them "My father is my mother, and mother is my father." I also recall being shamed for being dark complexioned and quiet. When my mother remarried, she married a man from the *Sudra* caste, a darker skinned man, who too shared liberal minded feminist thoughts as my mother. But with his arrival into our "Brahmin-ish" family, came unfamiliar customs which were deemed uncouth and inappropriate. My father ate fish and meat, drank alcohol, consumed foods with garlic and onions, and brought the loud and thrilling compositions of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Mozart which were far too opposing to my mother's quaint favorites like Ghulam Ali's ghazals. Forty-years later, in search of a "good balance" between caste affiliated rigidities and family-oriented negotiations, we now have a meat-free home, with no use of garlic and onions, and minimal alcohol consumption, and a daily ritualistic burning of incense, though my mother insists is only for the purposes of perfuming the home. The tunes of Jagjit Singh and ABBA play behinds the closed doors of different rooms, and when these boundaries are transgressed by my father or me, my mother doesn't shy away from expressing her sheer disgust, "Yuck, so uncouth!" As humorous as these gestures are now, and as progressive as we all may claim to be, we all carry with us a legacy of a cultural past which is very much affixed with our castes and classes. But what remains most striking to me is that though we all resist stating that Brahmanical codes of expectations and conducts are present in the house, criticizing these rigid codes remains unwelcomed.

Like many other countries, the instrumental mode of communicating the language of oppression in India is through the Indian news media and other media-based outlets. Similar to ancient and colonial Indian texts, the stories of the oppressed are informed by the oppressors, creating a specific perception of

reality which is based on generating a dominant Hindu-Brahmanical patriarchal knowledge system. Hence, the narratives of violence, especially against women and girls emerge within an exploited and tempered space of knowledge production. All forms of gender-based violence are consequences of masculine and feminine socializations. Just like the heterosexual, white, married, white-collar male sets the defining characteristics of hegemonic masculinity in the West, elite and upper-class Brahmin men set the standards of Hindu Brahmanical masculinity in India. As suggested by Sanjay Srivastava, "embedded in this representation is an entire inventory of the behaviors and roles that have been historically valorized as becoming of ideal masculinity" (Cequin 1). Therefore, I am keen on examining how Brahmanical masculine socializations and their representations are implicitly immersed in Indian media, but alongside I am also theorizing how the socialization of contemporary masculinities ties in with ancient, precolonial, and postcolonial constructs of masculinity and masculine identities.

In "What an All-Women News Network in India Shows Us About Democracy," Farah Stockman writes that Dalit reporters of the upcoming Dalit based newspaper in Uttar Pradesh, *Khabar Lahariya* are constantly belittled and intimidated by mainstream media giants, making their responsibilities of gathering data from rural and Dalit victims of violence difficult (New York Times 2022). Similarly, though the appearance of gender sensitivity in mainstream news has been criticized by numerous activists and independent journalists, scholars such as Pranjalee Kureel have highlighted that the hegemony of dominant caste groups in the media sector is often leading to dominant discourses shaping popular perceptions and playing a catalytic role in inflicting epistemic violence over oppressed and minoritized groups ("Indian Media and Caste: Of Politics, Portrayals, and Beyond 97). Likewise, activist-based journalists such as Rina Mukherji who have continued to argue that the prevalence of hegemonic toxic masculinity vividly exists in India news media, remains unchallenged, and this systemic institutional exploitation and discrimination seeps its way into Indian journalistic messaging (A Journal of the Press Institute of India 2022).

Though to most Indians this comes as a well-established awareness, how this hegemonic knowledge production is manipulated in mainstream news is a

question that needs greater attention. In other words, from my discussions with numerous Indian scholars, academics, reporters, and lawyers, mainstream media's lack of and distorted reporting remains common knowledge, but assessing the rhetorical tropes used within media to convey distorted, inconsistent, and contradictory knowledge needs greater attention.

In India you don't have to look far to find scholars ranging from social scientists to historians who have talked about the culture of contradictions that exist in historical and modern-day India. The most distinguished historian who makes the compelling arguments on contradictions in Indian society from an ancient and modern perspective is Upinder Singh. In her book *Ancient India: Culture of Contradictions,* Singh posits that Indian historical monuments (foundations of art and culture) are a great resource for understanding historical social norms (40). Engraved epistles are usually short and unimaginatively repetitive, but if analyzed carefully, they can disclose a great deal of knowledge on social expectations, taboos, social hierarchies, et cetera. Similarly, I am viewing the hundred cases of acid attacks collected in the span of four-years with a similar eye for analysis. Majority of acid attack cases in newspapers are short and repetitive, often leading one to believe that the reporting is of the same attack, but when analyzed in the context on masculinity, honor, caste, class, mobility restrictions and condemnations, they reveal historical connections and influences from ancient India. A vast majority of acid attacks are committed due to women's rejection of romantic proposals, but some attacks occur due to women's transgressions against the caste system (challenging caste purity), resulting in attacks by men's families for the sake of retaining their familial and communal honor. According to Singh, caste is not merely a division of labor, but a "[…] complex system involving control over material resources, value systems, and knowledge production. Ideas of purity and pollution help justify hierarchy, separation, and the position of the upper castes" (16). Hence, the practice of endogamy helps maintain purity within caste divisions, and punishments are justifiably issued to discipline women and girls into maintaining purity divisions, otherwise known as *varna* (Singh 11). Therefore, according to Vedic texts, one's *dharma,* or duties of a person as part of a society are strictly ordained through following their *varnas.* Any form of transgression of one's *varnas* can result in punishment but based on a significant number of cases collected for this study, majority of punishments are only issued to women, even

when men are engaged in defying their *varnas.* Though such ancient terms may be unknown to many Indians today, the ideas behind them continue to play a significant influence.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay elaborates on how historical codification of legal laws, social behavior and ideas on marriage and widowhood continue to be upheld in modern India. Hence, what were defined as *dharma* or one's duties historically, have been accepted as unquestioned, legitimate social practices today. The question therefore remains, if historical *dharmic* social practices continue to be vindicated today, can acts of violence and their representation also go unnoticed and justified?

Studying contradictions within language in modern times may seem irrelevant when drawing connections and influences on ancient India, but throughout this study, cases of acid attacks are intricately explored not only with their connections to ancient social structures, but also how prevalent these codes of conduct continue to justify violence against women and girls.

In 2010, I began work on a series of art works on Hindu imageries of deities. What compelled me to analyze deity imageries was the realization that nearly all my Hindu-Indian female friends and colleagues who had completed their masters and Ph.D. degrees in various disciplines were having arranged marriages, leaving behind their professional careers to have children, and taking pride in posting pro-nationalistic representations on social media, largely depicting Hindu-centric ideas of wifely and motherly duties. Social media posts of them performing annual rituals for the well-being of their husbands through honoring the *shiva lingam*[7]*,* to ritual fasts for their families, all directed me to the analysis of Hindu Goddesses and their social expectations. To my surprise, Goddesses from Saraswathi to Lakshmi and Kali were exalted for their

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[7] The *Shiva Linga* or *Lingam* is a symbol that represents Lord Shiva in Hinduism. As the most powerful of deities, temples are built in his honor that includes a *Shiva Linga*, representing all the energies of the world and beyond. The popular belief is that the Shiva Linga represents the phallus, the emblem of the generative power in nature (Subhamoy Das, *Learn Religions* 2019).

cultivation of knowledge, wealth, good health, and prosperity. Singh suggests this to be the biggest gendered contradiction in Hinduism when writing

> One of the many contradictions in India is the prevalence of the worship of powerful goddesses within a social system which advocates and inculcates a subordinate, male-centered life for women. […] The idea of a time long ago when women occupied an exalted position in society could be used to claim civilizational superiority during a period of humiliating colonial rule. It was also used as an argument to improve the situation of Indian women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when practices such as child marriage, sati, and low levels of female literacy pointed to the urgent need for social reform (83).

The above quote by Singh gives me further reasons to theorize that contradictory textual and visual language to convey sympathetic tones towards women, or suggestive contradictory empowerment messaging within media can in fact play a reversal role towards the maintenance of their social inferiority.

Within numerous Brahmanical-Hindu texts and epic tales such as the Ramayana, it is a common practice to use the term *pati parmeshwar*, used to define a husband who is revered as a God by his wife. As mentioned within the *Manusmriti,* the duty of the man worthy of this title is to protect his wife, although within parameters of her devotional obedience to him and his family. This form of masculine protection is intricately tied in with concepts of honor, where protection of one's own honor alongside, familial, and communal honor surpasses the honor of the woman. I have personally witnessed the use of the term *pati parmeshwar* in numerous Hindi-based soap operas, films, and modern-day songs where a wife would refer to her husband as a God, and her expression of faith and devotion to him is displayed not only through everyday actions, but also annual rituals such as *Karva Chauth*.8 But also, on the contrary, in modern-

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8 Karva Chauth is a one-day festival celebrated annually by married Hindu women in which they observe a fast from sunrise to moonrise and pray for the well-being and longevity of their husbands. The festival is also observed by unmarried women who pray in the hope of securing a desired life partner. The word Karva Chauth is made up of two words, '*Karva,*' which means an earthen pot with a spout and '*Chauth*' which means fourth. The earthen pot is of great

day entertainment, if men are represented as being disloyal to, or disapproving of their wives, it is not uncommon for a wife to awaken his memory of the akin to God title granted to him, reminding him of his own responsibilities as a Godly husband (*Iimlie,* Season 1, Episode 353). The *Manusmriti* highlights that the unification of a husband, and a wife requires a woman to be united with the man's identity (Doniger and Smith 197). Hence in both cases mentioned above, if a man is loyal or disloyal, respectful or ill-mannered, he continues to be revered as a God.

Similarly, another title granted to a man (not only a husband) is that of a King. Though the King overpowers all beings, and must be treated with respect, he obtains the powers to destroy and therefore must be feared. As suggested in the *Political Violence in Ancient India*, "His decree should not be transgressed by anyone. All this constitutes a powerful statement about the King's enormous potential for violence" (Singh 125). In general, both these prominent identifiers issued to men (akin to God and King) grant men limitless social powers and therefore are to be feared and to be left unchallenged as committing violence is a right granted to them in most circumstances.

The question that comes to mind when reading historical narratives on revered violent Gods and Kings is: How does the violent status of God and King issued to men problematize ideas around masculinity today? Another attribute that is associated with both Gods and Kings is their ability to be warriors, despite their exposition of altruism to supposed all believers. In "Muscular Mahabharatas: Masculinity and Transnational Hindu Identity," Sucheta Kanjilal states "…the increased visibility of epic warrior narratives across global platforms indicates a desire to re-fashion a hypermasculine identity for Hindus in the transnational religio-political sphere. I see this as an attempt to distance Hinduism from

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significance as it is used by the women to offer water to the moon as part of the festival rituals. It is said that this festival began when women started praying for the safe return of their husbands who went to fight wars in far off lands. It is also held that it is celebrated to mark the end of the harvest season. Whatever be the origins, the festival offers an occasion to strengthen familial ties (Ministry of Culture: Government of India, https://indianculture.gov.in/stories/karva-chauth).

Gandhi's 'passive resistance' and colonial conceptions of the 'effeminate native'" (18). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent 2019 campaign "FIT India Movement" can arguably be theorized as a campaign not only to get Indians to adopt a more physically active lifestyle, but also an anti-colonialist approach demonstrating India's reclaim of their warrior masculine identity. Gone are the days of effeminate Indian men, as seen by the British colonizers.

Another example of a contradiction within the codes of Manu suggests that though people of priestly classes should not eat vile animals, like dogs, suggesting you are what you eat, in a famine, a Brahmin may kill and consume a dog, and a father may kill his son, though sons are considered to be heirs who continue their father's and community's legacies. The Vedic period (1700 BC-500 BC) designed around the domination of the underprivileged became known for the rigidification of the caste system and patriarchal attitudes.

Another interesting theoretical concept brough forth by Doniger is the concept of the lack of explanation owed by *Manu* on the justification and rationalization of irrational arguments and behaviors magnifying inequalities. In the *Laws of Manu,* it's made explicitly clear that *Manu*, the son of the Creator is the innate lawgiver and the people who have access to reading the antient texts dictating virtue, wisdom, prosperity are the most prosperous within the caste system, the Brahman male. Consequently, suggesting that all non-Brahmans who are unknowing of the Vedas and the codes of *Manu,* are all capable of human fallibility (36). In other words, as suggested by Lucius T. Outlaw (Jr.) in "Social Ordering and the Systematic Production of Ignorance," just as the American academe has been an institution of Americanization since the nineteenth century leading to a racial ontology where the dominant white narrative dictates all others (Sullivan and Tuana 7), similarly, the Brahman man's Vedic knowledge dictated the ontology of the entire Indian social landscape.

Let's divert our eyes to another prominent Hindu text, the *Arthaśāstra*, written during the *Maurya* Empire[9] by Kautilya. It played a critical role in forming

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[9] The Maurya Empire was founded in 322 BCE by Chandragupta Maurya, it is best known for producing the Arthaśāstra, and the edicts of emperor Ashoka, otherwise known as Ashoka the Great who contributed to the spread of Buddhism in India (Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas 1961). Kautilya was also known as Chanakya, and amongst academic, as Indian Machiavelli.

internal and external trade, agriculture, a system of finance, administration, and economic security. The goal was to improve the Indian economy, and that meant creating new forms of disciplines, punishments, systems of taxation for people who broke expected social Vedic codes, and the solidification of existing caste and gendered hierarchies. Among the many sacred and legal texts that became the bedrock of Hindu society, the Arthaśāstra further segregated women and utilized women as a source of economic gain, while convincing the narrative of restoring religious ideologies.

Women were divided into six categories—married women (wives), widows, prostitutes[10], slaves, laborers, and spies (Shirin 123). Marriage was recognized as the means of gaining *moksha* (liberation), but it only applied to men. The wife's fundamental responsibility was to bare sons, thus "if a wife was barren for eight years or had only borne daughters for twelve years, the husband could take a second wife without paying compensation to the former or returning her dowry" (124). For a widow, if she failed to produce an heir, the king would claim the husband's property, leaving the widow with nothing more than being subjected to further exploitation by her community. If the widow had sons, the sons inherited everything, leaving little for her maintenance. The state's primary goal was to prevent the leakage of property inheritance from a patriarchal hold. A widow could retain her dowry, if approved by her in-laws, but was allowed to keep it only if she remained a widow. Hence, not only did in-laws often refuse her requests, but remarriage meant losing her only source of financial stability. The prostitute had a utilitarian purpose, and her profession was state endorsed, generating an incredible sum of revenues for the nation's economic prosperity. However, due to its stable source of revenues, high levels of skill and training programs granting intellectual growth, produced high demands for praised and accomplished prostitutes, who men preferred over their own wives. Brothel visitations were a fundamental source of prosperity, relegating wives to lead isolated lives. Since prostitutes were state endorsed and seen as a critical generator of economic wealth, the *Arthaśāstra* endowed one fundamental legal right to prostitutes—rape or gang rape of a prostitute was regarded as a crime,

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[10] Though I am against the use of terms "prostitute" or "prostitution" due to its lack of recognition as being work/ a paid profession, the terms are used in this study based on the same usage as in the author's paper, and the original texts.

though nearly impossible to prove. Many categories of women were placed as female slaves. Widows with no maintenance income, women with physical and mental disabilities, unmarried girls, women living alone, mothers of prostitutes, and elderly women, all were seen as outcastes and depended on largely spinning for textile commissioners for little to no compensation. Female spies were the only ones to retain independent employments, though much of their profession encompassed being sexual experts and fully versed in the art of seduction (126).

The list of restrictions placed on women during the Maurya Empire were vast, and often women found themselves between, what Doniger referred to as *apad* (a rock and a hard place). But, based on the *Arthaśāstra,* it is evident that the escape clause did not apply for women. Though slave women were not permitted to be beaten, wives could be physically punished but the punishment had to be limited to three slaps (though difficult to prove). Marital rape was unrecognized, and a wife's refusal to sleep with her husband often resulted in her loss of retainership over her dowry, and an unfaithful husband. Mobility restrictions were not placed on prostitutes, who traveled largely for sex work, but wives required permission to leave the home other than for exceptional circumstances such as death of a family member. Wives were not granted to divorce their husbands, and abortions were perceived as the most heinous crime a woman could commit (127). People were not permitted to shelter a runaway wife, and a wife was prohibited from claiming divorce in her first marriage, and in the following marriages unless both partners shared mutual hatred towards each other, a divorce was accorded, but rarely performed to the woman's liking (127). These contradictions within ancient texts may seem irrelevant to understanding the context of violence in contemporary Indian society, however, they all share one similar positioning of women— in order to be actors in everyday society, they had to follow rigid social expectations, the most common being, women had to be subjects of male sexual desires. Doniger succinctly explores the gendered relationship between a man and a woman and how sex becomes the defining structure of violence against women.

In "How Kamasutra Blurs the Line Between Rape and Sex," Doniger explores how the Kautilyan base of the Kamasutra suggest that when both men and women have independent desires, it results in competition (1). This is precisely

why Manu repeatedly declares that what makes women so dangerous is the fact that men are so weak. Manu recites

> It is the very nature of women to corrupt men here on earth; for that reason, circumspect men do not get careless and wanton among wanton women. It is not just an ignorant man, but even a learned man of the world, too, that a wanton woman can lead astray when he is in the control of lust and anger. No one should sit in a deserted place with his mother, sister, or daughter; for the strong cluster of the sensory powers drags away even a learned man (*On Hinduism* 368).

Manu's inconsistencies in the depiction of men is vast, however the text frequently embarks on strong narratives declaring women as conniving and deceptive, and these combinations make them perfect competitors of men; even learned men can be weakened—which is a direct threat to the constructs of masculinity.

Much of the *Kamasutra*, like most other ancient Hindu texts are based on trickery and deception governed by patriarchy. As a result, the *Kamasutra*, which has been influenced by a plethora of Indian texts, established a code of acceptable sexual violence, and I believe this acceptance of violence resonates into everyday social scenarios as well. For example, violation of a woman's body, from physical, visible and invisible scars from biting, scratching, and hitting are ways of branding a woman as a property. Contradictory to female scarification, male scars were and are to this day a symbol of his warrior identity, otherwise recognized as battle scars (2).

The scarification (I prefer to call it visible branding) of women and virgin girls primarily, were quite common, yet acceptable, but there are reasons to believe that such violence did not only remain confined to the bedroom but intervened into public spaces and be deemed as acceptable behavior. Hence, as proven in the *Arthaśāstra*, the physical abuse of wives at home was the worst, as not only was it acceptable, but wives were literal properties of the husband and his family. More concerning though, as Doniger suggests is the lack of recognition of women's pain especially in the *Kamasutra*. She writes, "…women's exclamations are taken not as indications of their wish to escape pain being

inflicted on them, but merely as part of a ploy designed to excite their male partners" (5). Therein lies another contradiction, in the *Arthaśāstra*, that though raping a prostitute was perceived as a criminal act, there were no credible details defining what constituted as rape, hence physical scarring and violence against women performed during sex, was not recognized as violence. The question therefore I would like to pose: When violence is not discerned as immoral, unjust, wrong, and when pain is disassociated from a woman's body, can acts of violence be deemed as acceptable? Furthermore, can acts of violence that cause mutilation and disfigurement further be associated with a type of branding of a woman? In his book *Strong Arms and Drinking Strength: Masculinity, Violence, and the Body in Ancient India,* Jarrod Whitaker suggests that *Rig Vedic* poet-priests practiced numerous rituals that constructed an androcentric ideology as normative; justifying everyday certain misogynistic practices as the valid way of living (5). One example (which was explored earlier) that Whitaker offers us is of ritualistic drinking of *soma* said to have been consumed in copious amounts by Gods *Indra* and *Agni,* but later consumed by priests, warriors, and men to confer immortality and gaining strength through reaching high levels of intoxication and hallucination (Simha 2017). The problem that Whitaker is posing which directly ties in with modern day attitudes around drinking is that if the practice of drinking is perceived as a normative androcentric custom, can misogynistic practices that are associated with drinking be justified? It does not take long to see a narrative pattern forming when numerous Indian news reports claim a perpetrator to be intoxicated during a committing of a crime—but does the intoxication read as a justification in the eyes of the public when drinking and intoxication has become a normative culture amongst a great deal of Indian men, and part of the cultural landscape?

Whitaker's statement on the normalization of androcentric views (when shared by a majority these individual views can construct a patriarchal society) may very well be the justification for numerous caste-class based dictations and divides. The story of my mother engaging in a thought process and rituals that are not considered "Brahminical" is simply because the dominant narratives are the status quo and are normalized. This would also explain the reasons why so many restaurants across India (largely within northern states) have a separate menu accommodating the dietary needs of strict Brahmins. These are normalized "trends" and there is little room for critiquing them.

In a recent webinar titled, "A New Global Norm on Violence Against Women," organized by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), feminist women's rights lawyer, Flavia Agnes issued an unprecedented talk on the term "violence" and how it needs to be understood in India. She stated that because India has a very narrow definition of violence, we, as a community, especially that of civil courts and political leaders, fail to see that by withdrawing basic rights, such as a women's right over her choices, we are committing an unseen violence. Agnes gave an example of childhood pregnancies (largely caste-based rapes), and the inability to access abortion without the ratification issued by the courts. Most often, girls are made to go into critical states, well into their second and third trimesters to gain access to abortions due to long delays. Do we call this violence? No. But, similar to the lack of abortion access, women are often put into positions where their civic choices are not heard and approved by legislators. Does this have a historical reference? It is hard to say for certain, but a brief look at India's lack of recognition of rights granted to women and girls, especially of lower castes, may indicate that historical texts and Brahmanical masculinist assertions may have immeasurable influence.

As ancient Hinduism is a culmination of ideologies influenced through numerous invasions and various religions, primarily Jainism, Tantrism and Buddhism, new contradictions were created with the unifications of religions. Contradictions within Hinduism have not only been sighted within the *Laws of Manu,* and other early *Vedic* texts. For example, the esoteric traditions of Tantrism/ Tantra developed within Hinduism and Buddhism in the middle of the 1st millennium CE (*The Hindus* 406), were recognized more for their theology, hence Tantras were deeply rooted in the evaluation of theory behind the physicality of deity iconography and mythical images of Gods and Goddesses which were one of the fundamentals of Hindu- Brahminic structures. Hence, with the introduction of Tantrism into post-Vedic Hindu India, it was a movement that rivaled Hinduism to its core and questioned the fundamentals and most cherished assumptions of Brahminic imagery (*The Hindus* 407). It challenged the rudimentary hegemonic Brahminic gendered structure.

Within the Hindu Vedic code of gender structure, the placement of gendered bodies, gendered responsibilities, and caste-based hierarchies were vividly clear. Women had a distinguished social placement and duties, but Tantrism introduced a new system or doctrine where ritualistic practices had the power to transform all levels of worshipers into deities. As a result, Tantras offered a new imagery of female goddesses as emancipators, as cultivators of new knowledge systems, as avengers of social orders, and as seducers with divine powers—a powerful being with self-agency and rights while simultaneously an eroticized figure (*The Hindus* 416). As a result, there was an emergence of Proto-Tantric Goddesses in the Hindu-Indian landscape. But as it turns out, like with Hinduism, though Tantrism and Tantric rituals had a more positive influence on the general attitude of women, contradictions arose with leading to the careful controlling of Tantric women (*The Hindus* 432). Many Tantric rituals placed women as both sexual partners and channelers of Goddesses—resulting in women being perceived as sexual objects and simultaneously ones worthy of worship. Most women did acquire a sense of autonomy through Tantric rituals, namely women of lower castes (434).

There are multiple reasons for why understanding contradictions caused by religio-cultural influences in Indian-Hindu history are important in the cultivation of arguments in this study. Firstly, many Hindu ritual ceremonies continue to this day, and just like the devout practice of rituals dictated within Vedic and Tantric texts, behaviors, attitudes, actions, and modes of interpretation are also historically derived today through Hindu textual history and a legacy of dominant masculine expressions. They play a critical part in the lack of presence of lower caste individuals working in the news media industry to the lack of representation of lower caste people and marginalized women in media.

According to Ayush Tiwari, less than 5% of all articles in English medium newspapers and are written by Dalits/ untouchable and indigenous people (NewsLaundry 2019). Tiwari states that Despite the topics in discussion, marginalized caste groups lacked presence in debates on caste related issues. Hindi based newspapers, which are predominantly present in rural communities, caste and gender issued remained more askew (NewsLaundry 2019). When the entire system of media representation is comprised of a certain sect of people, the news also is created largely for the dominant group. Contradictions,

therefore, in legal codes, the justification of violence, the social responsibilities and taboos placed on women, all exist within a framework guided through history. As suggested by AK Ramanujan,[11] "Cultural traditions in India are indissolubly plural and often conflicting but are organized through at least two principles, (a) context-sensitivity, and (b) reflexivity of various sorts, both of which constantly generate new forms out of the old ones" (Arni 4). Hinduism proliferates multiple meanings, interpretations, and perspectives, and contradictions that Ramanujar refers to as "doubles, shadows and upside-down reflections" (5). As a result, Doniger's belief that within Hinduism "Texts, languages, and thought systems respond to each other" (4) creating an epistemological chain of ideologies running through hundreds of transitions faced within Hinduism. I believe it is no different in today's modern day Indian society. So, what kind of an impact does the passed down system of Hindu influence have on Indians today? Is there a connection between inconsistent historical texts, Brahmanical masculine assertions, the numerous controversies that are emersed within them, and the impact they especially have towards defining violence today?

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[11] AK Ramanujan is an Indian scholar, poet, philologist and playwright whose immense knowledge on ancient Hinduism, and collaborative works with Wendy Doniger from the University of Chicago, have led to the numerous folklore tales on Hinduism, many that create alternative realities, and new interpretations on ancient Hinduism and India (Arni 4).

THE INVISIBILITY OF BRAHMANICAL MASCULINITY IN THE MEDIA

While in India, I was fortunate enough to have in depth discussions with scholars ranging from various disciplinary backgrounds from legal scholars to historians. And whilst these discussions were enriched with personal narratives and theoretical analysis from an Indian lens, I remained mystified when asked "Does Indian news media projects Brahmanical masculine characteristics?" In other words, they expressed their knowledge of certain news programs that contained extremist Hindu fundamentalist views, where there was clear devaluation of women and gender transgressions, but they were uncertain if news articles and reporting of violence against women cases were displayed through a patriarchal lens—largely because majority of news reporting comes across as being largely gender sensitive. [12] It was then that I questioned whether the inundation of masculine representations was so mundane that maybe my observations, that of an outside within were invisible to others. Their visibility of daily interactions (in person and the visuals in the television) was that of accepting masculinist traits but also acknowledging the problem they see and shrugging it off. I began noting down the ways in which expressions of masculinity or patriarchal connotations (primarily within rituals) went unnoticed and uncriticized, and upon highlighting them to others, often the response I received was *yeh sab to hota hai* or "these things keep happening"; confirming my theory that socialized masculinist norms are not only accepted, but they go unnoticed, even within an elite, educated group of scholars. There is a process of justifying toxic masculine behavior when much of it becomes a repeated pattern. These justifications of damaging toxic masculinist behaviors in daily interactions and within media are

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[12] The appearance of gender sensitivity in mainstream news has been criticized by numerous activists and independent journalists. Scholars such as Pranjalee Kureel have highlighted the hegemony of dominance caste groups in the media sector leading to the dominant discourses shaping popular perceptions and playing a catalytic role in inflicting epistemic violence over oppressed and minoritized groups ("Indian Media and Caste: Of Politics, Portrayals, and Beyond 97). And activist-based journalists such as Rina Mukherji who have continued to argue that the prevalence of hegemonic toxic masculinity vividly exists in India news media and remains unchallenged (A Journal of the Press Institute of India 2022).

close reminders of how racial and cultural hate crimes are often justified as being part of our "melting pot" culture in the United States.

The process through which violence becomes invisible is dangerous. Like millions of Indians who are riveted to their televisions daily between the hours of six to nine in the evening, my own mother and her sisters, who are avid viewers of daily Hindi serial dramas, watch the onslaught of patriarchal expressions cast on both traditional and modern Indian heroines in serials like *Imli* (name of the female protagonist) and *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (Because the Mother-in-Law Too Was Once a Bride). While watching these shows with the family, I often adamantly protested that such visuals on national television are corrupting the minds of audiences through the naturalization of violence and misogyny. Though often the response to my contentions on such characterizations were agreed with, they were also justified by suggesting that though misogynistic representations are evident they are also being challenged. My interpretation from many of the responses was "misogynistic portrayals are acceptable as long as they are also being challenged to some degree." Hence, there is a clear undermining of the consequences of patriarchal attitudes and behaviors, and a general acceptance of them as well.

In *Media, Gender, and Popular Culture in India: Tracking Change and Continuity*, Sanjukta Dasgupta et al. refers to Margaret Gallagher's observations on media's need for the continuity in representing traditional gendered paradigms. Gallagher writes that the early 1990s introduced the serialization (television series) of the great Indian mythological epics (the Ramayana and the Mahabharata) representing the macho culture of brave warriors and deities, segregating women's roles to family and their community. The production of serialization purposefully crafted for the upwardly class of women painted for them the image of an expected nationalistic culture, and with it, ideas on masculinity and femininity. The only difference being that the image of warriors and deities are now replaced with the modern day successful, upper caste Indian man. And though women's representations have also modernized, many aspects of social expectations remain unchanged, especially the legitimization of violence (both emotional and physical) cast upon transgressive women. Hence, it is not unnatural on the daily, to see the justification of violence in India, and

possibly even understood as being beyond human control as suggested by Sivakumar et al.

The term masculinity has had many different definitions and associations with masculine identities. Some scholars utilize the term as is, thus indicating that all men encompass masculine traits and behaviors thus problematizing the term by situating it within a collective context. But a great majority of modern-day scholars ranging from Raewyn Connell, Sanjay Srivastava, to Sucheta Kanjilal, to name a few, refer to violence caused by masculinity through giving it other terms such as hypermasculinity, toxic masculinity, patriarchal masculinity, machoism, and occasionally, manliness. For the context of this study, I find Sanjay Srivastava's definition of masculinity to be the most accurate. He defines it as

> Masculinity refers to the socially produced but embodied ways of being male. Its manifestations include manners of speech, behaviors, gestures, social interactions, a division of tasks "proper" to men and women (men work in offices, women do housework), and an overall narrative that positions it as superior to its perceived antithesis, femininity. The discourse of masculinity as a dominant and "superior" gender position is produced at a number of sites and has specific consequences for women as well as those men who may not fit into the dominant and valorized models of masculinity. These sites include: customary laws and regulations, the state and its mechanisms, the family, religious norms and sanctions, popular culture, and, the media (1).

Srivastava also emphasizes that for masculinity to stand as the superior identity to femininity, it must possess multiple characteristics that are binary to that of the feminine identity. Masculinity not only exists in relation to femininity (externally) but most importantly internally related to other men, in other words, the ways in which men display masculine characteristics to fit into the dominant standards expected by other men or a form of dominant masculine cult (2). This is what Raewyn Connell refers to as hegemonic masculine identity (303). Another point to clarify before we begin analyzing the expressions of

Brahmanical masculinity in Indian media, it is important to clearly make the distinctions between patriarchy and masculinity. As suggested by Srivastava, "patriarchy refers to a *system* of organizing social life that is premised on the superiority of all men to women. Masculinity, on the other hand, is not only a relationship between men and women, but also between men" (Srivastava EPW 2015). Therefore, masculinity is the process of *becoming* men whereas patriarchy identifies men as superior. As argued by Chakravarti, the term Brahmanical patriarchy is the most accurate term defining patriarchal Hindu masculinity today as there are ancient connections to strict protocols for the maintenance of patrilineal succession, the preservation of caste purity, segregation of gender divisions, and sexual control of women (579).

Since this portion of the study explores subtle and undisguised forms of masculine expression in the context of Indian media, it is critical to understand that patriarchal masculinity, though emergent globally, it is expressed in distinct ways that are isolated to the South Asian subcontinent, and one such repercussion is through the enactment of acid violence. In "Masculinity and Challenges for Women in Indian Culture," Sivakumar and Manimekalai write that though issues of violence against women are universal, they are manifested differently in independent societies, giving examples of dowry murders, bride burnings, female infanticides, honor killings, and genital mutilations- types of gender-based violence that are not occurring globally (431). I would add acid attacks to the list of violence specific to South Asia because though acid attacks occur in smaller scale throughout different countries globally, an overwhelming majority of attacks occur in India, and disproportionately at women and girls unlike other societies where victimization of men is more prominent (Govindnathan *Corrode*).

Finally, all forms of gender-based violence are consequences of masculine and feminine socializations. Just like the heterosexual, white, married, white-collar male sets the defining characteristics of hegemonic masculinity in the West, elite and upper-class Brahmin men set the standards of Hindu Brahmanical masculinity in India. And as suggested by Srivastava, "embedded in this representation is an entire inventory of the behaviors and roles that have been historically valorized as becoming of ideal masculinity" (Cequin 1). Therefore, here I examine how Brahmanical masculine socializations are implicitly

immersed in Indian media, but alongside I am also theorizing how the socialization of contemporary masculinities ties in with ancient, precolonial, and postcolonial constructs of masculinity and masculine identities.

In the past decade, I have collected over a hundred cases of acid attack articles. The selection process of the articles is based on multiple factors. My analysis of the cases is based on the exploration of language/vocabulary usage and rhetorical tropes media engages in when reporting acid attack cases. Further analysis is done to examine the role they play in the creation of explicit and implicit blame shifting and victim blaming, how downplaying of the crime appears, and finally how mainstream media avoids focus on perpetrator narratives. For the purposes of this paper, I will only be elaborating on one of the patterns—on blame shifting and adversely victim blaming. I am deliberately calling the theme of blame-shifting a "pattern," because it is based on repetitive trends that appear within majority of mainstream acid violence cases.

When analyzing patterns on blame shifting and victim-blaming, I begin by reviewing the difference between blame shifting and victim blaming, and how alcohol intoxication is often sourced as a blame for the crime committed by perpetrators. Over 80% of cases I have reviewed for this study indicate that perpetrator intoxication is a common phenomenon, however less than half of these cases indicate alcohol or drug intoxication being the cause of their attacks. As states in the previous section on India's high levels of drinking linked with historical inconsistencies on drinking, I make a direct correlation between historical trends influencing modern day normalized trends.

EXAMINING A CULTURE OF BLAME SHIFTING AND VICTIM-BLAMING IN INDIAN NEWS MEDIA

Within Indian news media acid violence is highlighted in two ways: Through journalistic reporting of individual cases, and within broader discussions between scholars, law makers, activists, and political leaders, all of which are available both in print and televised news. Based on my observations, when analyzing individual case articles, they fail to talk about crimes committed against women and girls in a socially thematic context, and within the few cases where the perpetrator is interviewed or confessions by the perpetrator are dictated by the police, the victim-blaming narrative is harrowingly noticeable. Though this may not be intentional, Indian media has been reinforcing victim-blaming narratives for many decades. As suggested by Asmita Ghosh, the victim-blaming narrative becomes a way of presenting the perpetrator in a sympathetic lens (Feminism in India 2019 Media Report 21). In a large majority of acid attack cases where victim-blaming occurs, it is usually due to a jilted-lover. Ghosh suggests that the jilted-lover narrative is quite common in India and "it is a symptom of a larger culture of male entitlement in which men believe they are 'owed' the attention and the affection of women and quickly turn violent when rejected" (Feminism in India 2019 Media Report 21).

Though the reporting and coverage of acid violence cases look very similar to those of rape and sexual violence, one major difference is that unlike rape reports which are often projected as being an "ordinary everyday occurrence," acid violence cases are made to appear as being a rarity, and therefore deserving of very little attention.[13] This is important because for readers and viewers, the observation of the coverage begins with a preconceived belittling affect and a bias of crimes committed at women and girls. As a result, much like other forms of gender-based violence, when acid attack cases are perceived as isolated episodic cases, it propagates harmful stereotypes such as where a woman's honor

[13] Both with constant and continued reporting of isolated rape cases, and with the occasional reporting and coverage of acid attack cases, readers and observers take little interest. As suggested by Aarathi Ganesan with most cases of gender-based violence, a woman's honor is instantly questioned, completely isolated from any social systemic context (The Bastion 2019).

is questioned, making the victim-blaming narrative easier to maintain (Feminism in India 2019 Media Report 11). Victim-blaming phenomenon is discretely and indiscreetly projected within isolated cases of acid attacks. When implication of blame occurs, a metanarrative analysis of how these patterns of blame contribute to the construction of masculinity expressed through news media is something that needs to be addressed more within most scholarly analysis. It is not just enough to state that victims are being blamed.

Though there are various common traits shared between blame-shifting and victim-blaming, the main conceptualization behind victim-blaming is the just-world hypothesis, as suggested by professor of Psychology, Sherry Hamby (Roberts 2016). The just-world hypothesis promotes the idea that the victim is deserving of the crime or the atrocity that happened to them. Professor of Social Work, Barbara Gilin explains that victim-blaming is a common defense mechanism behavior (Roberts 2016). Likewise, psychologists Laura Niemi and Liane Young suggest that victim-blaming is pervasive in communities that have stronger binding values (countries with strong patriarchal histories), rather than individualizing values. They write "[…] people who exhibit stronger binding values tend to favor protecting a group or the interests of a team as a whole, whereas people who exhibit stronger individualizing values are more focused on fairness and preventing harm to an individual" (Roberts 2016). Hence, for a society like India with strong binding patriarchal values, stigmatizing attitudes about victims are highly endorsed.

Niemi and Young present numerous complexities when analyzing victim-blaming. Niemi and Young suggest that coverage that focuses on the victim's experience and story—even in a sympathetic way—might increase the likelihood of victim-blaming (Roberts 2016). Their study on victim-blaming published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2016), explains how their research participants showed lower responses to victim-blaming when the perpetrator was the focus of the subject. Following which they inquired that if the participants had to consider the victim's actions how would the outcomes have changed? The respondents had little to say as their focus was no longer on the victim. Alternatively, when dispensable information such as the victim's age, place of attack, and time of attack is propagated by journalists and within police statements, the focus shifts from the perpetrator to the victim, leaving the readers

and viewers to sympathize with the perpetrator. Neimi explains that as a result "[…] we actually neglect to focus on the agency of the perpetrators [and what they] potentially could have done differently" (Roberts 2016). Nancy Berns refers to the works of Aaron Cicourel who calls this phenomenon "background expectancies" where individuals construct their own conceptions of what is normal or acceptable behavior based on dictations of media culture (newspaper columns, magazine articles, televised special reports et cetera) (Berns 263). Berns states that because individuals utilize media to make sense of socio-cultural problems, media is perceived as providing valid explanations that justify the problem, and individual decisions (264).

Blame shifting is far more discreet with no direct accusation being placed at the victim from the perpetrator. But blame is issued at the victim through media language, and police testimonies. Blame-shifting tends to give a pass to abusers as suggested by Deborah Tuerkheimer (*Ms. Magazine* 2021). Especially with cases of acid attacks, most often the victim is left unconscious from the injury or immediately taken away from the scene of the crime to the hospital (in most urban centers), the first respondents are more susceptible of gathering inquiries from witnesses or the perpetrator, if caught (Govindnathan 2010). Since often victims are left to endure severe trauma, fear of the perpetrator and his family and friends, and/or physically unable to speak, perpetrators and witnesses (if there are any) are the only ones who can provide a statement. "When victims are especially vulnerable, they are unlikely to satisfy the legal burden imposed on them. Without power [in any space] a woman will find it difficult to confront her abuser about the unwelcomeness of his behaviors, leaving her a prime target of whatever comes her way (Turkheimer 2021). Furthermore, she explores how the credibility complex is a further aggravated process when journalism exhibits perpetrator narratives.

Bern states that feminist constructions on violence emphasize the role of gender where abusive gender hierarchies are present. She refers to Susan Faludi's writing on the backlash movement, where a collective counter- attack emerges against women and the feminist movement, and blame shifting, and the shifting of responsibility is certainly one such manner of diffusing responsibility and accountability (Bern 263). According to the backlash discourse, the problem automatically becomes a woman, because there is a process of de-gendering the

crime and gendering the blame—something that we have seen a significant amount of within ancient and traditional Indian texts and within masculine Brahmanical expressions. The use of language, tone, behavior, witness and police responses—all play a critical part as a collective in the framing of journalism, and more often than not, as we develop an eye for deconstructing and watchfully looking out for rhetorical tropes in news media, we will notice how a strategy of the patriarchal-resistance discourse, as suggested by Berns, begins to take shape. Patriarchal-resistance discourse is commonly present in news and other media, and it actively removes gender from the problem at hand, and instead reframes the crises as a "human violence" (265).

CREATING A CULTURE OF ETHICAL, GENDER-SENSITIVE JOURNALISM

Journalists covering domestic violence and violence against women cases run numerous risks, and therefore the use of language plays a critical role as it can prompt necessary and impactful changes but simultaneously runs the risk of propagating further violence. In the *2019 Handbook for Journalists* titled *Reporting on Violence Against Women and Girls,* the authors suggest that the language used in discussing violence against women can easily prompt a contagion effect or a copy-cat effect (109). They give an example of the infamous Tat Marina case from Cambodia in 1999 which resulted in six similar [acid] attacks in the same month. Similarly, the Argentinian case of Wanda Taddei who was burnt with alcohol resulted in 132 similar deaths of women in the three-years following her death. Therefore, how attacks are addressed and investigated by journalists is vital especially within acid attack cases. Though this paper does not examine the moral codes of reporting faced by journalists, but rather the interpretations that can be generated amongst readerships on reports on acid attacks, understanding limitations and risks journalists face with vocabulary usage offers better insight into better analyzing articles and reports on crimes against women. One of the biggest challenges faced in reports on acid attacks, especially when gathering data by respondents is how can they ensure that the answers offered are honest especially when many victims are under social and political pressures (113)? These are challenging arenas to navigate through and readers and viewers must be well informed when not enough information is gathered so to avoid biased judgments from readers. When there is a lack of information gathered, much of the article is drafted under a presumptive framework which can often run the risk of downplaying the nature of the violence.

The handbook instructs that the fundamental rule when reporting crimes against women is to portray them as a systemic issue, and not a sensationalized miscellaneous occurrence (109). Furthermore, it should be highlighted the types of consequences that would result for perpetrators of the crime, which from my observance seems to lack in Indian journalism. There is also a need for regular

investigation reports and rereporting of attacks with updated information—this needs to become a basic language journalists practice in all reports on crimes committed against women and girls. The handbook suggests, "As several studies have pointed out, regular coverage in the media of existing legal provisions, including certain articles of criminal codes, and other measures taken to combat this phenomenon would have a deterrent effect and therefore protect women" (112).

Vocabulary usage can be a form of social activism or intensify crimes against women. The handbook offers numerous examples: terms such as "crimes of passion" should be replaced with "domestic murders," "alleged victim" and "alleged crime" should be replaced with reported victim and leaving little room questioning the victim and the crime. With sexual violence, statements such as "she confessed to have been raped" can imply that the victim bore some responsibility in the crime committed. Neutral language such as "the victim reported that she was raped" offers victims an agency in narrating their stories. In April 2018 the Association des Journalistes Professionells de Belgique Francophone (Association of Professional Journalists of French-speaking Belgium) advocated for a set of proposals with regards to vocabulary use in reporting on gender-based violence (*Reporting on Acid Violence Against Women and Girls* 112). They stated, "The vocabulary used to talk about issues of violence against women in not neutral. Some words hurt and conceal, minimize, mock, trivialize or truncate the reality of violence" (112). The authors argue that journalists must always ask a basic set of questions when reporting on gender-based violence, from does the language usage contribute to reinforcing gender stereotypes, does the use of vocabulary and formatting of the statements support the victim, to how does the choice of illustrations create an impact on building social awareness on the crime?

The Handbook for Journalists also offers a set of guidelines that must be followed when writing media articles on violence against women (111-122). It recommends that journalism on crimes against women should not wait until an international body covers systemic issues, but investigative research and reports should be carried out immediately; also known as proactive journalism. Below is a list of selected ten points mentioned in the handbook. Based on my observations, when the selected case studies on acid violence are analyzed with

these points in mind, it has the potential to provide protective efforts to survivors of acid attacks, but if not applied properly, articles can risk downplaying acid violence as a systemic crime and potentially increase cases of copy-cat crimes.

i. Headings and titles of articles must be clear and impactful. Oftentimes with reporters must resist the temptation to rush into a project or rely too heavily on immediate surveys or confessions without supporting evidence as that can create sensational or simplistic headlines and stories.

ii. Statistics and surveys must be analyzed with caution, preferably with the final approval from local and national NGOs who are experts on the field. Offering readers a clarity on the subject is necessary and it can be done through examining the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, whether the crime was committed in a private or public space, number of cases recorded each year offers insight into the crime being a systemic issue, does the research avoid non-reporting bias, is there a measure available of examining if cases are rising or dropping (based on social and political circumstances), are the figures accurate, and finally providing an better understanding to readers on what age groups are affected the most and why.

iii. Avoiding the possibilities of copy-cat effects- Much of this can be done with clear definitions of consequences of crimes.

iv. Gender-based violence should be mentioned in all articles as a human rights violation and not merely as an isolated incident.

v. Vocabulary usage should be approached with utmost care. Language that questions the victim's word should be avoided. It is important to reject language that lectures that could incite judgment. Language that details women's whereabouts, or the hours they were out followed with a statement suggesting that women should stay indoors can increase fear and guilt around women. Such statements within articles and televised reports will only further help maintain the status quo of defines patriarchal power relations and hierarchies.

vi. Describe the reality while avoiding sensationalism. As stated in the handbook, "A major challenge lies in knowing how to describe the violence committed, its nature and the circumstances surrounding it. How many details should journalists give?" (115) Decisions around

the extent of raw statements provided can also severely affect the reporting and therefore the audience interpretation. Too little information runs the risk of weakening the story and leads to readers and viewers underestimating the severity of the crime, and too much information can generate shock and "morbid curiosity" (115).

vii.   Avoid secondary victimization and portray survivors as resilient. This can often happen when language utilized discriminatory— indulgent towards the aggressor and accusatory towards the victim(s). (This can often happen with victim blaming and blame shifting language and written statements).

viii.   Practice service and solution journalism. It is critical to add institutional responses that are combating the crime. Providing information of resources, responses by the civil society, shelters, lawyers and judges who are engaged in similar cases, and lastly information on how to obtain economic and social assistance that is both government and privately funded are all resources that assure protection for victims. Such language of protection mechanism also poses a legitimate threat to perpetrators.

ix.   Practicing "slow journalism" (120) helps gain the complexity of cases and allows for victim narratives to also be included. Investigative approach to reporting is something that is lacking today, resulting in short, articles and reporting that gives little to no valuable information. This runs the risk of downplaying the crime.

x.   Rebalance information to improve gender equality. Women victim narratives must be issued as much importance as information gathered by the perpetrator, witnesses, and other commentators. Equitable presence issued to women is necessary, but based on my own observations, this lacks enormously within Indian news media.

Out of the fifteen tips in covering media reporting on violence against women issued in the *Handbook for Journalists,* I have selected the relevant ten that can be applied to when studying how language and vocabulary usage within Indian news media downplays the severity of acid attack cases.

Similar to the *Handbook for Journalists, A Media Ethics Toolkit on Sensitive Reportage* issued by Feminism in India (FII)14 focuses on media reportage in India with a focus on creating a culture of ethical gender-sensitive journalism. Within it, it states that the Indian media maintains practices that often perpetuates patriarchal mindsets and rape culture (1). All of the key points provided in the Indian toolkit resemble those in the handbook with the exception of an additional point—to not issue details that would lead to the identification of the survivor as pointed out in the Indian Penal Code under Section 228A (*Indian Penal Code* 58). Based on my study of numerous acid attack cases, nearly all the key points made by the two resources mentioned earlier are ignored. This is a problem not only for the security of the survivors and their loved ones, but also because if the Indian media did practice ethical gender-sensitive journalism, their coverage would not downplay or undervalue the crimes as a systemic issue. Out of the 20 cases reviewed in 2021, 8 cases disclose the name of the survivor, a family member, a friend, or a neighbor. Depending on the community, especially when the attack occurred in a rural village or a small town, disclosing names of schools, or work locations, neighborhoods, and markets where the survivor often visits can also reveal their identity.

The Toolkit and the Handbook provide a good set of ethical practices with a gender-sensitive approach to reporting. We now have a better understanding of the value of messaging and how we need to first alter how messaging is crafter and that can build a scope for changing the social landscape of toxic masculinity. In a country with a growing number of independent journalists demanding for introspection for Indian media, there is a growing critique of toxic masculinist behaviors and the impact they continue to have on the performance of patriarchal attitudes on women and girls. For decades, Indian scholars and activists have criticized the government for their lack of engagement in providing better services for survivors of violence, and harsher sentences issued to perpetrators of acid attacks. However, my observations so far indicate that media not only

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14 Feminism in India is an award winning intersectional digital feminist platform that aims to educate and create a feminist sensibility amongst the youth. FII published daily magazines with articles, holds national and international workshops and events, curates and creates feminist resources like the *Media Ethics Toolkit* along with large-scale digital advocacy campaigns from violence against women to safe abortions, sustainable menstruations, and media analysis (*FII Media Ethics Toolkit* 1).

continues to implicitly downplay the crime of acid violence, but they also shift blame away from perpetrators which can result in the justification of the crime committed. Therefore, I argue that alongside demands for new initiatives, we also need to introduce new methods of inquiry and critique on how to tackle systemic violence. Hence, this research is not only a critique of representations of acid attacks in the news media, but it also provides a framework for Indian legal scholars, activists, journalists, and media studies scholars to look more critically at media and build a keen eye for explicit and implicit representations of patriarchal tropes. This research has the scope for collectively demanding new policies not only in the media industry, but also introduce new gender-based educational initiatives urging a deeper look at how the masculinist legacy of a cultural past continues to damage possibilities for systemic change. This is not an impossible task. This study is merely an addition to the vast array of scholars and activists engaged and committed towards the reduction of violence committed against women and girls in India.

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