

# LENSING THE GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND ELEMENTS OF ACTIVISM IN THE PRIYA COMIC SERIES

Patricia Ningi Sibisi

*University of South Africa, South Africa*

---

**Abstract:** This research article focuses on the first Indian female superhero, Priya. This article critically analyses the storyline of Priya, a rape survivor and an ardent devotee of Goddess Parvati. The critical investigation reflects the pain, social stigma, and isolation encountered by female rape survivors universally particularly in Indian Society. The narrative of the comics is interwoven with Indian Mythology where Goddess Parvati is angered to see the sexual exploitation of women in daily life and is determined to change the scene. Goddess Parvati enters Priya's body and seeks revenge on the men who raped her. Priya is also blessed with a flying Tiger called "Sahas" (courage in English). This article lenses the message of women empowerment and Gender-based violence preached through the character Priya. This article highlights the sexual violence on women, women's rights, equality on one end, and challenges the deeply rooted patriarchal norms of our society at the other. Apart from that, the article explores three more adventures of Priya, focusing activism on burning issues. In Priya's Mask, she points out the compulsion of mask-wearing, working together to end the pandemic is essential for all humankind. The undercurrent of this comic strip reflects courage; compassion during difficult times as well as the sacrifices of frontline health workers. Priya's mirror uncovers the protest of acid attack survivors and the psychological impact of such assault. Titled Priya and the Lost Girls is a protest against Women trafficking and forcing them into a brothel. In short, articles offer a psychoanalytical approach to a dark-skinned and salwar-kameez clad girl representing modern women & her reformation towards rape culture, racialism, and conservative cum fundamentalist attitude of society.

Keywords- Priya's Shakti, Women Empowerment, Rape-Culture, Patriarchal, Psychoanalytical Approach.

---

## Introduction

Priya is a phenomenal female superhero, debuting in Ram Devineni and Dan Goldman's graphic novel titled "Priya's Shakti." In reaction to the 2012 Delhi bus rape, Indian-American filmmaker Ram Devineni created Priya's Shakti. Before collaborating with Dan Goldman, Mr. Devineni travelled extensively to various parts of India and discussed with various activists the issues of gender violence. The comic can be downloaded for free in both English and Hindi from its official website, making it accessible to all. Priya's Shakti appears to be the comic book that introduces the concept of augmented reality in comic books. The comic portrays the transformation of Priya into a super-powered defender of women's rights who would seek to change society in order to abolish all forms of abuse against women. As the title suggests, "Shakti", means "strength". The flying tiger she mounts is named Sahas, which means "courage" in Hindi. The Priya anthologies are different from other comics in terms of their treatment of gender violence issues and environmental problems. The powerful message incorporated into the comic book towards social reformation is different from other comics dealing mainly with fantasy and the celebration of the supernatural powers of superheroes. Priya's superpower is her faith in herself and optimism for a better world. That is where she differs from other superheroes, and the United Nations recently designated the character Priya as a Champion of Gender Equality.

Corresponding author's email : [faydogdu@erzincan.edu.tr](mailto:faydogdu@erzincan.edu.tr)



## Method

We shall critically analyse the four adventures of Priya –

- Priya's Shakti.
- Priya's Mirror
- Priya and the Lost Girls
- Priya's Mask

Our objective is to showcase how the character Priya highlights the psychological traumas of victims of rape, acid attack, and women's trafficking. That's not all. We are trying to highlight how Priya's transformation evolved from a fight for women's rights to addressing problems of pandemic through Priya's mask. Aside from that, we're attempting to answer the question of how far Priya's suggestions for combating gender violence in comics are justified.

### *Priya's Shakti*

Kailasha Mountain is known to be the abode of Lord Shiva and Parvati with their children. Far from Kailasha, in one remote corner of the earth, a girl named "Priya" preyed upon the deity of Goddess Parvati to help and save her tide over the trauma, as she had no one to turn to but her (Goddess Parvati). Priya wanted to become a teacher. But she was unfortunate as she did not get any support from her father. Her father stopped her from going to school and engaged her with household work and serving the other family members. Goddess Parvati was anguished and upset over the unfair treatment meted out to their devotees. One day, a few people teased Priya, stating she was a slut, and boasted of doing anything to her as no one could stop them. They touched her inappropriately in spite of her best resistance. On another day, another group of people stalked and threw stones at her. Priya being stoned fell down, brutally molested and sexually abused. The irony is that at this point, Priya was feeling guilty about having dishonoured her family, as if she was to blame. True to his apprehension, her family members disowned her and barred her entry into her own home. Goddess Parvati, seeing the plight and apathy of her family to her devotee Priya, incarnated into Priya's mind and body to tide over her sea of sorrows. Failing to get justice first from her family and then from the panchayat (local government at the grass root level), Priya was solely on a mission to identify and take revenge on her abusers. She was enraged to identify one of the abusers as someone who had known her since her school days. The accused person justified her action by blaming her for wearing loose clothes, exposing her body parts. The man, not deterred, molested Priya for the second time without any remorse. Priya tried her best to resist, but in vain. Perhaps Goddess Parvati forgot she was interwoven with the soul of her ardent devotee both physically and spiritually at that point of time. Being razed with anger, Goddess Parvati incarnated herself through the body of Priya and made her presence felt before the abuser. The Goddess Parvati warned the abusers about the punishment that was coming for the heinous crime that they had committed. Being frightened, the perpetrators of the crime wanted to flee. On the other hand, the anger and pain of Parvati engulfed the mind of Lord Shiva. He became restless and decided to destroy the whole creation. Lord Shiva gathered various Gods and decided to curse humanity, denying them the ability to reproduce because humans had degraded as a race. With the looming large of Shiva's curse on the Earth, there was a hue and cry among humanity at large with the complaint of their inability to procreate. This sparked a debate among the Gods about whether the curse would result in the extinction of humanity as a whole. Goddess Parvati realised that the curse had unjustly punished women and realised that, as rape is an act of violence and domination, it cannot be stopped by violence. When the assembly had failed to resist Lord Shiva's acts, Goddess Parvati took the initiative for the calm and appeasement of Lord

Shiva and pleaded with her beloved husband that his decree/curse would cause suffering to the women as well, without any fault on their part. Parvati further went on to say that it needs to be educated that divinity is inbuilt among men and women equally. But Shiva in his anger and turned down Parvati's request. A great chaos loomed over the Earth. In the meantime, Goddess Parvati, who is also known as Annapurna for looking after men and women, finding no alternative, prayed to Goddess Kali to transform him into her (Goddess Kali's) fierce form to save the earth. Parvati instantly appeared as the fierce Goddess Kali before Lord Shiva and asked him to stop the war. Shiva, also known as the God of destruction, was frightened by the fierce form of the deity and consented to end the war. After accomplishing her desire, the fierce Kali transformed back into Parvati before Lord Shiva to plead that she had great faith in human devotees and let them live. Lord Shiva was still relentless in his anger. He promised Parvati that then he would only revoke his curse if they give proof of changing their behaviour. Calm prevailed over the Earth amid ruins and confusion. Goddess Parvati appeared before Priya and was kind enough to give her a mantra (magic spell) to overcome any fear and give her the courage to protect her in any circumstance. She was instrumental in bringing a change among the people, as she (Goddess Parvati) wished for. After that, Priya was totally transformed into a fearless girl. She was gifted a celestial tiger by Goddess Parvati to aid her in her mission of reforming society. Priya returned back to the village that had previously exiled her. People were afraid of seeing her on the back of a tiger and thought that this was again a divine kind of punishment sent for them. But Priya condoned them and inflicted confidence in being outspoken about any kind of shameful act perpetuated on the women. Priya's was now on a mission to play the roles of a teacher and a social worker to educate society for the larger cause. The people assembled her and treated her as a divine girl, but she reminded them that every human is part of the divinity which they might have forgotten. Her clear message was that "women and men are equal in all respects" and that they should be treated equally. Society got confidence in encouragement in the education of girls and the general public were vocal in the case of misbehaviour and maltreatment against women after Priya's counselling. The effect was a rapid transformation in society. Men and women came out in large numbers to openly speak against injustices meted out to them. To end the injustice of gender-based violence, it was their first and most important duty to tell everyone about it. Priya's family also joined the protest march, having previously shunned her. Priya's message spread from village to village, and people learnt to treat their son and daughter equally. Lord Shiva was also pleased with the foresight of Parvati, trusting her faith in the earth but at the same time keeping her reservation of how many people would participate and enrol them in Priya's movement. The people on the earth and society talked about Priya's courage and bravery. Perhaps they did not realise that it was the beginning of something much larger than her life.

### ***Cultural Theory on "Rape"-***

Rape culture was defined as the widespread and normalisation of rape in American society, as an intense symptom of persistent social misogyny and sexism. To put in in a more simplified manner, rape Culture refers to a society in which rape is common and sexual violence against women is accepted and justified in the media and culture at large. Rape culture is fostered by applying sexist language, the commodification of women's bodies, and the glorification of sexual violence, all of which contribute to the development of a society hostile to women's rights and dignity and well-being. Every woman is impacted by rape culture. Rape of one woman humiliates, brutalises, creates shock and confines all women. Due to the prevalence of rape, the majority of women and girls restrict their conduct. The majority of women and girls live in terror of being raped. Men, on the whole, are not subjected to such state of mind. That explains the mechanism of rape which operates as a potent tool for subjugating the entire female populace to the entire male populace. There are many men who are

against rape but many women (who are not physically raped) still live within the fear psychosis created by the imprint or tradition of rape culture.

Instances of Rape Culture-

- Attributing blame on the victim.
- Sexual abuse is downplayed.
- Not Protesting against Sexual misconduct.
- Examining or judging a victim's attire, psychological condition, motivations, and background in public
- Gender-based violence that is unjustified or inappropriate in films and television
- Men is portrayed as sexually authoritative and aggressive
- Women Portrayed as meek and subservient sexually.
- Considering rape allegations lightly
- Instead of educating males not to rape, the stereotype mentality of telling women to avoid being raped.

### **Findings**

Lensing the Patriarchal Stereotypes & psychological trauma of victims - In the comics we see that though Priya from the very beginning of his child hood was never encouraged in her studies despite of her aptitude in becoming a teacher. Her parents never encouraged her in her education based on the fact that she is a girl. His father particularly stopped her from going to school and instructed her for learning household jobs. Priya was stalked by few people in the market place and criticized for the way she dresses. Even these stalkers labelled her as a "loose girl and believed that it is very natural to mistreat such a girl. Even Priya was touched inappropriately by the stalkers. When Priya was brutally gang raped by the abusers her family straightway disowned her. Her father pointed out that the shame is on as if it's her fault that she got raped. Even her mother who was supposed to understand her pain being a woman disowned her completely and never for once tried to treat her wound and shoed compassion at the time of her need. Crying with agony and pain Priya went to the village Panchayat. A member rebuked Priya going out all by herself in the market. A woman official said that they must have provoked the men that lead to the heinous act. Another official pointed out that as such an act has happened the best thing is to marry one of the abusers. Priya was heartbroken. This picture of the Panchayat or the treatment of Priya by his family members is the actual picture of the insensitive attitude of society shown towards rape survivors. When Priya confronted his abusers she was molested a second time. One of the molesters opined that she must not be dressed as a slut and it's appropriate to touch any body part of women without her consent. This mentality is basically another reflection of reality where still lot of men in society still don't know how to behave with women. The society or the abusers or her family was unable to feel the frustration, agony and disappointment and pain of Priya. Sexual assault victims feel extreme acute pain, comparable to other types of physical trauma. When physical damage is restricted, factors such as stress-induced hyperalgesia (high pain sensitivity) may create post-assault discomfort. A University of North Carolina study team assembled out to establish where sexual assault victims experienced pain and how intense it was. The researchers recruited female sexual assault survivors who were 18 years or older and requested a SANE exam within two days after the attack. The individuals were asked to assess their pain level on a scale of one to ten while also being questioned about the degree of discomfort in eight different bodily areas. According to the results, the majority of those injured instantly had severe or moderate pain, with

more than half suffering discomfort in four or more bodily sites. Only one-third of the females said that they used pain medication. Not only can victims of sexual assault have bodily trauma, but there may also be a neurobiological complication produced by the strain arising out of horrible crime. There are several bodily consequences of sexual crimes such as transmission of sexually transmitted disease, unwanted pregnancy, vaginal bleeding etc. But the psychological impacts on rape victims are disastrous in terms of:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder, which manifests itself via recollections, hallucinations, extreme anxiety, and irrational thinking.
- Chronic sadness and despair with acute depression.
- Suicidality and inability in trusting others
- Hatred and resentment, Shock, Loss of sensation, Absence of control, Confusion

We have discussed here some of the psychological after effects of sexual assault few of which has been brought alive in the comics through the character Priya. Even the readers feel Priya's pain when her suffering, frustration and shock are portrayed in the comics after her brutal rape.

**A Celebration of Women hood and Connecting to India's Past-** As she left her village grieving, Priya prayed to the Goddess Parvati. Like Savitri, or Matangini Hazra, or other great women who helped India obtain independence and established social consciousness, Goddess Parvati advises her to fight back in the same manner.

**A Survivor Not a Victim-**The message of the comic has been very clear from the first instalment of the series i.e. "Priya's Shakti". Priya's tale is that of a trailblazing superhero dedicated to the advancement of women's rights and equality. She refuses to play the victim's card and return's to the village to protest against the "rape culture" through counselling and messages which are need of the hour:

**On Women Discrimination and Equality-** Women must be treated with respect, as they are equal to men in every respect. Why isn't it possible to mark every single day of the year as International Women's Day? Why do they continue to be marginalised despite their talent and success? In spite of numerous national and international efforts to empower women and achieve gender equality, gender inequality persists on a global scale, though to varying degrees and for various reasons. In India, the gender gap is evident in every facet of life, from health and education to business and politics. India is placed at 101th spot out of 135 when it came to the severity of discrimination against women. The fact in the previous line is proved by 'Global Gender Gap Report'. Though the position of women has improved significantly in the previous several decades but gender inequality continues to be a plague on society. Priya strikes at the very root of the problem with her counselling. She stressed on the fact that respecting women should begin from school and family. As women are equal to men they should be entitled to all equal rights that men enjoy as they deserve them as human beings and not as a privilege.

**On Women Education-** As Priya was herself deprived of education as a child, she stressed on the need for educating both female and male children of a family. Girls are entitled to the same educational opportunities as males. Girls who are well-educated may make better decisions because they have access to a wider variety of possibilities. As a result of educating young women, families, communities and economies are strengthened. Economic development may be boosted by an educated female population. An increase in a woman's earnings may help her rise in the ranks of both her family and her society. Her increased sense of self-worth also gives her the courage to speak up for herself and her children. The rate of child marriage is reduced.

Charity Begins at Home: Parents should teach their male child from the very beginning that girl child are equally special and when they would have kids after growing up they should always remember that both female and male Childs are precious and should not be discriminated based on gender.

Men Should Protest against maltreatment of women: Women must speak up when they face any types of abuse or discrimination. But In the fight against gender based violence, males had an important role to play — as dads, boyfriends siblings, spouses, and public activists — in challenging the detrimental assumptions that contributed to legitimise gender inequity. This comic strongly highlights the need of altering masculine attitudes regarding physical violence, psychological manipulation, and authoritarian decision-making against women. Only when society protects all citizens equally a true safe society will be formed.

A Super-hero comic like no other- In spite of her formidable companions (her pet tiger Sahas & Goddess Parvati), Priya's superpower is her belief in herself and her aspiration for a better future. "Priya's Shakti" is a paradigm for future Indian comic books because of its use of cutting-edge mobile and digital technology, together with its daring but empathetic presentation of sexual abuse.

### ***Priya's Mirror***

In this adventure, Priya, riding on her celestial tiger, was flying over a beautiful valley and was charmed by the blossoming flowers. After some time, she felt a heavy heart. In the night, in her sleep, the nightmare of her getting abused surfaced again. But Priya reconciled instantly and remembered that she wished others to be courageous and act like her. As she came to terms with reality, shedding aside her nightmare, she remembered her mission was to instil courage in society at large to face the challenges of heinous crimes inflicted upon women with courage and confidence. In the valley, Priya learnt from a man named Rafi that he worked in a castle that accommodated and sheltered women acid victims. This castle was owned by a demon named Ahankar. Priya appreciated the gesture. Rafi narrated that in the castle there was a girl named "Anjali", and wanted to marry her. Rafi managed to escape somehow and wanted Priya to rescue Anjali from the clutches of Ahankar. Ahankar brain washed acid victims, stating they were safe in her castle and society would never love or accept them in mainstream life. Priya went into the castle to investigate the matter and found out that the victims were trapped in their own fears. Priya prayed to Goddess Parvati for her help. Goddess Parvati explained to Priya the origin of Ahankar. Accordingly, Priya unearthed that Ahankar was a simple man known by the name "Prem" in his youth. He was a budding poet. He was in love with a girl, "Kusum." When the matter came to light, Kusum's brothers assaulted him brutally and forced him to drink acid. Kusum prayed to Lord Shiva to save Prem's life. The prayer was answered by Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva saved his life, but the effect of the acid turned him into an acid-spitting demon, and his first victims were the brothers of Kusum, responsible for his state of affairs. Thereafter, Ahankar kept Kusum away from his castle as she was affected by the acid when Ahankar killed her brothers. While the other inmates shared their trauma with one another, Kusum never told her storey to anyone. Goddess Parvati gave Priya a mirror of "love" which would reflect and boost the courage and confidence of the victims, making them realise their journey in life and their glorious past. By seeing their own faces in the magical mirror, the victims refused to be trapped anymore in the name of fear, and they started coming out openly to stand by Priya. Priya consoled Anjali not to misunderstand Rafi as she thought he had abandoned her like many other people. But still, Anjali was not willing to leave the castle, living behind her other sisters. The narrative of the survivors were different from one another but in one point their attitude to the society was the same that they would not be accepted and always be looked at with disgrace and if the fault lies with them. Priya boosted confidence among the victims by narrating to them her own trauma as a rape victim, cast aside from the mainstream life of society. Priya further exhorted them to believe that they are more than victims, which will give them

strength. Priya helped the survivors to realise their complete selves by reminding them that they were more than just pretty faces. Still not convinced, one victim argued perhaps Priya could conceal her rape-trauma from the open public, but that was not their case as the scars from acid attacks could not be wiped away. Priya held up the magic mirror, showing the survivors their worthiness beyond their physical beauty. Then the survivors discovered that one of them was a lawyer, another was a painter, and the third had a gift for dancing. Over hearing the confidence of the victims, Ahankar appealed to them not to believe the stories as the world is an evil and cruel place. But without following his advice, they took an oath to change society. Ahankar tried his best to keep them confined with him, but united, the survivors resisted getting freedom. Priya finally defeated the demon by showing him his reflection in the love mirror. Ahankar realised how degraded he had become and repented, transforming back into Prem. Priya counselled Ahankar to come out of his guilt feelings and that controlling others does not make one powerful. Priya further pointed out that she was not here to confront Ahankar, but rather she wanted to free him from the fear that held them back. When everyone had left, Kusum stayed there to use the mirror of love over Prem (Ahankar). Anjali, now an established lawyer, filed a case in court against the open sale of acid. Another two victims opened up a café and were appreciated by different people due to their attitude of facing the world bravely.

### ***Cultural Theory on Acid Attacks on Women-***

An acid attack involves the premeditated throwing of acid on a victim (particularly women), usually on her face. It is a gender-based heinous crime against women. Acid attacks on women are growing daily, mostly on females between the ages of 11 and 30. Sulphuric, nitric, and hydrochloric acids are the most often used acids in such attacks. In Indian culture reasons for acid attacks are as follows-

#### ***A society dominated by Men***

Women in Indian Society are treated as a commodity of either their father or husbands. As a result of growing up in such a patriarchal culture, males aren't accustomed to hearing the word "no" particularly from women. A woman's denial in some circumstances has a significant unforgettable and on the hostile impact on the psyche of males who have always been pushed to dominate in this patriarchal culture and compels them to respond in this most distressing way and resulting in acid attack incidents..

#### ***Easy Access to Acids-***

A major factor in acid attacks is the widespread availability of acids. Any person can easily buy acid in medicine shops, super-markets, and shopping malls. It is not only cheap to buy and can be accessed by any person easily in a country like India.

#### ***Violence against Women in the Home-***

One of the most common reasons of acid attacks on women is domestic violence, in which members of the household threaten and abuse the victims. Even today in many Indian families when women express their view-point or do not agree on matters such as demands of dowry, to conceive a child, or not willing to have sex, family disputes is considered to be highly outrageous by their husband as well as their families.

#### ***Jealousy or Envy-***

Another major contributing reason to these horrendous events is envy. Everyone in today's hyper-competitive society strives to outdo the next person and get an advantage. A person cannot accept the success of others. We should feel ashamed and embarrassed that such occurrences have happened because someone was envious and wanted to put a crimp in someone else's promising and successful career.

Hatred arising out of rejected love/failed relationships-

This is one of the primary reasons for hurling acid at a victim. When a man's marriage proposal is refused or his approaches are denied by a woman, and in retaliation, acid is poured on the lady to punish her. For the attacker it's only a little span of time to throw acid on the victim but they are insensitive to understand that the women's physical features had not only been disfigured but it's a life worse than death.

### ***Crossing the line for the honour of the family***

As a way to protect the family's dignity, individuals have utilised such savage actions as acid to prevent women from fighting back against recognized customs and beliefs of the family.

### **Findings**

A Protest against Acid Attacks on Women & Exploring the Narratives of victim-blaming and society-induced stigma of Acid Attack Survivors- Acid assaults are undoubtedly an aberration of our civilization. Whenever we come across an acid attack survivor (most victims are women or girls), we are unable to understand the trauma, pain, and agony they live with each and every day of life. But her sufferings are not limited to her body; they go beyond that. Have we ever thought about the impact of acid attacks on their mental health? We haven't. In an acid assault, a person hurls acid at another person, most often on their face, as a form of retribution or vengeance. This horrific crime may be committed against anybody, regardless of gender, but it is most often committed against a girl or a woman with the goal of destroying her whole life. Victims of acid attacks are physically affected in terms of

- There is a chance that the eyelids will not budge.
- Scars develop on the cheeks.
- The nostrils may become entirely sealed as a result of the nose shrinking.
- Torn lips and a closed mouth are possible symptoms.

But nobody can undermine the social scars. This society's established standards against women, in particular, are clearly partisan and discriminatory, since no one can contradict this reality. Historically, women have been held responsible to carry out certain requirements than males because of these social conventions. At every stage of their lives, the acid assault survivors were subjected to racism. They wouldn't leave their house for fear of becoming the subject of jokes or conversation. It was difficult for them to build self-esteem and self-confidence because of the assumption that they would be assessed primarily on the basis of their physical appearance. Girls who are victims of acid attacks also suffers from the social stigma that they won't be ever married. These are only a few of the societal ramifications that a victim must endure. The misery of the victims does not end here. There are several financial scars as well. Because of their physical and mental impairments, the survivors will have to work incredibly hard to become financially independent. All of them are unable to work, and even those who are finding it very difficult to get employment. As a result of their plight, they are forced to rely on others for their survival. Employers not only look at a candidate's credentials, talents, and experience, but also at his or her physical appearance, which leaves many job seekers without work. Last but the most significant is psychological consequences of the acid attacks. Psychology has a significant impact on human growth. Overanalysing is a human trait. In the presence of stress, this propensity increases significantly. An acid assault on a girl or woman has many ramifications, not the



least of which is the psychological scars. Unbearable physical and mental trauma suddenly becomes a normal bodily component. The psychological scars left by the accident follow the sufferer for the rest of her life. Unbearable physical and mental trauma suddenly becomes a normal bodily component. The psychological scars left by the accident follow the survivors for the rest of their life. The victims' mind is continuously plagued by the fear of being perceived in a derogatory manner by family, society and friends due to their facial scars. Due to this the survivors are often prone to debilitating mental health disorders acute sadness, suicidal thoughts, trusting issues and helplessness. Priya's Mirror reflects this horrible and realistic aftermath of acid attacks through the character sketches of survivors. One of the survivors shared her story. A boy in her class approached her but she turned him down. In retaliation the guy threw acid on her face. She had to undergo several painful surgeries and despite topping her class she was unable to secure a job due to her disfigured face. Even his families and friends were afraid to speak to him and she was isolated from the society. Another survivor narrated her story which was equally insensitive. When she went to the police station lodging a complaint against acid attack on her she was questioned by the police that she might have provoked the boys to do such a heinous act. Another survivor laments that she does not want to go back to the hypocritical society which thinks that it's her fault in getting herself disfigured. Another victim narrated a grim tale that her used to abuse her physically to prove his manhood and then to make her suffer poured acid on her face. Another lady said that her parents were already bankrupt taking care of her medical charges and no people came for her help when she fell down on the ground after acid attack. The survivors believed that the outside world don't have any idea about their suffering and will never accept them back in the mainstream life.

But nobody can undermine the social scars. This society's established standards against women, in particular, are clearly partisan and discriminatory, since no one can contradict this reality. Historically, women have been held more responsible for carrying out certain requirements than males because of these social conventions. At every stage of their lives, the acid assault survivors were subjected to racism. They wouldn't leave their house for fear of becoming the subject of jokes or conversation. It was difficult for them to build self-esteem and self-confidence because of the assumption that they would be assessed primarily on the basis of their physical appearance. Girls who are victims of acid attacks also suffer from the social stigma that they won't ever be married. These are only a few of the societal ramifications that a victim must endure. The misery of the victims does not end here. There are several financial scars as well. Because of their physical and mental impairments, the survivors will have to work incredibly hard to become financially independent. All of them are unable to work, even those who are finding it very difficult to get employment. As a result of their plight, they are forced to rely on others for their survival. Employers not only look at a candidate's credentials, talents, and experience but also at his or her physical appearance, which leaves many job seekers without work. Last but not least, there are the psychological ramifications of the acid attacks. Psychology has a significant impact on human growth. Overanalysing is a human trait. In the presence of stress, this propensity increases significantly. Acid assaults on girls or women have many ramifications, not the least of which is psychological scars. Unbearable physical and mental trauma suddenly becomes a normal bodily component. The psychological scars left by the accident follow the sufferer for the rest of her life. Unbearable physical and mental trauma suddenly becomes a normal bodily component. The psychological scars left by the accident follow the survivors for the rest of their lives. The victims' minds are continuously plagued by the fear of being perceived in a derogatory manner by family, society, and friends due to their facial scars. Due to this, the survivors are often prone to debilitating mental health disorders, acute sadness, suicidal thoughts, trust issues, and helplessness. Priya's Mirror reflects the horrific and realistic aftermath of acid attacks through the character sketches of those who survive. One of the survivors shared her story. A boy in her class

approached her, but she turned him down. In retaliation, the guy threw acid on her face. She had to undergo several painful surgeries, and despite topping her class, was unable to secure a job due to her disfigured face. Even his family and friends were afraid to speak to him, and he was isolated from society. Another survivor narrated her story, which was equally insensitive. When she went to the police station to lodge a complaint against the acid attack on her, she was questioned by the police and told that she might have provoked the boys to do such a heinous act. Another survivor laments that she does not want to go back to the hypocritical society that thinks that it's her fault for getting herself disfigured. Another victim narrated a grim tale of how her husband used to abuse her physically to prove his manhood and then, to make her suffer, poured acid on her face. Another lady said that her parents were already bankrupt taking care of her medical charges and no one came to her aid when she fell down on the ground after an acid attack. The survivors believed that the outside world didn't have any idea about their suffering and would never accept them back into mainstream life.

.Allegorical Interpretation of Fear & Masculinity- Demon, Ahankar is a victim of masculinity as well. Before he became the acid-spewing Ahankar, he was merely a young guy in love with a lady, and his brothers objected, forcing acid down his throat. "Acid is a metaphor for toxic masculinity." It has the ability to corrode you on the inside as well as other people on the outside. So it's not like Ahankar isn't being corroded by the acid just as much as the folks he's killing. As a result, he seeks to keep women in that negative area.

Instilling hope and courage among Acid Attack Survivors- Priya, by holding the mirror of love to the acid attack survivors, counselled them and made them realise that they were more than pretty faces and should not hide behind their wounds. People have a different perspective and assume that an acid attack victim should not have a life full of opportunities. But that is not true. It is possible to overcome such circumstances. Priya encouraged the victims to appear the way they wanted, rather than complying with the conventional mind-set's standards. One survivor was a brilliant dancer, while another had a remarkable artistic talent. One victim saw her fighting as a lawyer for women's rights, as the mirror revealed. When the survivors gazed into the mirror of love, they saw themselves in a new light. The mirror of love reminded them of their goals and dreams before their acid attacks. And this gave them the strength to go ahead and alter their lives. At the end of the comic, we see survivors blending into mainstream life, opening their own businesses and getting appreciation from people for the courage they showed. Even the characters, Rafi and Anjali, get married. For the record, there are several instances often seen in newspapers where men willingly marry acid attack survivors based on true love and respect for them.

A Universal Protest against Retail Selling of Acid- In India, retailing of acids is prohibited, but that is not the case in other countries. For instance, acid is often used as a common weapon of vengeance. There have been more than 700 attacks on paper in the United Kingdom since 2016. Social hardship, marginalisation, and a lack of strong male role models are all common outcomes of gangs and young delinquency. Masculinity is characterised by strength and is associated with fear in this context. As a result, acid has become a popular weapon since it can induce tremendous terror (the bodily and psychological attack being so extreme). In the United Kingdom, buying acid is simple and inexpensive. Unlike firearms and knives, carrying acid is not restricted. This makes it more difficult for investigators to find evidence of a criminal motive.

A new Weapon against Gender Violence- Priya, our protagonist, is a lady who overcomes her worries and ignores the scorn, speaks out as a survivor and inspires hundreds of Indian women who have endured similar ordeals through this comic book. The first three instalments are mainly targeted to teen agers which act as a correction of traditional mind-sets against gender violence.

Introducing Augmented Reality- Readers will be able to experience real-life stories of brave women who have survived acid attacks through the use of augmented reality. Monica Singh, a life coach, philanthropist, and well-known social crusader for violence against women at the United Nations, is featured in the comic book. On the other hand, Natalia Ponce De Leon, the Colombian woman who was doused with sulphuric acid by a guy she had never met, also features in this comic book. Readers may put on a digital mask using augmented reality and post their picture on social media to demonstrate their support and solidarity with Natalia's "The Last Mask" campaign.

### ***Priya and the Lost Girls***

Priya returned to her village after a long time as she was engaged in her mission. She surprisingly noticed that there were no girls in the village and only old women and men lived there. She learnt from her parents that her sister, Laxmi, went for work to a palace belonging to Rahu, but nothing could be heard about her, like many others. Priya's mother learned that the palace had a bad reputation, but her father did not believe that. Her mother handed over a bangle from her ancestor that had the power of strength and wisdom. Priya understood the villagers were hiding something about the lost girls. Priya's memory flashed back to how her sister fought with her for the bangles to get possession. One night, Priya dreamt her sister Laxmi was in trouble and asked her for help. Priya started her mission to Rahu's palace with her flying tiger, "Sahas". At the very last, she found an old lady, Ambika, crying for water and learnt from her that she had been thrown out of Rahu like many others as she had become too old and saved her life. Priya learnt that, like Ambika, there were many ladies in the downstairs who needed help like her. At the entry point, Priya was greeted by Rahu, the king of the palace, who identified Priya as one of the gang members on the day she was raped. Rahu further stated that she committed a sin and could have easily avoided her sufferings if she had given herself happily to the abusers. Rahu boasted that the rule of the city is that women should serve men. Rahu also threatened Priya with dire consequences if she did not follow the rules of the city and vanished away by spraying some poison in her hand, which wounded her. In the palace, Priya met a strange female Naga (a shape-shifting female snake) known as Manidhari to help heal her wounds. At that very moment, a lady named Amrit appeared before Priya and the Naga snake faded away in fear. Amrit advised Priya not to believe Manidhari but rather accompany her (Amrit) to a safe place. Priya was hesitant to follow, but instantly felt Sahas (courageous Priya's tiger) in her heart to shrug off her weakness and fear.. Priya looked at the city streets lighted with neon, and the girls took their positions, and the men, after selection, took them to their private rooms. Priya understood that Amrit was also a part of Rahu's trade in women's trafficking. Priya unearthed that if any girl wanted to leave Rahu's palace, Amrit was instrumental in turning them to stone by spraying magical lotion called "Elexcir". Priya could recognise her lost sister, Laxmi, among the girls, but Laxmi refused to recognise her elder sister. From the conversation among the women in the palace, Priya learns that it is better to be safe in this place than be raped in the village. Another girl advocated going out alone with tight clothes as the reason for abusive acts. Priya tactically left the palace and later came back for Laxmi. Out of the palace, Priya met again with Manidhari (a shape-shifting female snake), who sought her help in regaining her kingdom, which had been taken away by Rahu unethically. Finally, Priya defeats Rahu and finds Laxmi. The lost girls were hesitant to return back to their villages but Priya was determined to bring them back to mainstream life and solidify their acceptance to society/families. Priya led them to their respective villages, but instead of being welcomed, they were treated like lepers. Parents, instead of giving a warm reception, ridiculed them and cursed them for bringing shame to their family. One mother was helpless to accommodate fearing her husband. One villager asked the girls either to go back to the brothel or die. However, one girl was courageous enough to shout back, "You go to those brothels too. You are the ones who are shameful. "Another

villager termed them as characterless girls and opined that they should cut out their tongues. However, one of the girls revealed that she had seen the man in Rahu. But her wife immediately protested and rebuked the girl for accusing her husband of making such an allegation. There was a huge gathering of men and women, and they asked them to vacate the village immediately, as the girls were all nasty women, according to the villagers. Villagers suddenly began to throw stones at these girls. Laxmi tried her best to stop the girls from running away. Priya was very angry and she roared, and she made every villager become calm and quiet. Every lost girl and woman who escaped from Rahu were absorbed into Priya's body and stated the villagers did not deserve the privilege of the presence of women in their lives. Priya spoke on behalf of all women and asked the villagers whether they would allow their daughters to die. She pointed out that a mother loves her own daughter but does not feel the pain of another mother's pain for her daughter. Most of the women in the village were blind to the faults of their husbands. But villagers were relentless in advocating the fact that women should know their limitations in life. She further clarified that boys are privileged in education while women are forced to cook. There is an unequal treatment of boys and girls in society. Priya holds a mirror of reality to the villagers that when a son beats his wife, no actions are taken and it is high time to treat women with respect and honour. Most importantly, boys should be educated from a very early age to behave properly with women. A little girl laments to Priya that she is often treated as a burden by her parents for being a girl. Priya had enough and, using magic absorbed the remaining women of the villages into her body. She left the village by saying that instead of making girls safe, the world should be made into a woman-friendly place. Until then, the villagers will have to stay without women.

#### Cultural Theory on Women Trafficking-

In India and Hinduism Women are revered as Devi or deities. But in actuality, this euphoria is proven to be a fabrication. By "trafficking," we mean "unlawful commerce." People are purchased in human trafficking. Human trafficking may take place both inside and outside of national boundaries. There are several motives for the trafficking of men and women, as well as children. Few motives listed are Underage marriage, sex abuse, forced labour, unconsensual marriage as well as other forms of harassment. India as a country is severely vulnerable to women trafficking due to number of reasons. Slavery might have been abolished a long time back it still exist in the modern era in the disguise of "Trafficking".

#### Reasons for women trafficking in Indian Culture-

- Poverty, deprivation & gender inequality- Women's sexual abuse has a lot to do with poverty. People who are more easily exploitable are the targets of human traffickers. Women are more likely to become victims of human trafficking because they represent larger percentage of the impoverished and are often depicted as sexual objects. Traffickers in India target mainly those women who are not backed up financially and are emotionally vulnerable. The trafficked women often are the population who migrated from their home due to natural disaster, political insurgence or economic problem.
- In rural India still women are frequently denied access to mainstream socio-economic structures, including job, postsecondary learning, and constitutional equality.
- Lack of educational possibilities, gender discrepancies in availability of opportunities in day to day life, and a lack of social security. Women engaging in other low-paying jobs or service that is insufficient to support their families are abused.
- Domestic or societal violence directed against women.

- Women who are oblivious to their legal rights/ constitutional protection and recourses are easy preys of traffickers.
- Natural calamities exacerbate women's vulnerability.
- In certain cultures, there is a high prevalence of bad traditional and religious practises. In India the above problem exist as it is a multicultural nation.
- The patriarchal order of society is partly responsible for this, since males assert their superiority over females and regard them as commodities.
- Ineffective law enforcement mechanisms and weak political attitude to counter trafficking of women.
- A burgeoning sex industry that employs a sizable number of young females.
- Some uneducated people in rural India believe that having sexual intercourse with virgin cures several sexually transmitted diseases. The above reason enhances the susceptibility of female children getting trafficked due to the idea that they have a lower risk of becoming HIV carriers.
- In rural India many poor parents sell their daughters to traffickers for financial gain.

## **Findings**

Confronting the Patriarchal Judgements- Sacrifice is connected with women in Indian culture. To justify this point of view, the notion of the volcano and Rahu originated in the comic book. Often, in folklore and ancient societies, women were thrown into volcanoes to satisfy the gods. The ladies voluntarily gave their lives for the community. This led to the notion of Rahu, who is described as a demon who draws his vitality from the volcano and the ladies who serve him. He symbolises "the brothels" and their psychological control.

The Mind-set needs to be changed- Unfortunately, the storey doesn't end with the woman's rescue. As is true outside of the comic book world, families of trafficked girls refuse to take them back. The survivors are ridiculed, judged harshly for their abuse, and treated like "lepers". The "ME-TOO" movement did change the way people protested sexual abuse against women in the cities. This comic, "Lost Girls," shows the reality of sexual harassment and women's trafficking against women, especially in rural India and other interior villages of the world.

Patriarchy exists beyond Gender even in Women and lensing the double Standards- When Priya returned to the village with the rescued girls from brothels, they were insensitively ridiculed and rebuked by their families. Some people openly cursed them. One woman hugged her rescued daughter, but her father turned the girl down and stated that she could not be accepted into the family. Another man from the village labelled the rescued girls from the brothels as "characterless". One of the girls from the group pointed out that this particular man often visited the brothel himself. The girl pointed out that if it's a shameful act, the shame lies with the man as well. Her wife intervened and slammed the women, saying her husband is an honourable man and her mind-set is dirty that she is putting such blame on her husband. Thus, the comic depicts women as being steeped in patriarchal norms, brainwashed, made blind to the faults of men (particularly their husbands), and unwilling to protest the abuses of other women. Trafficking is a colloquial term for unlawful trading. Human trafficking is defined as the transportation of individuals from one geopolitical region to another. Trafficking may take place inside a nation or may include cross-border travel. Human trafficking targets women, men, and children for a variety of reasons, including forced and exploitative labour in

factories, farms, and private residences, sex slavery, and underage marriage. Trafficking affects all areas and the majority of the world's nations. Prostitution is said to be the oldest occupation in the history of humankind and is widespread across the globe. Trafficking's human and societal repercussions are striking. From physical abuse and torture to psychological and emotional distress, victims suffer from socio-economic effects as well. Apart from being branded as outsiders and experiencing moral and legal isolation, traffickers are in danger of HIV transmission, substance abuse, high-risk miscarriages, and underage childbearing, all of which have a long-term effect on their reproductive health. In certain cases, victims who are trying to reintegrate into society are not supported by their families or communities. *Priya and the Lost Girls* lenses focus not only on the psychological traumas of the victims of trafficking but also on the issues of how society acts against them when it comes to accepting them back to normal life.

### ***Priya's Mask***

In this challenging time of pandemic, Ram Devineni's brainchild, *Priya*, the salwar kameez-clad female superhero, returns to impart the strength of bravery and compassion in society. *Priya's* mission isn't only about defeating the fatal illness; it's also about dispelling the coronavirus's myths, superstitions, and fears. During the early phases of the epidemic, much disinformation was spread online in India, blaming the illness on different ethnic and religious groups. This comic's storyline effectively dispels the virus's disinformation and dread, which might lead to something much more dangerous than the illness. In short, this comic mirrors elements like the importance of wearing a mask, maintaining social distance, and combining efforts to beat the virus as depicted in the graphic narrative.

### **Findings**

**The Essentiality of Wearing Mask-** The mask is the most significant weapon in combating the invisible Corona Virus in the course of obligatory social contact. *Priya* made a mask out of a clean handkerchief. If a prepared mask cannot be obtained for whatever reason, one may be created at home from any clean fabric to be worn as a mask. This is a critical lesson. As a consequence, *Priya's* mask in the comic underlines the significance of wearing a mask during a pandemic. It emphasises the need to wear masks not just for personal safety but also for the protection of society as a whole.

**The Importance of Social Distancing-** Throughout the globe, including India, governments imposed lockdowns. Now that the world's markets and economic activity have reopened, the lockdown has taken a back seat. However, we must exercise more prudence in avoiding needless social meetings, and, in the event of an inescapable scenario, we must take appropriate safeguards. The social separation recommended at the time in *Priya's* mask remains relevant till now.

**Sacrifice of Health Workers-** Medical professionals have performed a wonderful and honourable duty throughout the world as frontline troops against the pandemic, giving their lives in the process. *Priya's* Mask highlights the devotion and effort of health professionals via the character description of Meera's mother (a nurse). Apart from that, it beautifully reflects the gratitude shown by fellow citizens to health workers in the form of blowing conch shells, ringing bells, clapping hands, lighting candles, and turning off the power supply, all of which were later carried out by citizens on the Prime Minister of India's initiative.

**Getting Rid of Fear and Superstition-** The comic strikes right at heart of superstition, fear, and ignorance among a segment of the population who are unaware of the virus. This sort of individual deceives the general public and attempts to persuade them not to heed medical professionals' safety recommendations. We must be mindful of the mentality of those who are just as dangerous as this unseen infection.

Celebrating Mutual co-operation- Priya's Mask is a distinctive Asian voice in the middle of a worldwide epidemic. Because vaccinations were not available at the time, Priya used conventional methods to avoid pandemics, such as wearing masks and social isolation. Priya paired up with Burka Avenger (Jiya), a skilled Pakistani superhero, emphasising the significance of cross-national cooperation in the battle against the epidemic. This further emphasises the fact that the epidemic is unconcerned with national or geopolitical borders. Both Priya and Jiya emphatically stated in the comics that fear makes us weak, and that in this situation, only kindness, understanding, and mutual compassion among all individuals and nations would allow us to survive.

A celebration of Womanhood from comics to Animated Film- Priya's Mask was recently transformed into an animated film, which honours the courage of female healthcare professionals while simultaneously educating the public about the illness. Famous actresses and leaders like as Vidya Balan, Mrunal Thakur, and Sairah Kabir have contributed their voices to this important film. This animated clip has garnered over 628 thousand views on YouTube and is used in various school curricula to improve student awareness of the virus.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

What makes Priya unique from other superhero characters and mythologies is her evolution from rape survivor and teenage avenger to representation of Indian female empowerment to tackle other social issues. The Priya series is unique from other stereotype comics in the sense that they project the heroes with unnatural and unbelievable superpowers, whereas the Priya series deals with the projection of a simple girl next door as the protagonist. The Sanatan Dharma, also known as Hinduism, believes that every woman is a part of Goddess Parvati. Molestation of women, or "rape culture," is a crime against God and humanity. Priya, unable to get any help from society, turned to Goddess Parvati. She instilled in her courage and strength to fight the evils. Priya is the embodiment of courage and strength that every woman possesses and is the reflection of the "New Indian Woman." The success of the comic is due to the fact that it not only highlights real-life stories of abusive women in patriarchal society, but it also raises public opinion and proposes solutions. Priya, Series imparted strong messages to women to rise to the occasion in the case of such abuses and speak up/protest as tremendous power lies within them without being ashamed. Initially, the series focused exclusively on gender-based violence issues with an audience of teenagers, but now the series is creating comics for children and requires a reframing of Priya and her friend Sahas. As a result, the series has moved away from Hindu iconography in creating its mythological characters and settings. The shift in the series occurs during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in India with Priya's Mask. Priya's Mask specialises in graphic art aimed mostly towards children. Syd Fini and Neda Kazemifar deserve praise for their art and colouring work. In terms of art, this comic differs from the previous Priya series. Priya and Sahas were drawn in an animated approach, avoiding the gloomy treatment of the main character Priya and the ferocity of the tiger Sahas. Here, the tiger, Sahas, converses with children, resulting in a modern-day fairy tale with a meaningful lesson. This comic offers youngsters a fun reading experience while also informing them about the COVID-19 Virus and the need to take precautionary measures. In the comic book and animated short film with Bollywood movie stars, she points out the compulsion of mask wearing and that working together to end the pandemic is essential for all human kind. The undercurrent of this comic strip reflects courage, compassion during difficult times, as well as the sacrifices of frontline health workers. Emboldened by the success of this new style and audience, the new comic book, Priya and the Twirling Wind, addresses climate change through a unique female Indian perspective. The new comic will be released on Earth Day 2022. In the new comic book, the characters are turned into puppets and introduced to many new magical characters living in an enchanted forest. Our paper has discussed not only the

issues of gender violence but also explored the challenges of shifting audiences and tackling new social issues beyond the mandate of the character's background. Thus, Priya is indeed a symbol and representation for multiple critical movements in India and abroad.

## **References**

- Devineni, Ram, et al. *Priya's Shakti*. Rattapallax, 2014.
- Devineni, Ram, Paromita Vohra, et al. *Priya's Mirror*. Rattapallax, 2016.
- Devineni, Ram, Dipti Mehta, et al. *Priya and the Lost Girls (Priya's Shakti Book 3)*. Rattapallax, 2019.
- Prakash, Shubhra, et al. *Priya's Mask*. Rattapallax, 2020.
- Guha, Pallavi. *Hear #metoo in India: News, Social Media, and Anti-Rape and Sexual Harassment Activism*. Rutgers University Press, 2021.
- Nadeau, Kathleen, and Sangita Rayamajhi. *Women and Violence: Global Lives in Focus (Women and Society around the World)*. ABC-CLIO, 2019.
- Dubey, Priyanka. *No Nation for Women: Reportage on Rape from India, the World's Largest Democracy*. Reprint, S&S India, 2019.
- Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. 9th ed., Routledge, 2021.
- Wake, Paul, and Simon Malpas. *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory (Routledge Companions)*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2013.
- Bose, Debadatta. *Acid Attacks in India. Should Strict Liability Be the Norm?: An Analysis from the Strict Liability Perspective of the Acid Attack Clause in the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 of India*. GRIN Verlag, 2015.
- Unnithan, Prabha, and Mahesh Nalla. *Violence against Women in India*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2020.
- Verma, Nmp, and Alpana Srivastava. *The Routledge Handbook of Exclusion, Inequality and Stigma in India*. 1st ed., Routledge India, 2020.
- Evans, Heather. *Understanding Complex Trauma and Post-Traumatic Growth in Survivors of Sex Trafficking (Routledge Research in Women's Mental Health)*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2021.
- Sidun, Nancy. *A Feminist Perspective on Human Trafficking of Women and Girls*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2019.
- Geetanjali. *Girl and Women Trafficking in India*. Centrum Press, 2022.
- Chin, Ko-Lin, and James Finckenauer. *Selling Sex Overseas: Chinese Women and the Realities of Prostitution and Global Sex Trafficking*. NYU Press, 2012.
- World Bank Group. *Combating Trafficking of Women and Children in South Asia: Regional Synthesis Paper for Bangladesh, India, and Nepal*. Asian Development Bank, 2004.
- Hua, Julietta. *Trafficking Women's Human Rights*. 1st ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2011.