

# Final Draft

The YIF Critical Writing Journal | Issue 6 - 2025



**Final Draft**

**Issue 6 - May 2025**



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In this

# ISSUE

Acknowledgements .....	06
About the Journal .....	07
Designer's Note .....	09
1. Mango Pickle: The Kitchen as Container .....	11
2. Anti-Caste Films in Tamil Nadu : Re-engineering the Spectacle in Mainstream Cinema .....	16
3. This One's for the Girls: Fashion and Feminine Excess in the Post-Pandemic Digital Age .....	27
4. Participatory Theatre in Rural West Bengal: Jana Sanskriti and Bridging Last-Mile Welfare Gaps in PDS Access .....	42
5. The State and its 'Obstructors': Re-thinking Adivasi-State Relations in India .....	54
6. Conflict Over Content: Shadow Banning and Ideological Warfare .....	62
Meet the Authors .....	80

## Acknowledgements

Producing Final Draft is always a team effort and Issue #6 is no exception. It is with gratitude and pleasure, therefore, that we thank: Karan Bhola, Director, Young India Fellowship, for his deep interest in various forms of critical expressions at the YIF; the YIF Team, and in particular, Tejasvini S and Shruti Bajaj, for providing continuous and indispensable assistance on matters big and small; Anuja Sinha, Shahambare T and Somnath Chakraborty for helping us with pre-launch publicity; Naman Sachdeva for his support with printing and finances; Chiranjit Mahato and Rakesh Meitei for their valuable operational and logistical support. We would also like to thank Oviya Manivannan, our designer, for her thoughtful engagement with the Critical Writing faculty and the essays as she produced the wonderful final images and the journal layout; Sourya Majumder for proofreading the manuscript at a rapid pace; and Somnath again for typesetting and crafting the final layout.

And to the Young India Fellows, whose writing and spirit animate the Critical Writing programme, this issue is dedicated to you.

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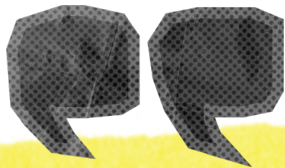
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## About the Journal

The YIF Critical Writing Programme has few visible contextual precedents within the Indian higher education system. Acknowledging the importance of writing as central to processes of knowledge acquisition, production, and consumption, the programme has developed a pedagogy geared towards building critical reading, writing and thinking skills to help Fellows engage with the world of ideas and enable them to develop and express their own ideas in a well-reasoned, lucid, and engaging manner. We do this by helping students innovate with genres of writing across different disciplines to develop a metacognitive awareness regarding their own reading and writing practices. These skills act as building blocks for the liberal arts education they receive at Ashoka University and enhance their abilities to navigate academic, professional, and social spheres once they graduate from the Fellowship.

The goal of Final Draft is to showcase both the range—in topic and genre— and strength of writing in a student body that is itself highly diverse in terms of its educational, disciplinary, professional, geographic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Through the process of writing multiple drafts, student-authors discover their own unique voice, and recognise writing as an ongoing, open-ended activity as signalled by the title of the journal itself. As the Fellows learn to bring critical thinking tools to the drawing board, readers of Final Draft can witness a clear attempt by them to negotiate with texts and social phenomena as they make sense of the world around them.





*One has to come at stuff without too many preconceptions and allow oneself to be struck by something. Criticism or interpretation is explaining that after.*

**- Frederic Jameson**

## Designer's Note

**BIO:** Oviya Manivannan is a visual artist, designer, and a Young India Fellow (YIF '24) who enjoys working where art, design, mental health, and social change meet. A Bharatanatyam dancer and storyteller at heart, Oviya is curious about how people, emotions, and cultures shape the everyday. A big part of her practice is about making mental health more approachable and meaningful, especially by creating programs rooted in the realities of Tamil communities.

Her work moves between the traditional and the experimental — sometimes quiet, sometimes bold — always looking for new ways to bring unexpected connections to life. She has exhibited her art at spaces like Gallery Veda, Museum of Goa, and Art Inq Centre. When she's not at work, you'll probably find her running, surfing, or happily spending time alone by the sea. Oviya loves piecing together people, stories, and ideas, hoping they spark reflection and change.

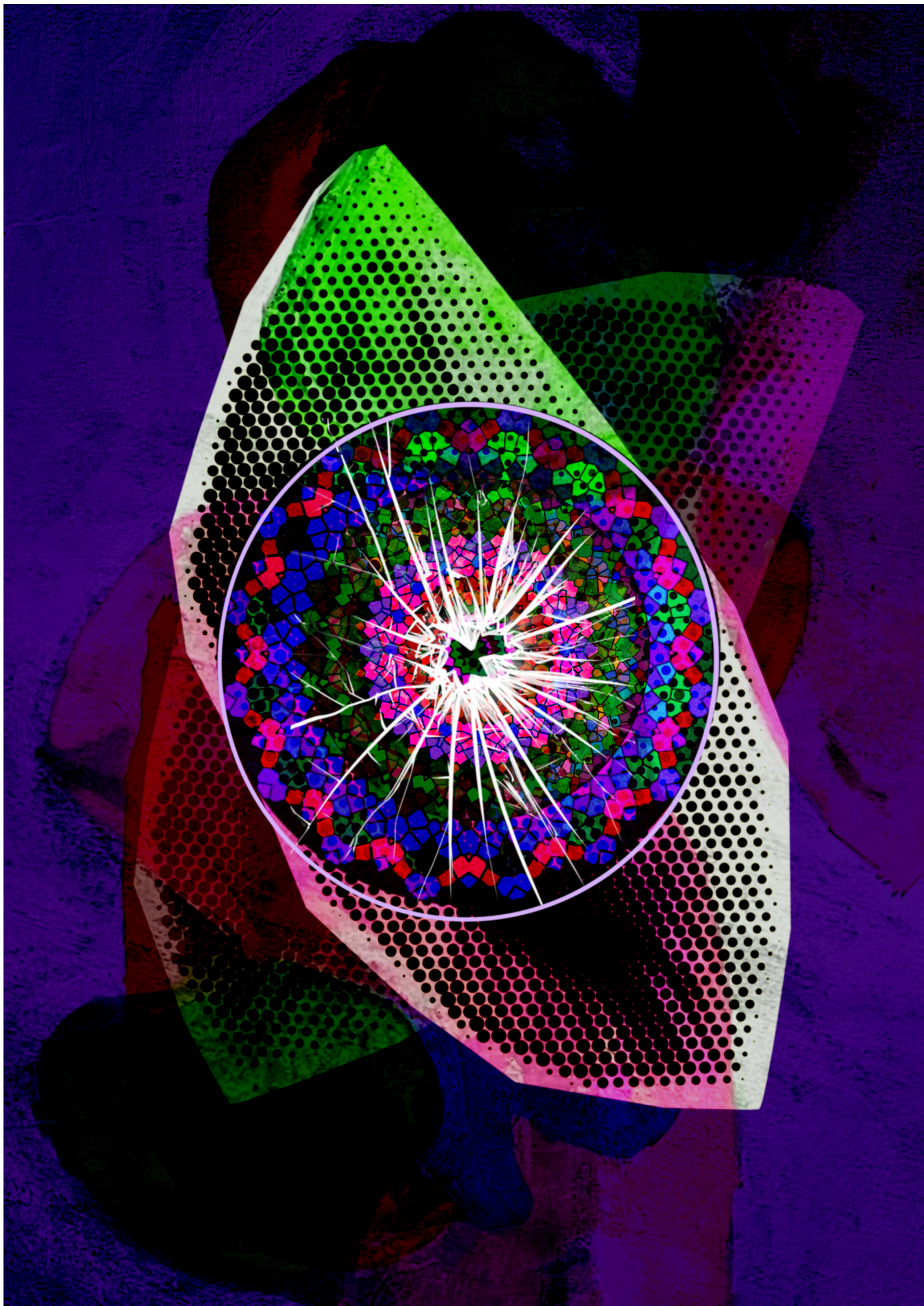
**NOTE:** The Kaleidoscope of Thought is a visual exploration of how critical thinking unfolds, not as a straightforward path but as a shifting, evolving, and often unpredictable process. Like a kaleidoscope, thought rearranges fragments into new patterns with every turn, showing us that meaning is never fixed but constantly reshaped through perspective. At the center of the series is the recurring eye-shaped form, which acts as more than just a symbol of perception. It becomes the lens itself — a space through which thinking happens, much like the viewing frame of a kaleidoscope. This lens holds and refracts the scattered fragments within it, reminding us that while the subject may not always change, the way we see and connect its parts does. Surrounding it, layers of color, texture, and abstraction reflect the emotional, cultural, and historical influences that quietly shape every act of thought.



As the series unfolds, the pattern that once appeared stable begins to fracture. What seemed whole now reveals tensions and gaps, exposing the fragility beneath certainty. Yet these cracks are not failures but openings. Fragments begin to move, flow, overlap, and reorganize, showing that critical thought is not only about breaking apart but also about forming new, unexpected patterns as perspectives shift. The patterns then begin to exceed the frame itself, flowing beyond earlier boundaries. Thought here is in full motion, no longer contained, but spilling outward, merging contradictions, and creating layered and unpredictable relationships. Familiar shapes blur and give way to complexity, as thought crosses edges and makes space for multiplicity. In its final state, thought opens completely. It becomes fluid, drifting, layering, and reshaping itself without limit. No longer bound by structure, it grows into a dynamic and ever-evolving field of connections, where meaning is created not by resolution, but by the ability to continuously connect the unconnected.

Together, the cover and illustrations chart the journey of critical thinking — from certainty to questioning, from questioning to discovery — showing how every shift adds another layer to how we understand the world.









# 01

## Mango Pickle: *The Kitchen as Container*

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*Sai Motupali Nair*

### **Abstract:**

*The making of avakaya (mango pickle) is more than a culinary practice. Guided by an autoethnographic process, this essay explores the embodied nature of intergenerational knowledge transfer within the kitchen, where every stage of pickling represents a form of culinary literacy. Here, the kitchen emerges as a paradoxical space—one of creative self-expression yet a site of gendered labor, where skills are passed down but often framed within societal expectations. The physicality of preparing avakaya challenges perceptions of domestic work as effortless or intuitive, instead requiring precision, patience, and endurance. Through its sensory and performative nature, cooking extends culinary knowledge beyond mere sustenance, where recipes serve as more than instructions, often alluding to a collective memory. Every year, as the mango tree yields its fruit, the process repeats, and food-making functions as a language of continuity and change, where the dish is both preserved and subtly reinterpreted.*

It was avakaya season. The mango tree in front of our house had finally borne fruit after four years. The previous years had been marked by early rains that ruined the tender flower buds, but the tree persevered. What resulted was a bounty of over two hundred mangoes. The process of harvesting the mangoes was tedious. We had to wait patiently for the mangoes to grow to just the right size to be worthy of harvest, but not so much that they started to ripen. That year, my father fashioned a long fibreglass pole with a cloth bag and blade at the end into a contraption to cut and catch the mangoes with. I scoured the bookshelves for my mother's handwritten recipe book, its thick, orange pages distinctly marking it from the other notebooks. It was time to get started.

Avakaya-making was a ritual in my household. I grew up on stories of my grandparents' childhood, filled with summers spent climbing trees to pluck mangoes. They would sneak some out of the growing pile, cut them up, sprinkle them with a mixture of salt and chilli powder, and devour them before they were caught by their elders. The idea of sneaking food away always made it seem more appealing. Fast forward a couple of generations later, and there I was, following in the footsteps of my grandparents. Except this time around, I was in control of the tree's fruit and what to do with it; a responsibility that felt far beyond my age. Nearly a decade of observing had made me confident about handling what came my way, but I was still cautious.

To make avakaya, the unripe mangoes had to first be inspected for any bruising, insects, or cuts in the skin. These were unfit for processing and were

used immediately to make mamidikaya pappu (raw mango dal), the most delicious mamidikaya chepala pulusu (raw mango fish curry), or simply sliced and eaten fresh. The mangoes were then washed in a saltwater bath, after ensuring that the water had not become warm from the summer heat. It was a joint effort to walk the washed mangoes up to the terrace to let them dry under the hot sun. I discovered that sunshine is an essential element in pickle-making. Come evening, the mangoes were brought back into the kitchen, still warm from the day's sun.

I woke up early to get a head start on the process. The mangoes had to be cut into smaller pieces. I was armed with my trusty chef's knife and a well-used wooden chopping board. With one hand firmly gripping the handle of the knife and the other held around the mango, I sunk the blade into the firm exterior of the raw fruit. Once it was secured in the flesh, the hand that had been grasping the mango now provided the blunt force that pushed the blade through the hard seed of the mango. Years of using knives, progressing from smaller food like soft fruits to hard-skinned pumpkins had prepared me for the marathon that was to come. The knife became an extension of my hand. I spent the next four hours cutting the mangoes, my hands cramping at the halfway mark. The top of the blade left red, angry indents on the skin of my palm. My upper body was growing tired from the continuous exertion of force. By my side, a family member peeled a whole kilogram of garlic heads. These repetitive actions mirrored each other, silently acknowledging the intensity of both acts, the only sound being that of the knife hitting the board. Soon, I reached the very last mango and felt my hands rejoice. We dragged the baskets of

cut mango, the peeled garlic cloves, and a packet of mustard seeds to the terrace to dry under the last few hours of sun left in the day. My body was begging for some rest before the main day of pickling arrived.

On the actual day of pickle-making, the sun-dried ingredients were waiting to be processed in the kitchen. When I think of the act of preserving, I remember my grandmother stressing the need for clean, dry hands while reaching into the pickle bottles. Moisture is a mortal enemy and a failproof recipe for mold. I kept her instructions in mind that day. I ground the mustard seeds into a fine powder, the noise from the mixer-grinder dulling the ache in my still sore hands. In the biggest steel vessel I could find, I added the cut mangoes, garlic cloves, mustard powder, red chilli powder, and salt. I got to work, my hands rubbing the spices into the mango, skins shrinking at the edges of the semi-dry chunks. Once the oil was added, my hands turned red from the mixture. There is an art to making pickle. One must know the perfect quantity of salt to add, a touch saltier than usual. As the pickle is left to age, the salt is absorbed into the ingredients and mellows out. The fresh pickle is ladled into sterilised glass bottles, a slight deviation from the traditional ceramic jaadi. Three days later, I opened the bottles to check for any adjustments that needed to be made to the flavour, and after much reassurance from my family, I was satisfied. The real validation, however, came when my grandmother tasted the avakaya a month later, and said it was like she had made it with her own two hands.

The preservation of the season's mangoes was the preservation of my grandmother's knowledge. The act of

preserving this skill and consequently, the mangoes, meant that I had taken it upon myself to ensure the survival of this tradition. Recipes are literacies, and the status of women as "preservers of community value" (Sutton 356) means that dishes like these are usually passed down to the women in the family as a way of keeping alive a certain way of eating, and by extension, a way of life. The making of food is seen as an act of care and devotion to loved ones, and in claiming it to be so, the kitchen becomes a space for gendered domestic labour—and food, its medium. Participating in the activities of the kitchen may seem like a mundane ritual, but it was this mundanity that moulded me. It was through the everydayness of the kitchen that I learned to think and express myself.

The kitchen is, at the same time, a contradictory space. It takes the shape of two worlds: one where I am most easily able to communicate and another where I face an internal struggle against conforming to my prescribed gender role. While most of my family more than welcomed my yielding to the kitchen space, as they only saw the delicious food they got to dig into, some saw my skills as a means to smoothen any hiccups in the process of acquiring a future partner. In these instances, I am caught between my most preferred form of self-expression and a forced performance of what I am "supposed" to do. The domestic kitchen may seem like a typically feminine space—one that is delicate and comes naturally, intuitively to women—but this intuition is derived from years of repetitive, mechanical actions ("Semiotics of the Kitchen"). I have seen the women in my life persisting in this space despite hard days of work, certain dishes and their movements becoming second nature, not necessarily due to an affinity



for food-making, but the requirement of nourishing their families. One only has to make avakaya to realise the immense physicality of cooking, as opposed to an assumed daintiness. The flex of my muscles as I drive the knife through the mango, the deadly mixture of spices, and the heavy wooden chopping board are reminders that this domestic space is rather hot-tempered, and one slice away from turning violent.

Coming into the kitchen with this awareness allowed me to recognise that I am viewed through the food I produced—dishes that demanded a greater share of my time, energy and resources elicited responses that fulfilled my need for connection by validating my effort. Inevitably, this shaped how I viewed myself and my labour. Food became a crutch with which I strengthened social bonds, either through conversations about cooking and eating, or by feeding people I wanted to become friends with. David Sutton quotes Joy Adapon's *Culinary Art and Anthropology* to convey a similar idea: "confronting a meal can also be thought of as confronting a person ... and the food itself is an outcome of the cook's intentions" (358). I claimed a part of my cultural identity by teaching myself how to make avakaya. In making the avakaya, for a brief few days, I embodied my grandmother's knowledge and invoked several layers of consciousness to inform the making of the recipe. I relied on the knowledge I had accumulated in the kitchen space, as well as new knowledge gained from what the process itself taught me. Every time I find myself at the beginning of a bout of cooking, I am compelled to acknowledge that it involves more than just the palate, engages multiple senses, and carries cultural and personal connotations,

prompting me to consider the historical and material context of ingredients and processes, the visual aesthetics of the dish, and the emotional resonance it generates.

The experience of watching my grandmother make avakaya always culminated in the final act of pickle-making. On the side, a pressure cooker full of steaming hot white rice would be opened, ladle after ladle lathered into the steel avakaya vessel. Melted ghee was poured over the rice in an almost never-ending stream. My grandmother's hands, still red from mixing the pickle, would dive straight in, to mix the last dredges of pickle stuck on the walls of the vessel into the hot rice and ghee. With the flavours being massaged into each other, the mixture would come together, glistening from the fat coating the starchy rice. The prepared rice would then be shaped into balls, much too large to eat in one mouthful, and dropped into the outstretched palms that crowded around her. Mouth to hand, we would bite into it, blowing out hot air from the still-steaming rice. In a way, the whole household was now involved in the process.

Through this performative practice of preparing a meal—or in this case, avakaya—my body became the medium through which my culinary skills were expressed, and an active participant in the reproduction and transmission of a collective memory. Rebecca May Johnson succinctly frames my thoughts about what it means to look at cooking beyond just sustenance, when she says, "Culinary knowledge is a reaching towards the other, an acknowledgement that our relationship with that which lies beyond us is what will nourish us" (145). Every year, as I look out at the mango tree, I hope for a bountiful harvest, so that in this perennial

remembering, what is preserved serves as an anchor to a part of my heritage that would otherwise fade away. In translating this recipe to tangible form, the avakaya crystallised itself in the past while simultaneously secreting into the future, perhaps changing ever so slightly with every set of hands it passes through, but retaining its essence nonetheless.

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# 02

## **Anti-Caste Films in Tamil Nadu :** *Reengineering the Spectacle in Mainstream Cinema*

---

*Rohana Jeyaraj*

### **Abstract:**

*The Tamil entertainment industry is currently experiencing a significant cultural shift - anti-caste narratives are occupying the mainstream and are forming a strong opposition to dominant cinematic traditions and sensibilities. What began as a cultural moment has now evolved into a movement, with the influence of these films extending beyond the cinematic sphere. Filmmakers like Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj center Dalit assertion while engaging in storytelling techniques like symbolism, surrealism, historical reimaginings, giving rise to a fresh, new cinematic language. Their work constructs a counter-vision that is in keeping with the spirit of the Dalit futurism-paradigm. This paper presents an optimistic forecast of the future of Tamil cinema and its relationship with subaltern politics.*

The Tamil entertainment industry is currently experiencing a significant cultural shift, driven by a wave of anti-caste cinema. The treatment of caste as a subject in Tamil films has undergone a steep evolution in the last few years, moving beyond tacit narratives that upheld the status quo to more direct, unapologetic articulations. It is only in the recent past that the caste conversation in contemporary Tamil films have caught up with the guiding principles of the long-standing Dravidian movement. Not only have these films achieved remarkable success at the box office, securing a place in the mainstream, they have also begun to reshape the aesthetics of mainstream cinema. This essay explores this shift in Tamil cinema, and examines how contemporary filmmakers like Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj are pushing the boundaries of filmmaking. It also goes on to suggest that their films are building an alternative politico-aesthetic consciousness, especially in opposition to that constructed by pan-Indian epics and spectacles that rely predominantly on the Hindu mythological or the dominant historical canons.

### **Caste in Tamil Cinema: Past and Present**

Anti-caste sentiment in the region has had a long history, bolstered by the Dravidian political movement, and preserved by the literature that the movement inspired. However, it was only a post-2010 phenomenon that the mainstream film industry lived up to this consciousness, and overtly spoke the language of progressive caste politics. In Tamil cinema, there have been a few films led by protagonists belonging to historically depressed castes, such as MGR's *Madurai Veeran* (transl. The Hero of Madurai, 1956) and *Orey Ratham*

(transl. One Blood, 1987), but most have centred narratives of persons from historically privileged castes (Ezhilarasan). In the early 1990s, films like *Thevar Magan* (transl. Son of the Thevar, 1992), starring industry giants like Kamal Hassan and Sivaji Ganeshan; and *Chinna Gounder* (transl. The Young Gounder, 1992), starring Captain Vijayakanth, were made and went on to be hugely successful and influential. *Thevar* and *Gounder* are powerful, politically influential and affluent caste groups in Tamil Nadu. These films ascribe a caste identity to their heroes, and suggest that protecting the pride and honour of one's caste ought to be one's primary concern in life. Songs like 'Potri padadi ponne, thevar kaaladi manne', which literally translates to 'Girl, sing the praise of thevar, and the ground beneath his feet', went on to become anthems of caste pride amongst thevars. By characterizing the hero as a benevolent leader, sympathetic towards those who belonged to caste groups situated below his own, it suggested to the viewer that everyone can benefit from the existing order. It also suggested that it is perfectly acceptable to 'pick up the machete', if push came to shove, in order to defend one's caste pride. It was not just the narrativization of caste in films, but also the caste composition of the industry at large, including directors and producers, presenting itself as predominantly Savarna, that reflected in the way caste was being handled in films.

Dalit assertion was not to be seen in Tamil cinema until as late as 2012, crucially buoyed by Dalit filmmakers such as Pa. Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj, who not only make films with caste consciousness but promote it within the industry. In a movie titled *Attakathi* (2012), the hero, a Dalit man, was shown leading his life on his own



terms and also eating beef (Rajendran)—a contentious meat variety in India, since cows are considered sacred by its Hindu population, but are also a common part of the diet of Muslims, Christians, Dalit and indigenous communities. The film marked the debut of director Pa. Ranjith who, following his second release *Madras* (2014), went on to direct *Rajinikanth*, arguably the largest star in Tamil cinema, in *Kabali* (2016) and *Kaala* (2018)—two films known for their assertion of Dalit identity and politics. This catapulted Ranjith to prominence and also marked the emergence of a new cinema that foregrounded the Dalit lived experience in the mainstream. The emergence of this perspective in the mainstream and the success of these films are an indication of the appetite for the same in the popular consciousness. This has given way for a market for Dalit cinema now (qtd. in Rajendran). Initiatives like Neelam Productions and Neelam Culture were created by Ranjith to permeate the spaces of film production and culture. Neelam now finances creative projects of many up and coming Dalit filmmakers and creatives. It also produced *Pariyerum Perumal*, the directorial debut of Mari Selvaraj, who is now Ranjith's contemporary as a prominent Tamil filmmaker. In the cultural space, Neelam also hosts a music festival called *Margazhiyil Makkalisai*, a counter-cultural event that aims to celebrate folk, gaana, rap and other forms of song, in response to the yearly string of Carnatic music events that happen across sabhas in Chennai in the month of Margazhi or December. Neelam also publishes books; hosts a book fair, an art festival, and a film festival; and is engaged in many other modes of cultural production.

Today, the influence of figures like

Ranjith and Selvaraj is not limited to the cinema industry, but extends beyond into the larger public sphere. They do not limit their anti-caste politics to directorial ventures alone, but cultivate a broader space for Dalit assertion. In July 2024, when K Armstrong, the state president of the Tamil Nadu unit of the Bahujan Samaj Party, was murdered, it was Ranjith who became an important public voice in the aftermath, in the castigation of law enforcement, mobilization of protests, and the demand for justice. It can thus be said that what began as a cultural moment, has now snowballed into a cultural movement of its own.

### **Anti-Caste Cinema: A Portmanteau Of Aesthetic Conventions**

The current wave of anti-caste cinema both responds to and extends some of the arguments presented by Dalit literary scholars like Sharankumar Limbale and Arjun Dangle. In his essay, "From Erasure to Assertion," Alok Mukherjee writes that Limbale's literature is 'purposive', and that those purposes vary among 'revolutionary', 'transformational' and 'liberatory'. He also discusses how, to achieve this purposiveness, it must espouse, or create, a literary and aesthetic convention that is separate from the mainstream (Mukherjee 14). Dalit literature rejects Brahmanical literary traditions that adhere to classical Indian aesthetics, and instead draws from varied sources such as Buddhist philosophy; political movements that challenge authority; bodies and sexuality; personal, social, and community histories; etc. (Yengde), to map out an alternative aesthetic.

Cinema, as the immediate successor to the theatre tradition in India, has



been heavily influenced by Sanskritized doctrines like the *Natyashastra* and the *Rasasutra*. According to *Rasa* theory, the purpose of art or drama is to elicit *rasa*—a relishing of an inexplicable, inward experience in the reader or audience (Pollock 51)—and to reinforce propriety or *dharma* (Muni, ch.1). Similarly, Tamil cinema has been historically preoccupied with either producing a spectacle that often also becomes a vehicle for imparting the moral values of divinity, nationalism, and Gandhian socialist sensibilities or soft-Dravidianism (or both). The process of creating a spectacle followed an almost formulaic grammar, which, when adhered to, would ensure a certain degree of commercial success—case in point, the infamous masala film (Jacob 78).

Anti-caste cinema owes its success to its ability to straddle these two strands effectively— that of creating spectacle, but also reworking the purpose and the aesthetics of the spectacle. There is both an adherence to existing cinematic grammar and conventions, as well as a defiance in the form of innovation. These films are indeed purposive in the way they tackle caste head-on. Not only is the narrative assertive, guided by lived experience, it also moves beyond just pain and humiliation to include political expression and celebration. Filmmakers like Ranjith and Selvaraj seem to have cracked the right balance of imitation and innovation, which has helped them deliver successive commercial hits while also pushing the boundaries of their craft. This new aesthetic convention marks a shift from bourgeois, caste-Hindu, or nationalist moral values to an explicitly anti-caste perspective, and has also helped create and sustain a growing interest in Dalit cinema (Edachira).

## The Dalit Hero: Decentralising The Hero Figure

The hero figure is an age-old archetype that we have been interested in since our most ancient story-telling traditions. Early theatre traditions that primarily told stories of the great epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, envisioned Ram (and Arjuna) as the ideal hero figure. How we envisioned the hero figure in theatre traditions greatly influenced how we wrote and visualised characters for the screen. The hero figure is the principal storyteller, the focal point of the story, and the conduit for the moral message that the story wishes to impart. What the hero figure says, does, looks like, sounds like—all have lasting cultural and societal implications.

Although films in India, and Tamil films in particular, have aligned their heroes, to a large extent, with class politics, often characterising them as the saviour of the poor, they are nonetheless guided by a Brahmanical, patriarchal moral compass, and the caste question is also conveniently dodged. And so, the emergence of the Dalit hero figure was important in more than one way. By taking up the position of the hero figure, they make a claim to agency. Anti-caste films write the hero figure as someone who is unambiguously Dalit, upfront and unapologetic about their politics. As a result, our cinematic morality has also shifted, and how we watch films as an audience has changed. Dalit writer and activist Shalin Maria Lawrence says,

*Many directors today feel the compulsion to include an anti-caste dialogue or scene in their films. A hero has to be someone who takes an anti-caste stance, someone without caste pride (qtd. in Rajendran).*

Further, the construction of the hero in these films is such that the locus shifts from the individual to the community. The hero might enjoy singular focus and image-elevating scenes, but they embody more of a collective identity. This is resonant with what Limbale identifies in Dalit literature as its unique feature, namely its collective aspect.

*The experience described in Dalit literature is social, hence it is articulated as collective in character. So, even when the experience is of an individual, it appears to be that of a group. There is no individual in Dalit literature (102).*

An example of this trope can be seen in Ranjith's *Kaala* (2018), a film that follows Karikalan 'Kaala', the leader of Dharavi, played by Rajinikanth, who tries save his land from being seized and his people from being evicted by Haridev 'Hari Dada', a corrupt minister played by Nana Patekar. In the penultimate scene of the film, we

witness the showdown between Kaala and Hari Dada. Hari Dada's men have stormed Dharavi to hunt down Kaala, in a bid to break the residents' collective resolve and force them to move out of the slum. Violence breaks out in Dharavi, leading up to a moment when it is uncertain whether Kaala is alive or not. As a final act of defiance, the entire slum rises up and explodes into a riot of colours. Amidst the vibrant chaos, Hari Dada begins to hallucinate Kaala's presence, slipping into a state of disorientation. The slum residents celebrate to the rhythm of the song 'Katravai Patravai', which opens with a hat-tip to the fabled tribal king Ravana. The verse goes: "Single-headed Ravana. Wear your 10 heads right now!" The residents are shown initially bathed in black, the colour Kaala dons throughout the film. This is followed by red, symbolic of Marx and Communism, and then blue, symbolic of Ambedkar and Dalit liberation—a recurring motif in all of Ranjith's films.



Figure 1. Screenshots from (*Wunderbar Films*)  
at (clockwise from top left) 1:23, 1:34, 1:21, 2:36, 2:22, 3:10, 2:36, 2:53.

Hari Dada, disoriented and overwhelmed, stumbles through the crowd, which now wears masks resembling Kaala's face. In his stupor, he calls out to Kaala, accusing him of hiding behind his people and demanding that he confront him face to face. In response, the following line is delivered: "Inga irukra ovvorutharum Kaala dhaan?" ("Who is Kaala, but every single one here?"). This scene does an excellent job of creatively representing what the act of organising, agitating, and resisting can look like. The entire slum comes together, led by the spectre of Kaala, their identities coalescing into one massive force of resistance, where each one of them, individually and collectively, embodies the persona of the hero figure.

Similarly, *Karnan* (2021), by Mari Selvaraj, transposes the personhood of the eponymous character from the Mahabharata onto a Dalit man, played by Dhanush. It is also an allegorical account of the 1995 Kodyankulam violence, where a police raid was conducted on the instruction of oppressor caste officials targeting the Dalit community and their material prosperity. The storytelling in *Karnan* is driven by the hero figure and star-power of Dhanush, but his personhood is inseparable from his community (Rangan). The anger that fuels his rage is as much his community's as his own.

### **Looming Spectres: Other-Wordly Reminders**

The spectre is an ambiguous figure, like a vehicle that inherits and carries one or multiple meanings, and identities that are sometimes singular and sometimes plural. This ambiguity also helps in making it a powerful storytelling trope. The cinematic universe of Mari Selvaraj is

populated with such spectres and symbols that recur throughout, and sometimes even anchor his films. They take the form of unglamorous animals like the indie dog, the pig, or the donkey, or folk deities that fall outside the bracket of the Hindu pantheon, and are often victims of caste-driven violence or homicide. They loom and hang over the plot and the lives of the characters, as reminders of the enduring grief of their loss, but sometimes also as sources of hope.

In *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), Karuppi, a black indie and the protagonist's dog, fulfils this role. The film follows Pariyan, played by Kathir, a young man from an oppressed caste who enrolls in law college with high hopes for a better future. There, he forms a friendship with Jothi Mahalakshmi, played by Anandhi, a woman from an upper-caste family. This friendship infuriates Jothi's family, leading to an unending cycle of extreme torture and harassment against Pariyan. The film delves into the complexities of caste, examining how they manifest in interpersonal relationships, educational spaces, family dynamics, and broader society. Pariyan fights back and speaks up against his oppressors multiple times, but his protests are often met with extremely violent attempts to deter him, and even attempts of murder to silence him once and for all.





Figure 2. (*Jabbarwock*)

Karuppi, who is Pariyan's best friend, is tragically killed on a train track at the beginning of the film. Despite her death, Karuppi remains a spiritual presence in the film, kept alive by Pariyan's memory. A verse from a song in the film goes, "Yaar andha kaatil odanju kedappadhu, neeya illa naana? Naana illa neeya Karuppi?" ("Who is that lying there broken in the forest? Is it you or is it me?"), which implies that the spectre of Karuppi represents both the dog and Pariyan himself. In times of distress, Karuppi appears before Pariyan as a vision, through whom he finds strength to power through. In one of the final scenes, when Pariyan appears to have lost all his will to fight back, his body is bound to a train track in yet another murder attempt on his life. When all hope seems lost, Karuppi reappears as an apparition, bathed entirely in Ambedkarite-blue. As a *deus ex machina*, she licks Pariyan's face, awakening him from unconsciousness just

in time for him to escape being run over by an incoming train.

In Karnan (2021), also by Mari Selvaraj, the youngest daughter of the family is killed in an act of caste-based negligence, and is then immortalized as the folk deity Kaatu Pechi, who becomes a recurring symbol in the film. The people of the village of Podiyankulam had been denied a separate bus stand for a long time, preventing easy access to healthcare and education. Karnan's younger sister thus cannot be taken to a hospital on time, and ends up passing away on the road during a fit of epileptic seizures. She lives on, however, as Kaatu Pechi, a reminder and also the guardian angel of the film. She looks out for her grieving family, meeting them in their dreams and directing them to the location of hidden bags of money buried under the ground.



Figure 3. (Singaravel)

In a bid to experiment with and push form, both Selvaraj and Ranjith's films interface with symbolism and the imagery of the surreal, while narrating very real, hard-hitting stories rooted in lived experience. Harnessing the power of the visual metaphor, the storytelling feels both authentic and real, but also as though it is from a world once removed from ours. This could be seen as an inventive technique, or even as a way to establish critical distance with the viewer. Further, the visible and invisible ways in which these spectres participate in the films could also be a broader commentary on the nature of caste itself.

### Building the Opposition: The Case for Futurism

In literature and in art, many cross-cultural artistic philosophies emerged from the logic of 'futurism', or the wish to reimagine

alternatives to historically determined realities and circumstances (White). Dalit futurism is one such powerful spin-off paradigms. Priteegandha Naik, a researcher of Dalit futurism, states,

*I theorise Dalit futurism as a methodological tool that enables the exploration of caste futures in (but not limited to) alternate technoscientific worlds...It recognizes the potential in science fiction to defamiliarize the familiar and thereby provide freedom to its writers to explore different features of caste. As a result, it can disrupt, question, and challenge various notions about the caste system.*

In anti-caste literature, specifically, there have been many articulations of an alternative or better future. Over 500 years ago, Sant Ravidas (1450–1520) sang of Begumpura, or the land without



sorrow, a legendary city devoid of caste, class, hierarchy, government, sadness, or suffering (Omvedt 36). Begumpura became a source of inspiration for anti-caste intellectuals in imagining the society they aspired to create. Iyothee Thasa Pandithar had a vision of a Buddhist utopia (Omvedt 188), and also believed that a Buddhist ideology could help reclaim the identity of the historically depressed classes.

Ranjith and Selvaraj's collective cinematic universe also seems to be working towards a similar project. At times, their films seem to appear as a creative envisioning of anti-caste articulations of the alternative, wherein the Buddha is used as a recurring symbol, either in the foreground, the background, or as a crucial part of the plot. In *Thangalaan* (2024), Ranjith's most recent outing, a pillaged statue of Buddha is recovered as a relic from a past when Buddhist values flourished in Tamil society. Its worn-down stature is a reference to the decline of Buddhism and its eventual replacement by the schools of Shaivism and Vaishnavism. In Selvaraj's *Karnan* (2021), a headless statue of what appears to be the Bodhisattva is a recurring symbol. But more broadly speaking, the films are futuristic in the way they reengineer the cinematic spectacle, and redefine moral and political value in cinema. They also regularly interface with the alternative, through the use of symbolism and surrealism to creatively articulate various facets of caste. The intent being to disrupt, question and challenge the system.

Especially in the face of the "pan-India" phenomenon and the current roster of big budget films that are being erected, the growing prominence and popularity of anti-caste cinema and the

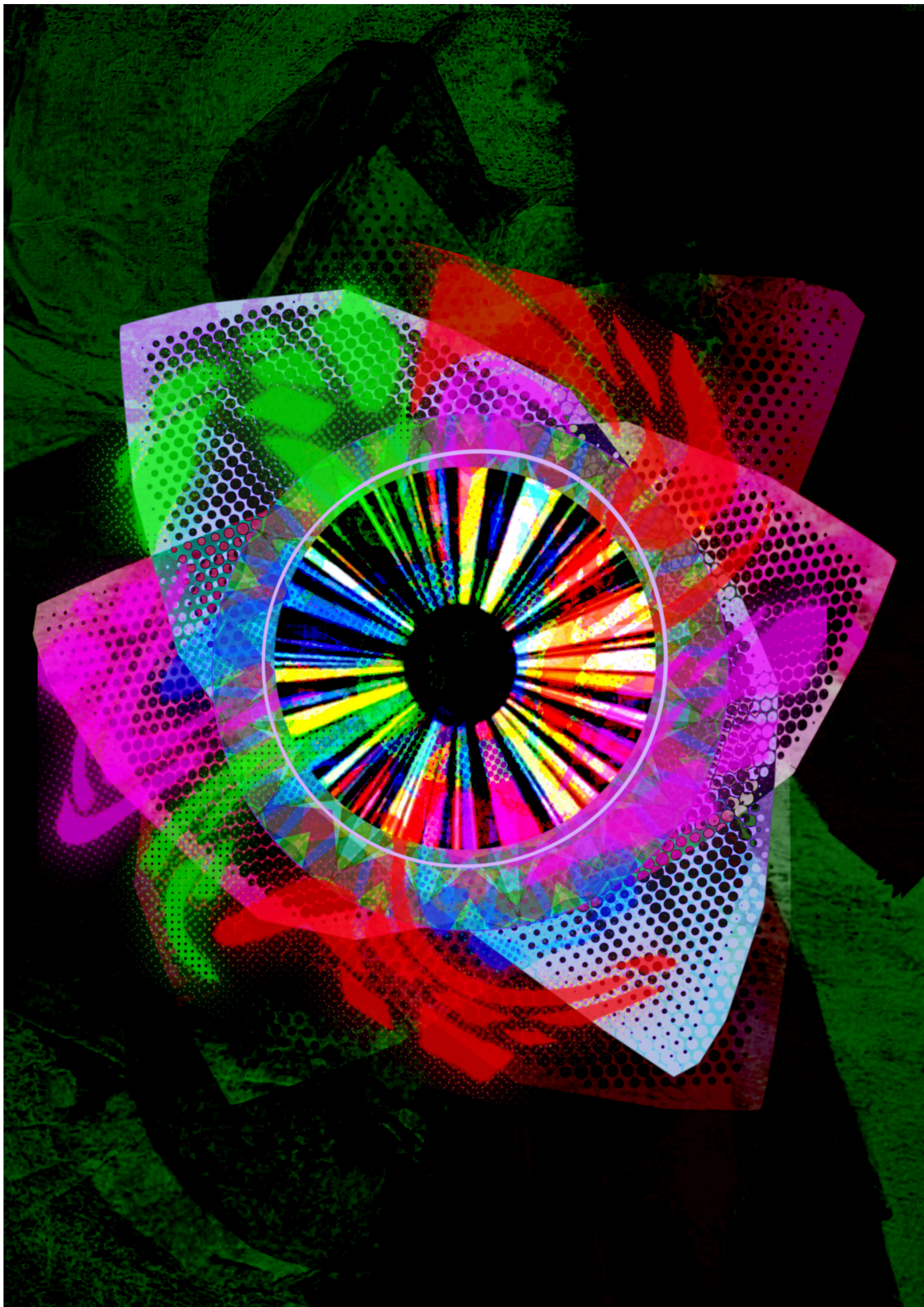
oppositional consciousness it brings with it becomes all the more important. There is a strong tendency and pattern in films to rely on the corpus of popular Hindu mythology in the process of worldbuilding or imagining alternate possibilities, as in *Brahmastra* (2022) and *Kalki 2898 AD* (2024). The possibility of creating a large-scale Dalit futurist epic, not exactly in response but as an alternative, occupying the mainstream, is enticing. Furthermore, in light of the many historical-fiction/alt-historical big-budget films that are being made, like the two-part *Ponniyin Selvan*, which creatively reimagines Tamil imperial history, films like Pa. Ranjith's *Thangalaan* (2024), creatively reimagining forgotten chapters of history like the struggles of the Dalits from North Arcot district who migrated to the present-day Kolar Gold Fields, become all the more important.

As the possibilities and capacities of the Tamil entertainment industry and cinema continue to evolve and expand, it will be interesting to observe how these alternate imaginations are embraced by the industry—if they compete with one another, or enter into a dialogue. The answer will shape the future of the filmic and cultural landscape of Tamil Nadu for years to come.

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# 03

## **This One's for the Girls:** *Fashion and Feminine Excess in the Post-Pandemic Digital Age*

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*Aparajitha Sankar*

### **Abstract:**

*This paper examines the rise of hyper-feminine aesthetics in contemporary digital spaces and its surprising entanglement with the Victorian era. Rooted in Victorian ideals that framed excessive femininity as monstrous and socially deviant, the concept of “Too Muchness” reveals how moral anxieties around women’s self-expression have persisted across time. Platforms like TikTok have redefined excess as aspirational through embodied aesthetics like Cottage-core, Coquette, and Whimsi-goth that borrow an intriguing number of elements from Victorian fashion. The resurgence of neo-Victorian fashion reflects a paradox: once a tool for moral and social enforcement, Victorian femininity is now being reclaimed as an act of self-expression. Perhaps this digital reconfiguration of Too Muchness signals a shift in how femininity is performed, moving from a site of shame to one of agency.*



In a collection of personal essays titled *Too Much: How Victorian Constraints Still Bind Women Today*, Rachel Vorona Cote opens by provocatively stating, “a weeping woman is a monster. So too is a fat woman, a horny woman, [and] a woman shrieking with laughter” (11). The reader is caught by surprise—what is it about these four women that is so monstrous, positively devoid of humanity? Something about their embodiment of joy, sorrow or desire challenges norms of civility. Cote argues that what these women have in common is a feminine excess, or as she calls it, a certain “Too Muchness”—too much emotion, too much body, or brimming with too much lust (12). These women exist beyond the confines of polite society; they have no place among those who abide by the “unspoken rules of deportment” that otherwise bind men and women in gendered sociality (14). In Cote’s writing, feminine excess becomes something to observe with a measure of revulsion and feelings of pity, a ticking time bomb to “when her muchness becomes cause for expulsion, and renders her irrevocably alone” (16).

Therein lies the inevitable consequence of Too Muchness. The woman is deemed unworthy of love and unfit for society. Forced to live on the fringes of what is accepted, as she no longer fits the mold that heteronormative society has designed for her. The failure to self-regulate their ‘Too Muchness’ boils down to a particularly feminine moral failure. The woman who is Too Much has breached the social contract of the ‘good’ feminine, an integral part of the Victorian construction of femininity, one that neatly boxes itself within the walls of morality and self-control. The Victorian ‘good’ feminine arises from the prerogative of

what society deems to be ‘good’ and not ‘Too Much’. Therefore, a weeping woman is a monster, and consequently, deserving of the punishment that her breach of ‘good’ femininity dictates. Cote sees the consequences of Too Muchness on the women around her. Whether it be with food, film, fashion, or their relationship with their own bodies, Too Muchness defines the boundaries of the modern woman’s existence, with shame doled out for straying too far. Recognizing this as part of a larger phenomenon, Cote attempts to free her understanding of Too Muchness from the blinders of the personal, and historicizes her argument. She draws from the literature of the Victorian era to argue that the social and psychic construct of ‘the feminine’ was essentially birthed in this period, legibly tracing its acceptable limits. She posits that cautionary tales of Too Muchness have proliferated into the DNA of what constitutes the feminine ever since the Victorians, irreversibly conflating the feminine with restriction, rules and moderation.

However, an interesting paradox arose in the digital world and in pop culture shortly after the publication of Cote’s book in 2020. The unexpected devastation of the Covid-19 pandemic changed how we moved through the world, both physically and digitally. Digital femininity has become a proxy for embodied femininity, and there is no better indicator of this than fashion. With social media and short-form content as the primary mode of disseminating trends in the late 2010s, the pandemic became an incubator for experimental fashion. People were stuck at home, with no reason in particular to dress up at all, but found themselves with more time than ever to play around with their looks. Cutting your own hair, coloring it, and

styling outrageous looks became much easier to commit to without the pressure to wear them out in public. Women could explore Too Muchness safely within the confines of their homes and rooms. This moment seems to have marked the start of a phenomenon whereby hyperfeminine and 'excessive' aesthetics achieved positive connotations within the fashion lexicon. From the rise of early lockdown fashion trends like cottage-core to the global box office resuscitation perpetrated by Greta Gerwig's Barbie film and press tour (competing, of course, with the aesthetically austere Oppenheimer), feminine excess was undeniably redefined during the early 2020s.

To see feminine excess in action online today, one need not look further than the '-core' aesthetics appearing on platforms like TikTok. Etymologically derived from 'hardcore', the suffix -core connotes an aesthetic that reaches the mainstream consumer yet bears resemblance to subculture fashion ("A Glossary of '-Core' Style Aesthetics"). Cottage-core, Fairy-core, Mermaid-core, Coquette, Mob Wife, Whimsi-goth, and more straddle the line between fashion and fantasy, deriving inspiration from a variety of sources, imagery and subcultures. These aesthetics are brazen in their hyper-femininity, and have a more-is-more approach. The medium of trend proliferation, especially on TikTok, is recreation of others' content. When an aesthetic or particular look becomes popular, users attempt their own version of the trend, adding and subtracting based on their tastes and creating an incubation chamber where no idea feels too outrageous. This was especially evident within the context of global lockdowns. Through this melding of ideas, a very contemporary hyperfeminine

digital aesthetic was born, one where 20 satin bows would not be amiss on an outfit to go grocery shopping, nor would wearing a corset as outerwear for brunch be questioned.

There is, however, one entirely surprising element to this hyperfeminine aesthetic. The 2020s have marked a revival of the Victorian age in clothing, through garments, silhouettes and even accessories. Given that fashion has been taking cues from mermaids, reviving the past does not seem particularly outrageous. However, the underlying significance of feminine excess to the Victorians in particular is what makes this phenomenon intriguing to study. Scholars like Anna Krugovoy Silver have posited that the contours of femininity were tightly drawn during the Victorian period, in large part due to the codification of how gender and sexuality were embodied (9). There began to be a code for how women should eat, talk, dress, and be that managed to propagate even through the rigidly defined classes. A clear conception of socially acceptable femininity was created and administered to the masses, and women's self-fashioning thus set itself on a course that was dictated by morality and restriction. As we know from Cote, moral judgment is tied to fitting with the bounds of what version of the feminine is acceptable and what is not—and the Victorians are generally thought to have written the book on Too Muchness.

It is therefore entirely surprising that an almost revisionist take on Victorian aesthetics is so prominent in trends of hyperfemininity today. Victorian style is being used to embody the exact Too Muchness that would have been denigratory in its own time. The neo-Victorian digital aesthetic is

repurposing the style of the rule-abiding Victorian feminine and deliberately divorcing it from the immorality of Too Muchness to make itself at home among the hyperfeminine. In this paper, I posit that this take on Victorian aesthetics appears to be more agential—a conscious

self-expression rather than a social and moral enforcement.

## Two Fashion Eras, Both Alike in Dignity

The key to the success of the ‘core’ aesthetics appears to be the way women are using social media as fashion and styling archives. The same trend can be interpreted and reinterpreted by individuals, which was what led me to posit that we see a return of agency, allowing femininity to be derived from individual sources. From what I observed, a Victorian garment like a corset need not be tied to restrictive Victorian femininity, but could simply be a sexy and versatile piece to be styled alongside jeans. But how did we get here? In line with Cotes’ argument, I have chosen to historicize the current trend by first trying to gain an understanding of the Victorian period. Not only was the Victorian aesthetic born there, but it is also integral to our understanding of femininity and Too Muchness. Within the established historical context, it then becomes a prerogative to analyze current fashion trends and see what elements of the Victorian look they have borrowed, and why. Lastly, these puzzle pieces will allow us to see whether this reclamation of the Victorian aesthetic through a self-referential and hyperfeminine lens embraces the philosophy of Too Muchness, divorcing it from the historical values from which the aesthetic was borrowed. To take the feminine from a place of restriction and morality to one of excess and fun is no small task, and yet there remain many

consequences to ponder in this agential reclamation.

Much like the 2020s, the Victorian period was an era of constant change. During the Victorian era, fashion was viewed as public personhood, and a tool for the expression of femininity. We now start to see the conflation between Too Muchness and a woman’s comportment. In her book *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, Anna Krugovoy Silver explores how the period conflates ideal womanhood with restriction. The especially image-heavy period, due to the advent of media like the newspaper and photographs, made the reach of women’s fashion trends quite large. The Industrial Revolution was also a key contributor to the diverse variety of clothing the Victorians had access to, making clothing a commodity. Imperial industrial routes made a wider variety of materials available—cotton and silk were more easily obtained and produced around the world. The scene was set for fashion to become a consumer good and to dictate one’s standing in society, a pattern which continues today.

Victorian cities were bursting at the seams with people in new occupations, bringing into being a large middle-class. Concurrently, industrialization and formalization of labor pushed women out of



the productive sphere and monitored their every move in society. At this time, the ideal woman became the “angel of the house”, a somewhat ornamental role that not only emphasized acceptable social behaviors but also comportment and dress. She was an example of desirable middle-class femininity, where womanhood was tied to the home. The housewife exemplified the careful moderation of this restrictive model of femininity, with her reserved purse strings, conservative hemlines, and chaste sexuality. Propagated through elaborate etiquette manuals with advice on how to dress and carry oneself in different social situations, this conception of femininity was tied to moderation and morality, and was anti Too Muchness.

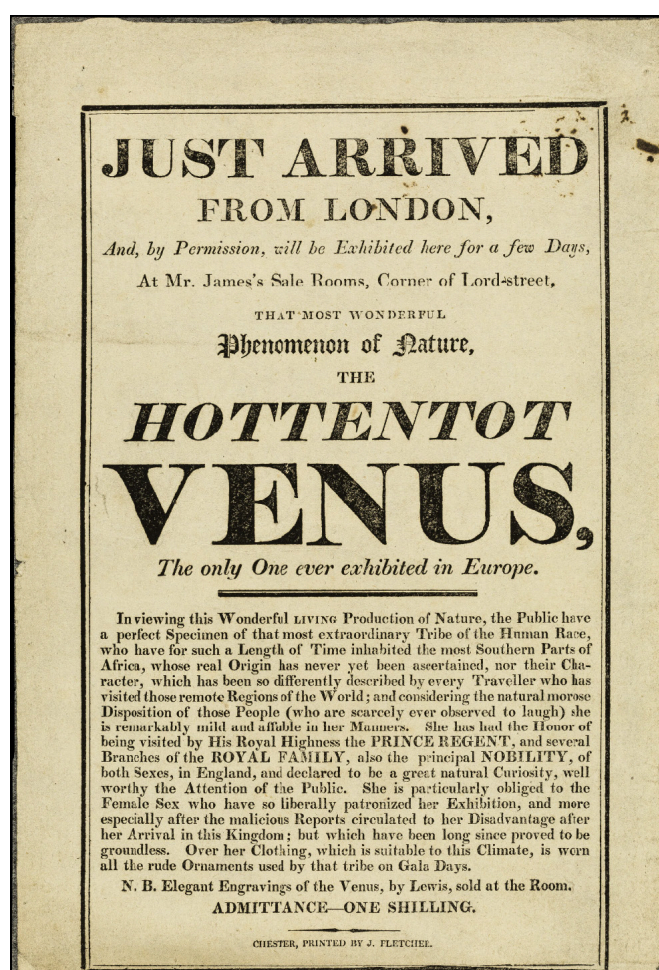
Speaking to the implication of morality in devising ideals of femininity, Catherine Hall says in “The History of the Housewife”, “the respectable middle-class lady and the prostitute were two sides of the same coin” (13). Hall’s claim suggests that they were both part of a regulatory project that sought to outline the limits of acceptable femininity, drawn together through an idea of risk. The proper middle-class lady is at risk of becoming her obverse, falling out of favor with society, if she gives in to excesses and does not uphold propriety well enough. Women’s conduct is subject to careful scrutiny and they are made the flagbearers of morality, tasked with upholding class and gender divides. Thus, fashion became a means by which to express femininity within a certain conformity to the rules. The ideal feminine of the period was embodied in “an aesthetic validation of the slender female form” and “to conform to that ideal, women were urged to downplay every aspect of their physicality, including (but not limited to) their sexuality” and most importantly,

their fashion (Kurgovoy Silver 27, 9). The trends and styles that are popular now would have undoubtedly been accused of feminine vanity or ‘finery’, to borrow from Mariana Valverde, who writes, “finery in the pejorative sense meant the type of female dress that signified or brought about moral ruin” (168). The lines of Too Muchness were drawn in the sand, and women were to firmly stay on the right side with their fashion.

The Too Much binary that cleaves through women as either proper and excessive or mad and monstrous is also notably class-marked. The upper-class woman’s role was to be fashionable, and the middle-class woman’s role was to embody moderation—social roles could not be breached. The poor, class-marked and race-marked bodies were immoral in their very existence, for which you need look no further than the Hottentot Venus. Perceived feminine deviancy in outward presentation was often tied to an excessive sensuousness and translated into the diagnosis of hysteria in Victorian times, a supposed physical and mental affliction. Notably, hysteria is an ailment borne of excesses—sexual libido, emotion, or even expression. Whether verbally or through one’s appearance, this notion of hysterics and the hysterical woman still finds purchase in our culture and aesthetics, albeit not carrying the same diagnostic weight as before. Lynn M. Voskuil, in the paper “Acts of Madness: Lady Audley and the Meanings of Victorian Femininity”, sheds lights on the Victorian belief in somatic fidelity, “the idea that a body necessarily and indisputably displays its inner truths, a notion that is closely tied to conventions of normal femininity” (613). By this conviction, both the ideal feminine and feminine excess should be

apparent in a woman's appearance and comportment. The hysterical woman, the madwoman, and the fallen woman are some of the negative archetypes that also correspond to a certain visual, verbal, or

gestural excess in the body of the women themselves. Fashion thus becomes an enforcer, a way to neatly box women into 'Too Much' and 'Just Enough'.



*Unknown, 1811, Wellcome Collection, Newsprint and Engraving of the Hottentot Venus*

Valverde rightly points out that until quite recently “the spect[er] of the Victorian fallen woman continued to haunt the urban palaces of consumption and the lower reaches of popular literature well into the twentieth century” (174). Consumption and leisure still carry with them the weight of moral opprobrium for women today, making our two fashion eras eerily similar. The intersection of

morality and fashion continues to play out in online fashion trends, as women use them to push the bounds of femininity. The neo-Victorian aesthetic does not want to be haunted by the specter of the fallen woman. However, propriety is still in play, in the difference between risqué enough and too risqué, for example, but also in terms of good consumption—that is, conscious consumption, which is gaining increasing



traction. The material consideration of having a variety of styles available at the click of a button is fueled by wholesale markets that make cheap replicas of as many aesthetics and eras of fashion as possible. Fast fashion has no doubt contributed to the rise of nostalgia-laden vintage aesthetics constituting a genre of fashion, and simply by virtue of availability, women are able to explore historical garbs that would otherwise be far too expensive to incorporate into the day-to-day. Much like the Victorian era, today's consumers are still divided by the right and wrong ways to engage with trends.

Then what makes today's digital Neo-Victorian aesthetic different? I propose that it makes more agential

choices in its interpretation, borrowing directly from this visual palette and neatly tailoring the edges between fashion and costume. There is a deliberately fantastic character to this revival, taking a whimsical and often humorous outlook that I aim to make visual comparisons with. There is careful deliberation accorded to how Victorian garments are styled, and how they are modernized to suit contemporary online culture. Through visual analysis, we will be able to see how the Neo-Victorian has distanced itself from its tight-laced Victorian inspiration. Through this, I aim to point out how the individual styling and interpretation of Victorian garments embraces feminine excess, thereby disassociating Victorian fashion from Victorian morals.

## A Passion for (Victorian) Fashion

The Coquette, Fairy-core and Cottage-core aesthetics exemplify the hyperfeminine transformation of the Victorian aesthetic in today's digital spaces. They take recognizable Victorian elements and reinterpret them in maximalist ways. Take the ubiquity of the corset, for instance. Almost emblematic of Victorian restriction and female morality, this undergarment has undergone a renaissance. Making prominent appearances in the Mob Wife, Fairy-core, and Whimsi-Goth trends, to name a few, the corset saw a full-blown resurgence in the 2020s. In her article "What's so feminist about garters and bustiers? Neo-burlesque as post-feminist sexual liberation", Kay Siebler posits that the original Victorian aesthetic of the corset is comprised of "exposure (a vulnerable subject position), restriction (preventing

a female body from moving about in the world as an active agent), and helplessness (infantilizing an adult)" (571). The corset is the poster child for literally restricting the feminine. The corset cuts a certain figure that is feminine in both tailoring womanly curves in the mode of the ideal feminine, as well as in lacing and binding women's bodies in place to prevent Too Muchness. No wonder Victorian ladies would swoon and faint so!





*T. McLean, 1830, Etching, "A correct view of the new machine for winding up the ladies"*

Feminist discourse of the 20th century validates Sieber's position, and the history of the corset also shows that it is a garment of underground subcultures like drag and burlesque, even now. Both of these art forms are, in fact, spaces where performers make a spectacle out of femininity. They tease out what is otherwise forgotten—Victorian femininity is an elaborate and painstaking production that women had to take part in! The corset is emblematic of restraint, yet has become a valued commodity for hyperfeminine styling, whether in a performative sense or simply in everyday styles; its very functionality has changed. By caging the body, the corset also amplifies the feminine form, cutting a sultry hourglass figure.

Siebler validates the theory that corsets are sexy and have an element of show to them, making them titillating garments to work with. The caging of the body is thus what makes the uncaging so tempting. The idea that corsets can be used to hide and tease, a concept extremely widespread in burlesque performances, is a good example of how modes of controlling Too Muchness can become agential in expressing one's Too Muchness. Perhaps the difference comes from something inherent in the way of presenting/staging it that imbues it with a productive tension? The 'core' aesthetics also have a sense of over-the-top performativity in which one may find parallels with the agency of the burlesque dancer.

Emblematic of this transformation are the Fairy-core and Mermaid-core silhouettes of TikTok. Their bright colors, in palettes of ocean blues and fairy greens, are complemented by cinched corsets that enhance the waist and bust. Often styled along with layered skirts, the Fairy-core silhouette is reminiscent of the middle-class Victorian woman, while Mermaid-core's pearl jewelry is quintessential to the upper-class woman. There has also been a resurgence in knitted and lace styles in these aesthetics, harking back to the handcrafted clothing of the Victorian period. Yet, exposed skin and accentuating glittery makeup contemporize these aesthetic elements, and bring an element of self-styled feminine sexuality. The emphasis on styling, particularly with storybook-ish elements in these two '-cores', reinterprets the Victorian through a dehistoricization, much like the Steampunk aesthetic, which treats the Victorian era as inspiration but also as a jumping-off point to rewrite history.



*Mermaid-core. @madeleinecwhite. Instagram.*

The Coquette aesthetic, another of the '-cores', can be explored through works of designers like Simone Rocha, who explicitly reference Victorian fashion as inspiration. This eye-catching aesthetic derives its moniker from the 17th century term meaning a flirtatious girl, and characterizes itself with sweet, romantic, and feminine styles. The children's literature, fashion, and etiquette manuals of the Victorian era provide a plethora of inspiration for this look, with the adoption of bows, frills, handmade flowers, flouncy layers, and a fresh-faced, youthful look. The industrial revolution, with its formalization of labour concretized the social understanding of childhood, such as through the first laws mandating a minimum age of employment, and consequently notions of girlhood and womanhood. The Coquette aesthetic plays with this conception of girlhood, reinterpreting it in a maximalist fashion by having grown women reinterpret the 17th century coquette into one couched in the 21st century.

Victorian girlhood, particularly upper-class girlhood, was a private affair, much like how the good housewife belonged within the realm of the home. The home was a chrysalis for the metamorphosis into a respectable lady, and consequently the upper-class fashions being replicated in the Coquette trend derive from a notion of femininity that is entirely shielded from the public eye. The visibility of social media, in the literal form of views, challenges the idea that Victorian girlhood is confined to the private, and instead puts it out on to the stage of the internet. The coquette being a flirt no longer bears a negative connotation, but rather plays into the flirtiness of the aesthetic itself, agential to the woman's body as opposed to being a characteristic of outgoing, chatty little



girls. The 21st century coquette is keenly aware of her sensuality - the bows and frills are merely ornamentations to the body, whereas the stifling high collars of the young Victorian girl are emblematic of the restraint they were bound in.



*1850s Pink Dress and Hat, The Vintage Dancer; as compared to singer Madison Beer. Coquette. @madisonbeer. Instagram.*

Lastly, one of the chronologically earliest trends is the still-popular Cottage-core. This is perhaps the most interesting of the three, as it birthed the 'core' trend and became immensely popular during the early phase of the pandemic lockdowns. This style connotes a lifestyle as much as it does an aesthetic, as foundational to this trend is a longing for a quiet countryside 'cottage' life. Activities like homesteading, cooking and gardening became associated with this

aesthetic. Much like the ideal housewife of Catherine Hall's essay, the Cottage-core aesthetic models itself after a form of domesticity. Emblematic of this aesthetic and the hyper-femininity associated with -core aesthetics is the Strawberry Dress, a flouncy pink glittery day dress designed by Japanese designer Lirika Matoshi ("How Did The Strawberry Dress Get So Popular?"). Matoshi and her sister Teuta both run immensely popular fashion houses that have received a boost in popularity due



to the mid-2020 Cottage-core trend. The aesthetics of Cottage-core, once again, encompass corsets, layered skirts, bows, embroidery, and lace. Elements of this style have trickled down into the other two aesthetics discussed, making this one of the earliest signifiers of the resurgence of Victorian style.



*Cottage-core. Instagram. @aliccevis*

The fantasy, role-playing element of all these aesthetics makes sense when looked at as a form of escapism. The storybook-esque feeling I referred to with

Mermaid-core is actually a thread that seems to connect all of these reinterpretations of Victorian garb. What is evident to me is that, in order to reinterpret these styles, the women of today needed distance from their origins. The digital landscape democratizes information sharing, and everyone has access to similar imagery, trends, and inspiration should they seek it. Unlike the women who were bound by the restrictiveness of the original styles, the neo-Victorian aesthetic has become something of a storybook fantasy to embody for today's online culture. The churn of the modern world has taken us far enough from the Victorian era that in digital spaces it can be taken as a source of inspiration divorced from the values it once represented, values that a woman today might not even be conscious of when she laces herself into her corset. Those who are aware of the Victorian mode of restrictive femininity are quick to satirize it, and while the spectre of the Victorian fallen woman still haunts us today, modern women most certainly are not willing recipients of the haunting. The reinterpretation of Victorian fashions represents an agential distancing from the bounds of Too Muchness. Who is to stop women online if they want to dress up as Victorian fairies at music festivals? Certainly not each other.

## The Trickle-Down Effect

The communal aspect of how these trends have been propagated seems to have allowed women to mold the Victorian aesthetic to suit contemporary times, and this includes cutting away the judgement and shame of Too Muchness. Too Muchness seems to be indulged in with a conscious sense of humor. Perhaps none

of these '-cores' are particularly practical, but the fantastical element of the styling appears to allow a subversion of the values of the Victorian era. Too Muchness is being embraced in all its chaos and absurdity, an entity that grows and undulates through digital spaces, turning femininity into a living thing. There seems to be a positive

movement at work that is challenging the long-standing patriarchal rules for embodied and social femininity. Film and television have also begun taking cues from this, with movements of historical revisionism underway. Prime examples of this are the immensely popular *Bridgerton* show, *My Lady Jane*, and *Decameron*, which are all based in history, but come across as fantasies that rewrite their women to reflect contemporary values. They allow their female protagonists to forgo the morality associated with their original time periods and explore unabashed female sexuality and desire, often to a pleasurable excess.

We can see digital culture posing a challenge to the norms of morally restrictive femininity and providing a largely positive outlet for exploring the self. It provides a much-needed break from the constant tip-toeing of restrictive femininity and is open to accepting more nuance without judgment. This culture does provide a more positive connotation to the feminine overall, and allows spaces of common experience and diverse shared interests to be formed. This is a heartening movement, particularly for those of us who have struggled to understand our own femininity in a society defined by a tightrope walk between enough and Too Much. In deconstructing my own argument for agential freedom from the bounds of Too Muchness, I was overjoyed by how my own place in the world, as a 6 foot-tall, curly haired, bespectacled woman, could be shifting from something I would only see in the 'before' shot of movie makeover sequences. However, is this hyperfeminine maximalism successful in eliminating the social risk (and very real physical risk) of embodying feminine excess? Or does it actually trickle down as I have claimed,

to rework the limits of what is risqué and what is acceptable?

The insular digital bubble within which these trends originated also produce an imagination of an ideal body type for these aesthetics. In fact, my own reference images feature largely white, cis-women, whose bodies meet societal norms, donning these trends. What does it say for those of us with bodies that do not quite meet this requirement? Trans women, for example, have been pioneers of fashion and presentational dynamism for a long time, but they continue to be persecuted for their feminine 'excesses'. There are also upsurges of conservatism in pockets of the internet—in fact, trends like Cottage-core lend themselves to these discussions, with Tiktoker Ballerina Farm being front and center in the debate between conservatism and aesthetics. A young mother who left her life as a Juilliard-trained ballerina at the behest of her millionaire husband to homestead, she has been at the center of several discussions about how the internet allows us to glamourize lifestyles and communities that perhaps have darker moral implications for femininity at their heart.

In gender theorist Judith Butler's work, she speaks of 'performativity', a theorization of gender as performative. She says that gender places a lot of value on the aesthetic codes that are worked and reworked to grant legibility to gender expressions (Butler 25). While I have argued for an agential reclamation of feminine excess, stories of women like Ballerina Farm make it difficult to gauge whether this movement is entirely positive. Perhaps it is reflective of the fact that constructed digital spaces neatly package themselves under trendy hashtags—making it a

commercially and socially viable way for women to explore Too Muchness. Ultimately, it becomes something digitally performative, but can we claim that it has impact in the real world? In addition, modern consumption patterns and fast fashion make it so that one can hardly be blamed for mistaking the smoggy spires of Victorian London for the smoggy skyline of Beijing, with reports on labor practices and sweatshops telling us that we have not moved as far ahead of the Victorians as we think. Maybe this is why Butler refers

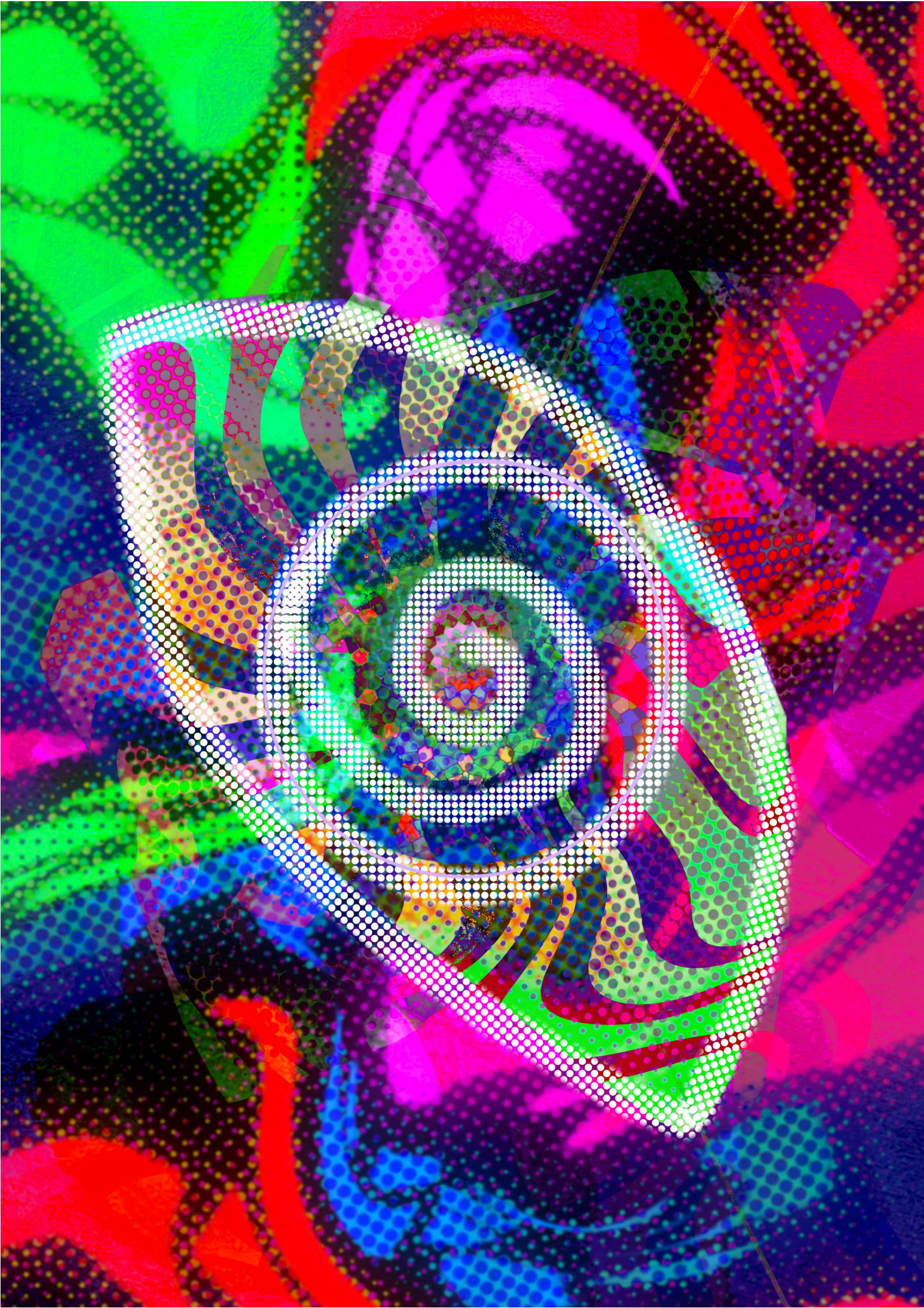
to the feminine as a construct—it is always under construction. In my observation, women in digital spaces appear to be the ones wearing the neon safety vests and hard hats, but they are not entirely capable of changing the way we perceive Too Muchness in one fell swoop. Instead, I would read this as a sign that women are capable of chipping away at the walls that enclose femininity with their own hands, taking more agential decisions on how much is Too Much.



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# 04

## Participatory Theatre in Rural West Bengal:

### *Jana Sanskriti and Bridging Last-Mile Welfare Gaps in PDS Access*

*Sulagna Maitra*

#### **Abstract:**

*Why do last-mile gaps persist and prevent resources from reaching those most in need? How does participatory communication become a possible bridge between policy-makers and the common public? How does one even attempt to create these channels in our system? Using Jana Sanskriti's Forum Theatre in the Sundarbans as a case study, this paper works with field observations and interviews with farm labourers and theatre performers to assess the impact of the organisation's work in alleviating PDS-related issues in the region. It explores possibilities for policy-interventions that may use this approach as a framework to include marginalised groups in accessing the schemes and rights they are guaranteed. This is done by tracing the sustained influence of this form of performance and communication in producing context-specific solutions, alongside fostering 'last mile' connectivity, encouraging understanding, and usage. It also examines the importance of decentralised means of communication to ensure the propagation of equitable welfare and adoption strategies elsewhere in the country through replication.*



According to the National Food Security Portal, the Public Distribution System (PDS) in India serves as a lifeline for millions of vulnerable households, reaching 80 crore people and providing essential food grains at subsidized rates (NFSA Portal). However, despite the government's efforts and success in broadening its footprint, the PDS still does not reach everyone in need, especially among the most marginalized communities in remote locations, as leakages still remain. While there are organized efforts at disseminating information about the PDS and its many processes—including ration cards, categorizations and classifications, and application processes—through various public service campaigns, deployment of Integrated Child Development Services, mid-day meals at schools, and door-to-door visits, gaps remain. The reality on the ground is that these efforts have not fully bridged the information divide. This is due to hyperlocal contexts being overlooked when policy decisions are taken. Despite communication being strategized and implemented, it is often the case that people who need the support of welfare the most do not know about it at all or are too intimidated by the bureaucratic processes required for access, particularly at present, with the integration of digital technology.

One of the ways that the government has attempted to streamline access and address corruption, bureaucratic complications, or the involvement of middlemen is through Aadhaar card integration and technology. While 'Digital India' and surrounding advancements claim to make processes a click-of-a-button away and available to all, in reality, many individuals in remote rural locations do not have the smart devices, the digital

literacy, or the money required to access the internet and the provisions available, or benefit from them meaningfully (Dhaliwal 104). Added hindrances are caused by inequities within communities, ranging from gender, caste, class, disability, and literacy to economic issues, leading to inadequate support. So, despite attempts at creating avenues for access, people continue to be deprived.

Development experts agree on the lack of tailored communication as a principal 'last-mile' bottleneck throttling accessibility, enrollment, and equitable adoption of healthcare, financial services, education, and social security entitlements across socio-economic divides (George and McKay 2), all of which are pressing issues hindering India's development goals. Communication is the binding glue fostering last-mile coordination between national planning, district-level machinery, and grassroots-level workers within the policy cycle. In this context, participatory communication aimed at empowerment through consultation and collaboration emerges as a crucial tool (Tufté and Mefalopulos 6). It can aid in contextual awareness generation through interventions like messaging in local dialects, addressing local needs and issues—in collaboration with community members, local leaders, and civil society organizations—which otherwise hinder awareness and access to the PDS, among other state and centrally-run welfare initiatives. It can foster multidirectional information flows between governments designing interventions, on-ground institutions driving implementation, and communities requiring outreach. This approach further enables participative processes, allowing feedback assimilation for optimized targeting and accountability

in a dynamic manner.

This paper analyses how strategic participatory communication aids in propagating welfare. It examines the case of Jana Sanskriti, a grassroots organization that leverages a form of participatory communication aimed at consciousness raising and collaboration called Forum Theatre—specifically, Theatre of the Oppressed. Rooted in ideologies of empowerment and emancipation from oppressors, it uses context-specific imperatives around fostering ‘last-mile’ connectivity via localised, interactive theatre-based participatory communication strategies, encouraging understanding and usage among marginalised groups. Women in the Sundarbans are empowered to facilitate dialogue in their communities through performance and discussion, which has improved PDS access as well as enrollment to other schemes in the last decade. Having worked with Jana Sanskriti on the field for six months, most of which was spent in the Sundarbans, I interviewed several women working with the organization to investigate how this theatre form has become a means for decentralized and community-led awareness, and feedback generation. It is a form that has the potential, through replication, to become crucial to the state’s welfare agenda and its success in the region.

### **Participatory Theatre for Consciousness-Raising: Jana Sanskriti**

While there are state-driven communication efforts which may also be participatory, it is important that participatory interventions are not prescriptive but are led by communities, and build a sense

of entitlement and ownership among those most vulnerable—something that is seriously lacking due to the many levels of intersecting socio-economic hierarchies at play. Participatory Communication through Forum Theatre, pioneered by Augusto Boal as part of his Theatre of the Oppressed technique, attempts to do just that. Based on Paulo Friere’s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), here, oppressed groups collectively develop and enact plays based on real-life experiences and stories of injustice, which are then debated and reshaped by spectator interventions (Boal)—or as Dr Sanjoy Ganguly, founder and creative director of Jana Sanskriti, terms it: ‘spect-actor’ interventions. The theatre experience, with repeated exposure and the dialogue generation it encourages, triggers critical reflection on regressive practices, highlights structural issues and motivates individual, and eventually, collective community action for change.

Jana Sanskriti, which started as a grassroots theatre movement based in West Bengal, exemplifies the transformative power of participatory communication through this method. From February-July 2023, while being engaged in fieldwork in three blocks in the South 24 Parganas district i.e., the Sundarbans (as well as parts of the Purulia district), I conducted numerous interviews with close to 100 women—all agricultural laborers who also perform in, or are spectators of, Jana Sanskriti productions, many of whom have been associated with the organization for over a decade. They actively take part in rehearsals and are joined by the community, who come to not simply watch passively, but also participate in discussions around the topic of the play of the day. I have observed

first-hand how people go back with knowledge of schemes such as the PDS or how to acquire ration cards, as a direct consequence of their work. Workshops conducted in every village where they operate have trained local activists to provide necessary information about the ration card application process and other aspects of PDS-related issues. The women, all members of the community, and all from marginalized backgrounds, working as laborers in the fields, learn to solve grievances people from the village might have, in the local dialect. This has been crucial to making the bureaucratic processes much more comprehensible—more so than even public service announcements in the region. Through a multi-pronged approach with theatre, para,<sup>1</sup> and village-level gatherings, discussions and workshops, Jana Sanskriti aims to not just aid in solving issues on the surface, but build a sense of entitlement and consciousness among everyone in the villages.

Over the course of the organization's work, social change has developed in the region and the people with regard to awareness and entitlement (Brahma et al. 7). It has fostered confidence among women, particularly, to publicly articulate their perspectives, assume social leadership roles, positively reshape familial gender relations, and actively participate in public forums, providing support to the community to ensure access and smooth implementation of state-sanctioned welfare. This transformation, despite a

history of hunger and poverty, can be ascertained through the interviews I have conducted and is corroborated by studies conducted on the organization's work in the region for over 30 years.

Forum Theatre holds potential for consciousness-raising, norm-questioning, and the provision of greater social agency as initial steps enabling the participation of communities in their own development. As people participate in identifying the issues that are unique to them and try to resolve them, they point to gaps that exist in their hyperlocal contexts. This is then brought to those in power, to co-create solutions. Through Forum Theatre and other participatory techniques, Jana Sanskriti engages communities in critical dialogue and collective problem-solving (Brahma et al. 11). As applied by Jana Sanskriti across the Sundarbans in West Bengal, Forum Theatre has helped spark intergenerational dialogue, questioning entrenched patriarchal norms around child marriage, gender discrimination in education, domestic abuse, etc., and encompassing issues surrounding access to government-mandated welfare schemes (Brahma et al. 12). In the early 2000s, for close to a decade, Jana Sanskriti members were involved in staging a play called "What is the BPL?"<sup>2</sup>, aimed at addressing the corruption and food insecurity that plagued landless agricultural laborers, especially women in the area. The play sought to address how Below Poverty Level (BPL) ration cards<sup>3</sup> were being issued in the area to people who should not qualify as BPL, along with

1 Similar to mohalla-level.

2 BPL কি আছে?

3 The BPL Ration Card is a key component of India's PDS, designed to ensure food security for the nation's most vulnerable citizens. This card allows families living below the poverty line to access essential commodities at highly subsidised rates, including food grains, cooking fuel, and other necessities.



other issues like appropriate quantities of grain not being provided at ration shops, bills not being provided, lists not being maintained for transparency, shop managers bullying people in need, etc.

While Jana Sanskriti works with all members of the village community, they have had the most sustained engagement with women, as their work in the region started with women empowerment. For PDS work, it is often women who are the performers in the plays and also the ones who attend workshops to learn about the bureaucratic processes involved in ensuring they get the resources and help they deserve for their families. This is because it is women who are usually in charge of the kitchen, food provisions in families, and decisions around food. It is also women who face more food insecurity, which affects newer generations negatively. In West Bengal, another reason for women being approached is that Jana Sanskriti workers try to teach people about other women-centric schemes that may be clubbed with rights already assured by the state government, creating awareness about all of what is available, as well as the advantages and pitfalls of each scheme. This was clear across the board in all the interviews I conducted.

Many stories were similar. These women grew up in acute poverty, were denied education, and were married off quite young. They worked as laborers in the fields and managed the home, but would often respond with, “I didn’t do anything at all.”<sup>4</sup> Hard times persisted in their lives, with many suffering abuse from in-laws and husbands, as poverty

and food insecurity cast a shadow over their lives permanently. For many, Jana Sanskriti’s entry into their lives became an avenue for emancipation. With time, and as their lives intersected more deeply with the organization, they not only recognized their crucial role in their homes and society, but became catalysts for change in the community in the process. This was highlighted in an interview with Archana G,<sup>5</sup> a 45-year-old resident of Pathar Pratima in the Sundarbans, who has faced lifelong challenges with food insecurity. Her past, marred by limited access to food, and domestic violence, continues to influence her present, casting a shadow on her relationship with food despite changed circumstances through her association with Jana Sanskriti. While she battles still with the trauma from her past life, she has been a crucial part of her para’s fight against illicit liquor consumption and associated issues. She has also helped many women access essential food grains in her village. Excerpts from other interviews have also been included.<sup>6</sup> Archana, a tireless agricultural laborer and now a skilled Forum Theatre performer, dedicates her days to both farming and fostering vital conversations in her community on women’s and farming issues, along with issues related to the PDS in her village. Her day begins at dawn, and ends late in the night. She resides with her maternal family and contributes to meal preparation before venturing into nearby fields and toiling throughout the day. Her dietary preferences are modest, typically consisting of puffed rice and potatoes in the morning, and local small fish from communal sources, complemented by rice or pulses based on provisions made available by the PDS, for lunch. In the

4 কিছুই করতাম না, দিদি।

5 Name changed and surname withheld for anonymity.

6 Name changed and surname withheld where applicable for anonymity.

evenings, if there are meetings, rehearsals or social events organized by local NGOs or the Panchayat, tea is served with a biscuit; and dinner is usually leftover rice or, on warmer days, *panta*.<sup>7</sup> Seasonally, neighbors offer mangoes and palm from their trees.

Talking candidly, Archana mentioned how, when she first started to develop a sense of the world, she realized that theirs was “a household dealing with extreme lack.”<sup>8</sup> She was the youngest of five siblings in a large family, growing up with scarcity, and often their only meal for a day would be “a slurry made with wheat flour.”<sup>9</sup> Things improved slightly when her brothers started working, but this did not eliminate scarcity. She was taken out of school after the fourth grade to support the work her brothers did. She would be sent to deliver rice, dal, eggs, potatoes, and kerosene procured from the PDS to them. There being so many members in her household, the provisions at the ration shop were not enough to ensure everyone ate well. Individual ration cards were not made, as procuring them was far too complicated. Some amount of the allotted grains would be withheld, and often, things would run out. She mentioned, “I would eat a couple handfuls of rice and leave for where they worked at around 9:30 am. I’d reach around 3 pm.”<sup>10</sup> She would walk.

As she approached puberty, she

joined in the household chores, helping provide meals for everyone. The family earned meager wages working in nearby fields. She worked in the rice paddies, tended to the chili plants at home, and managed the housework. With tears in her eyes, she recalled how people would sometimes suggest cleaning her scabs with soap when they could not afford food. “We didn’t have food so I was skin and bones. Sometimes I would get scabs on my skin, it would become like rope. We would often live off leftovers from neighbors, who could be cruel. Sometimes I would drink water and go to bed because the little rice that was cooked was left to be shared between my brothers, their wives, and I.”<sup>11</sup> She welled up again talking about how her mother would wake up at 3 am to work, remembering how some days were good days despite the hardships—they’d have a biscuit to share amongst the siblings, and these were inexplicably warm memories.

Eventually, she got married, at twenty-two, to a neighbour. “Nobody wanted to marry me because I was dark and thin,”<sup>12</sup> she said. Her father paid a dowry of INR 25,000 by selling a huge part of the small plot of land where they farmed—their primary source of income. She had envisaged an easier life after marriage with less scarcity, because her husband had a pond and even cows, but that was not to be. Grains and rice were still sourced from the ration shops, along

7 *Panta Bhat* is cooked rice soaked and fermented in water. It is functional as it is naturally probiotic, prevents the rice from spoiling, and many who consume it believe that it has a cooling effect on the body.

8 আমাদের সংসারে অভাব ছিল।

9 আটা কে পায়েসের মত বা সুজির মত গুলে খেতাম।

10 দু মূঠো চালা খেয়ে আমি যেতাম ৯.৩০ নাগাদ, পোঁছতাম সেই ৩টো। তখন আর হাঁটা ছাড়া উপায় ছিল না।

11 আমরা খেতে পাইনি! চামড়া উঠে আসছে, গা দড়ির মত। ২টো ভাত বাঁচলে দিয়ে যেত কিন্তু আমি জল খেয়ে শুয়ে পরতাম কারণ দাদা, বৌদি সবাই খেত।

12 আমি কালো না দিদি! আমি রোগা ছিলাম তাই বিয়ে আমার অনেক পরে হয়েছে।

with other necessary items, but any food she cooked or ate would first need to be permitted by her husband. He would catch fish and distribute it to Archana and his sister-in-law, but if the quantity turned out to be less than he expected after cooking, he would beat her on suspicion of her having shared it with others. Despite there being scarcity, there was also waste. In fits of anger, he would throw cooked food into the pond, letting her starve after beating her. All issues would begin with food scarcity and hunger, but would lead to her facing even more hunger, which became a relentless cycle. Eventually, she was forced to leave with her 25-days-old son, when her husband beat her unconscious over a fistful of puffed rice she had eaten. Despite walking out on a violent man, she blames herself for her marriage failing.

Archana's story is representative of interviews I conducted with several other women, who live tough lives with little knowledge of how to access the protections and rights that the state has to offer them. Along with domestic abuse, food access was a prevailing issue for most. There was rampant mismanagement of the facilities that stored and distributed rations to the people. While some farmers grew their own crops, working on small pieces of land meant very little would be left to sell or store for the family's yearly consumption. Another interviewee, Kamala, also spoke about the poverty faced by her family as she grew up, and how, despite tireless work, food was always scarce. The PDS was there, but never in a way where it alleviated hunger or poverty meaningfully. Often accessing these public resources depend on private relationships with those in charge, sharing allotted provisions, or providing

favours. Some family members, despite being adults, remained on child-cards and received food shares accordingly. In many families, male members drank away whatever little money was earned, adding to food access issues. In the Sundarbans at the time, brewing and selling of illicit alcohol as a business grew alongside the diminishing role of the PDS. People would barter stored grains for alcohol in extreme cases. Therefore, in the blocks where Jana Sanskriti worked, not only was food scarce, but alcoholism was on the rise, exacerbating other issues such as domestic abuse, affecting women the most. Both the women named above and several others with similar experiences spoke very passionately about how Jana Sanskriti had transformed them as people and women. They spoke of their fights at home, and how theatre became a means for liberation. They spoke of struggles—internal, socio-cultural, familial—that ultimately led to what they now see as a much better society, and much better structures. These women were the facilitators of this social change, empowering their communities as members. I heard many stories, where the women formed groups and dismantled distilleries; and went to ration shops and supervised the work of the manager, ensuring community members were treated right, often facing pushback. They learnt to file RTIs<sup>13</sup> about the ration provisions in their blocks, and ensured that the people in power addressed their grievances.

Jana Sanskriti's interventions are unique as a mode of participatory communication, as they generally involve training interested theatre performers from villages—often farmers who

<sup>13</sup> The Right to Information Act (2005) ensures that any citizen may request information from a 'public authority', securing a response from the body within 30 days.



volunteer with the organization for an honorarium—to use theatre as a tool for social awareness and education. This process involves equipping performers with knowledge of various social issues and laws, such as those associated with the PDS system, through multiple training sessions with experts like lawyers and policy advisors. For example, performers like Archana and Kamala are trained to creatively convey complex information to their communities, making it more accessible and engaging. These women then engage with the members of the village for over a month to understand what issues around PDS access they might identify in their own communities, along with things they experience themselves. Based on their understanding, they create a few short performances that demonstrate instances of injustice featuring the ration shop. The performance is then advertised in the village and a show is put up, and village residents come and engage with the issue being performed. The spectators are invited to become ‘spect-actors’ and participate in changing the narrative of the play by engaging in critical thinking and dialogue with the performers, who take contrarian positions, making it hard for justice to prevail. This eventually leads to the creation of a participatory space where all opinions are heard and addressed, and people are put in a position that offers them opportunities to think critically and stand up for themselves. Multiple instances of this kind of performance, encouraging repeated interactions with the same issue; opportunities to assess it from various points of view, through different complications; and attempts to untangle those threads leads to a more informed and empowered audience, and eventually—although change is slow and sustained—a community of people who

form a clearer understanding of their rights through participatory communication. The stage becomes practice for real life, where they are encouraged to claim their rights and entitlements in a similar manner. The involvement of the community, in turn, highlights issues that are specific to the region, which then creates opportunities to address them more effectively.

For Archana, joining Jana Sanskriti after her marriage failed became a means of not just earning back the dignity she had foregone, but also gaining awareness about food scarcity. Through training and performance of plays on ration-related issues, she and others like her not only made changes in their own lives, but changed their communities. They began by attempting to see themselves in a new light. Then, as actors in forum performances—women who initiated public discourse on socially relevant contemporary issues—they became vehicles for change in their communities. In that period, Jana Sanskriti was able to create roughly 4000 ration cards, fixing and updating ones that needed corrections in Pathar Pratima and Kulpi. Citizens’ Monitoring Committees were set up, RTIs were filed, mass petitions were made. The people of the community and the organization received a lot of pushback from government officials, but as the whole community became involved over the course of seven-eight years, working towards holistic redressal of the local ration shops and the PDS system operation in the area, things changed.

In South Bengal, Jana Sanskriti’s interventions in the form of theatre performances, workshops and awareness campaigns have created an understanding among people, mostly women in the rural Sundarbans, about entitlements,

empowering marginalised groups to assert their rights and hold authorities accountable for transparent and efficient service delivery. In every workshop, there are a significant number of participants who are less alienated from the ration card registration process, issues related to lack of documentation, Aadhaar-related access, etc., as indicated through feedback from participants. This becomes indispensable in the community's understanding of their entitlement to this scheme and others introduced by the state, as well as of the process. There is a general fear surrounding the paperwork that may be involved, as well as the bureaucratic hurdles one may be too busy for, which is demystified through dialogue in the form of theatre created by the community, for the community, in the language and dialect of the place, broken into easily digestible pieces of information and delivered in the form of entertainment. More than anything else, people feel entitled to seek their rights, which changes their approach to the system.

Today, there is still hope in Archana's voice and she sees dignity in her labor. Even though her son earns enough to sustain her, she still works for daily wages and is supported by Jana Sanskriti, an organization that has enabled her to find her voice and, more importantly, access information and knowledge, and reclaim some agency and power. She fears old age, when she will not be able to work as she does now. She also cannot fathom consumption to the point of satiation, always saving for bad days even though they have become few and far between with government schemes for women now being accessible to her. She is haunted by her past, unable to come to terms with this "better" present, laced with uncertainty. However, things for her and

her community are good. This bittersweet experience is echoed by most women I spoke to.

## **Community Participation Opportunities in PDS and Welfare Access**

Experts advocate public investments directed at localizing awareness drives, strengthening grievance systems and bridging coordination gaps via dialogic communication across hierarchies for equitable welfare delivery, curbing prevailing 'last-mile' divides (Sinha 60). Firstly, decentralized communication planning—through the transfer of campaign ownership to panchayats, for example—allows optimization of the messaging according to the distinct geographic-cultural contexts. Panchayats collaborating with civil societies undertake participatory communication, mapping citizens' barriers around adopting entitled welfare. Secondly, administrations expand the reach of vernacular communication via folk media like street plays, puppetry, and interpersonal contact, leveraging self-help groups, youth clubs, NGOs, etc., equipping them with scheme-related knowhow. Thirdly, storytelling initiatives documenting case studies of citizens who were assisted in availing entitlements through frontline worker mediation affirm their facilitative role. Such narratives validate localized communication in driving welfare uptake. Fourthly, administrations need investments in strengthening grievance redressal, incorporating beneficiary inputs to enhance the accommodativeness of schemes towards user concerns. Finally, mandated regular interface meetings between policymakers, district officials and frontline workers can foster policy learning

across levels, while enabling workers to provide feedback on ground realities.

Leveraging community influencers and local media can also help dispel misconceptions and motivate behavior change. By incorporating feedback from marginalized communities, policymakers can design communication campaigns that resonate with their cultural contexts and address barriers to access. The key impediments requiring urgent redressal via dialogic communication are: lack of localized awareness on scheme provisions, enrollment procedures, and entitlement benefits leading to citizens remaining outside the ambit of welfare; lack of coordination between higher authorities and ground functionaries, impacting access; and weak grievance mechanisms hampering accountability (George and McKay 7). Empowering communities to actively participate in the PDS and other schemes and rights assured by the government can change lives, enhance accountability and ensure that the system meets their needs. Jana Sanskriti's work has gone beyond the Sundarbans; they have worked with other NGOs and local government officials to create awareness, raise entitlement, and provide people support on their quest for PDS access. They have worked across states and even in Delhi with the Dilli Shramik Sangathan<sup>14</sup>, with whom they co-created a short forum theatre performance involving slum dwellers and daily wage workers who were migrants in the area. These were people who were refused PDS access, and it was through this collaborative theatre-making that the

people in the area not only understood their rights as laborers and migrants, but also claimed their rightful resources. Here too, there was pushback, but ultimately, with people taking action with the support of the Shramik Sangathan, things changed. This has been replicated across pockets in India through Jana Sanskriti's satellite teams, and strategic collaborations with other grassroots organizations and theatre departments. Using participatory theatre as participatory communication has led to gradual but long-term change, helping systemic reform in these areas through community support and input on specific issues.

The case of Jana Sanskriti demonstrates the potential of participatory approaches, whether through theatre or some other mode, to catalyze sustained social change and empower marginalized communities in remote and rural areas to access welfare. These approaches are thus worthy of consideration as key factors contributing to welfare dissemination and implementation. However, the reality is that limited resources, bureaucratic inertia, and power imbalance still hinder meaningful participation and inclusive decision-making. This is where a decentralized approach, integrated into policy, is crucial, as these models can be replicated and scaled across geographies owing to how they are rooted in the context and circumstances of the people who work with them. The successes of organizations like Jana Sanskriti can make a huge difference to people's lives.

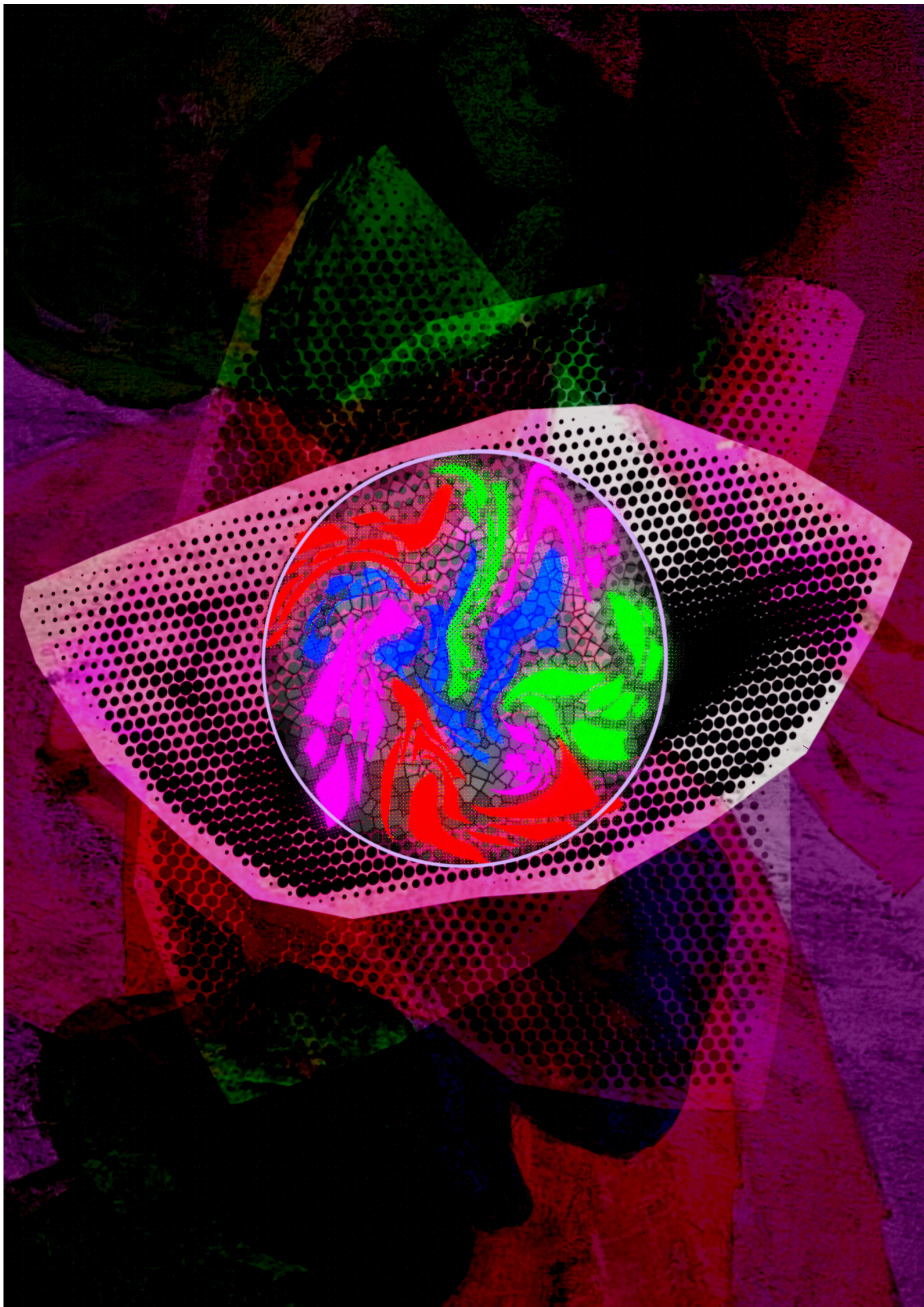
<sup>14</sup> The Dilli Shramik Sangathan emerged out of political activism in the 1990s. Their work till 2006 concentrated on empowering people living in slums to claim, from government authorities, basic amenities and services that they had been deprived of. They work throughout Delhi, across verticals, to ensure basic rights for slum dwellers, including housing and rations.



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# 05

## The State and its ‘Obstructors’: *Re-thinking Adivasi-State Relations in India*

*Tusshar Yadav*

### **Abstract:**

*In colonial times, Adivasi populations were framed as those groups that remained isolated from the state or actively obstructed its efforts at welfare. While the colonial era has long concluded, such imaginations have extended well beyond their departure. Experiences from more than seven decades post independence dictate a story that not much has changed in how the state thinks about adivasi communities or how it communicates with them, primarily vis-a-vis welfare mechanisms.*

*This paper aims to explore the relationship between the state and the adivasi communities, particularly in Schedule V areas. The focus is on understanding how troubling narratives of obstruction and alienation have informed a distinct kind of welfare for these populations, one that seems detached from the realities of their lives, lives that are increasingly in contestation with the growing dangers of market interventions and ecological threats. Drawing from newer scholarship this paper also argues for a re- thinking of adivasi-state relations and welfare approaches, one that keeps the communities first, embraces their changing social and cultural lives and thinks of them not as hapless victims but as claim-making agents.*



The relationship between adivasis and the state(s) in India has been one of constant negotiation for belonging and survival, starting from colonial times, when adivasi communities waged various struggles ranging from the Malpahariya uprising in 1772 to Lakshman Naik's revolt in Orissa in 1942 (Bijoy 56) against the British, to the rise of the modern state in India, where adivasi populations continue to negotiate with the state on matters of forest rights, development and welfare<sup>1</sup>. Two common notions that have come to inform these negotiations are obstruction and alienation. The idea that adivasi communities residing in forests wish to keep the state at bay has informed both 'commonsensical' parlance, leading city folk to describe these communities as 'jangali' or those who are like wild animals, as well as the ways in which various governments have interacted with these communities. The assumption that adivasis wish to avoid development, welfare, and market interventions has led to policies detached from their realities. Year on year, adivasi rights are reduced to mere privileges conferred by the state, and paternalistic concessions in welfare or conservation schemes, such as the Conservation of Forests and Natural Ecosystems Act 1980 or the applications of schemes like MGNREGA in adivasi areas.

This paper argues that such binaries of belonging and obstructing obscure the active role adivasi communities play in negotiating their place within the state

and the economy. By examining historical and contemporary examples, it aims to demonstrate the inadequacy of these simplistic narratives in addressing the complexities of adivasi demands and agency. The paper first critiques historical and contemporary portrayals of adivasis as obstructors of the state, then examines how welfare and market policies have marginalized these communities, and finally explores the diverse ways in which adivasis negotiate their relationships with the state and the economy.

Throughout India's colonial and postcolonial history, scholarly and popular notions have followed a rather unitary line of thought, characterizing adivasis as communities that are inherently at odds with the modern state in India (Chandra 297). Such notions emerge from historical factors that can date as far back as the epics such as the Ramayana, where adivasis were portrayed as demons and enemies of the Hindus (Bijoy 54), to political and cultural factors that put adivasi interests such as protecting their lands in direct conflict with the interests of mainstream populations. Claims made relatively recently that describe adivasi communities as deeply involved in 'obstructing the state' (Gell) continue to resonate with some of the scholarly work done on these communities by multiple colonial anthropologists/administrators, such as Edward Dalton (1872) and William Crooke (1896), who helped cement the notion that the 'tribe' was always at odds with the state.

<sup>1</sup> The total forest cover in India is reported to be 765.21 thousand sq. km, of which 71% are adivasi areas. Of these, 416.52 and 223.30 thousand sq. km. are categorised as reserved and protected forests, respectively. About 23% of these have, furthermore, been declared as Wildlife Sanctuaries and National Parks, which have displaced some half a million Adivasis (Bijoy 55). This displacement has taken place over centuries, from the Indian Forest Acts of 1864 and 1927 to the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and the Forest Conservation Act of 1980. With the advent of globalization, these numbers are only going up.

This presumed dissonance has provided a framework for a unique relationship between the welfare state and the communities. At its worst, it has allowed for policies and development that have eradicated adivasi land in the name of infrastructure, and at its best, it has led to a kind of welfare that seems critically uninformed about adivasi lives. Throughout the various planning commissions, schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), and welfare plans, the state and the community have tussled with the ideas of acculturation, isolation and assimilation, while also negotiating the politics of recognition, redistribution and demands of socio-economic amelioration.

Focusing primarily on adivasi communities, specifically those that have come to occupy a stronger political hold within the Indian mainland, this paper hopes to raise pertinent questions regarding the relationship between a welfare state and communities both considered to be beyond the scope, as well as the repeated targets of, welfare and developmental agendas. The effort here is to understand the relationship between the adivasi and the state vis-a-vis their larger public connotations, where one is supposedly “keeping the state away” (Shah 24) and the other is perceived to be the ‘guardian’ of its population or the *maai baap*<sup>2</sup> that ensures socio-economic welfare for all.

## Who really isolates whom?

A prevalent trend in scholarly literature has made adivasi populations an exemplar of otherness, untouched by the processes like welfare that make up the modern state (Chandra 299). Their forest-centric lives and livelihoods, distinct languages, spirituality and religious mold have often helped construct an image that these communities are beyond the scope of traditional welfare programs like preventive health campaigns, education, employment guarantees, subsidized food, etc. This has resonated with the larger social-scientific understandings of ‘tribes’ as state-repelling agents (see, Lévi-Strauss; Hobart, Kapferer), as those that must be ‘allowed’ to stay isolated from the modern realities of the state. This sense of isolation allows for a detached kind of welfare. It is palpable that for populations that are perceived to be beyond the domain of the state, welfare policies would also be different from those for the ‘normal citizen’, not just in nature/theory but also in implementation.

For instance, government welfare schemes like MGNREGA, which are touted as successful, take a distinctly different shape when it comes to the adivasi population. In many cases, MGNREGA does not reach communities in remote areas. It is also not designed to provide work that can be taken up by forest-dwelling communities. (Dutta 12). Consequently, they do not have access to safety nets that can help them tide through crises. Many of these

<sup>2</sup> The term *maai-baap* (literally “mother-father”) refers to a paternalistic conception of the state, particularly in colonial and postcolonial India, where the government is seen as both the caretaker and ruler of its subjects. It has often been used to describe the relationship between marginalized communities and the state, implying both dependence and subjugation (see Kaviraj, 1997). In the case of Adivasi communities, this dynamic manifests in welfare policies that reinforce state control rather than genuine empowerment.

communities, who rely on collecting and selling forest produce (NTFPs), have also struggled with stricter regulations from forest departments and their recurring 'conservation' and afforestation drives that are, in partial essence, efforts to benefit the living environments of the communities who reside in these forests. Such efforts fail to achieve their goals because they are driven by a sense of protection that comes not from the hearts of the communities that live in these forests but those that reside further away, in metropolitan cities. In many cases, like with the adivasi populations in Andhra Pradesh, where MGNREGA work is available, even if not nearby, the processes of wage collection are so arduous—requiring, for example, long hours of travel to nearby towns and cities—that workers end up giving up these essential sources of livelihood (Sarma, Buddha 17).

Many cases with the Public Distribution System tell similar stories. Forced towards isolation and 'conservation', adivasi communities in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh and other areas continue to remain far from accessing the benefits of food security (Dutta 14). In many cases, ration shops are barely accessible or suffer rampant corruption. In others, the quality of food grain is so poor that people opt not to travel the long distances. The dilemma between isolation and access in adivasi-state relations arises from fundamentally different understandings of what access entails. While the state equates access with integration into formal welfare systems—education, healthcare, and wage-based livelihoods—adivasis do not inherently reject these opportunities. Rather, the issue lies in how these policies are designed, often without accounting for the socio-economic realities, cultural

contexts, and modes of subsistence of the adivasis. Simultaneously, the state's increasing encroachment on adivasi lands and resources further constrains the ability of these communities to sustain traditional livelihoods, forcing them into a position where neither state-led welfare nor their customary ways of life remain fully viable. As a result, Adivasis are not merely isolated from the state, but are caught in a cycle where exclusion from meaningful welfare coincides with the erosion of their autonomy over land and labor.

The question, then, of who really isolates whom is of critical importance. Are Adivasis inherently 'state-repelling agents,' or is this perception a constructed narrative shaped by historical and political forces? Are Adivasis fundamentally incompatible with the capitalist economy and its model of welfarism, or has their exclusion been systematically produced?

In contrast to some of the initial arguments presented, a newer range of scholarship has shown that adivasi communities across India have been deeply entangled with the processes and the logics of modern state power (Chandra 299). Even if the forests and hills are deemed as marginal spaces, our assumption that the state is somehow absent, weak or at odds with those residing in these spaces may not be just. Many communities across western, northern, central, eastern, and southern India have social and economic histories that are closely connected with the Mughal, Maratha, British, and Indian colonial/postcolonial states, such as the Bhils (Guha 139; Skaria 165). This is not to suggest that adivasi-state relations in contemporary India or across different historical periods have been amicable. However, assuming that adivasi communities lack



awareness of the logic and language of statehood overlooks their long history of political engagement, which has played a significant role in shaping modern state formation. Chandra argues in his seminal work on adivasis that there are no 'tribes' or 'adivasis' that are outside the domain of the modern Indian state (300). Similarly, there are few tribes or adivasi populations, especially in the central Indian forest lands, that are not cognizant of the functions of the state. Most of them have an active understanding and history of interacting with the state, in many cases even directly, through movements or protests against land acquisition by state or private enterprises.

## The Malady of Priorities

Having an understanding of the close intermingling of adivasi communities with the larger functioning of the state helps us go beyond the initial discussions of isolation and assimilation towards a larger discussion on the welfare priorities of the state and the people. Adivasis are neither passive recipients of welfare nor completely isolated from the state; rather, they actively engage with it through negotiation, resistance, and adaptation. Social movements have continuously been the principal mechanisms through which negotiations with the state have taken place. In many instances, these movements have been led by activists from urban middle-class societies, such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Baviskar 19). However, many have also been led by the adivasis themselves, like the Koel Karo movement in Jharkhand (Ghosh 5; Chandra 297). The most significant example is the creation of the state of Jharkhand, where various tribal communities from different

parts of the erstwhile Bihar mobilised themselves to demand a new state which could represent a unified tribal identity, yet also make cultural and political space for a variety of tribal populations that were residing in these regions. This state was eventually created in 2000, yet this recognition did not translate into comprehensive welfare addressing the diverse developmental needs of these populations. This underscores a key issue—adivasis are not simply obstructing the state but are instead negotiating for inclusion on their own terms.

At the same time, the failure of the welfare state is multiplied by the increasing encroachment of the market into Adivasi land. This relationship is characterized by a sense of imposition. Big private enterprises continue to exploit adivasi lands and shared resources with the support of the government, as adivasis continue to remain in destitute states of being. In such a scenario, the popular notions of isolation that govern the state's interactions with the adivasi population add on to the misery caused by market interventions. Adivasi populations neither get good quality welfare schemes, nor do they benefit from economic boosts provided by the state and private enterprises that materialise at the cost of their lands.

The contradictions within adivasi-state-market relations also manifest within adivasi communities themselves. These communities have increasingly led the fight for progressive legislation on forest rights, such as the Forest Rights Act (2006) (Rao 231), which allows them to create private landed property protected by tenancy legislation on which they can grow

their own produce for selling in the market. While some adivasis have leveraged land rights to gain economic benefits, others, particularly marginalized groups within these communities, remain excluded. In some cases, this is because the state has tended to partner with dominant lineages within adivasi communities to work on joint forest management projects that aim to protect certain endangered species of trees and wildlife, or commercially valuable forest produce/trees. This puts adivasi communities in a paradoxical situation, where women, peasants, and laborers increasingly demand private land rights for agricultural purposes whereas dominant lineages within adivasi communities collaborate with the state to preserve the same lands and its ecological value. Thus, it is not surprising that today, governmental bids for land acquisition on behalf of public or private corporations are met with a mix of approval and contestation within rural adivasi communities, deepening existing conflicts along class, gender, and generational lines and also interrogating the notion of being 'adivasi'.

Land remains a central issue in defining adivasi engagement with both the state and the economy, but it is not the only one. The market economy, livelihood and welfare schemes are also matters of great debate that spur intra-community conflicts. As the youth increasingly move from low-income non-farming and other traditional activities to newer opportunities in the city, they seek a newer kind of welfare, away from their home lands. They hope for skill development to pursue livelihoods in the city and convenient ways to ensure food security and shelter (Shah and Harriss-White). At the same time, dominant lineages that

have had a generational stronghold in the region, occupying a considerable amount of land, increasingly benefit from state interventions like NREGA, Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana and other food security schemes introduced by the state or NGOs. These emerging tensions highlight the complex and evolving relationship between Adivasis, the state, and the economy—one that cannot be understood solely through narratives of exclusion or isolation.

## Some Final Questions

This paper has sought to dismantle the simplistic binaries of isolation and assimilation that have long shaped the discourse on adivasi-state relations. By critiquing historical and contemporary portrayals of adivasis as inherently at odds with the state, it has aimed to demonstrate how these narratives often conceal the active and complex negotiations adivasi communities undertake with the state and economy. Far from being passive subjects or state-repelling agents, adivasis are dynamic actors who navigate, resist, and reshape the structures that affect their lives.

There is growing scholarship, including works that have been cited here, presenting arguments about re-examining and rethinking relations between adivasi populations and the state. The implications of such arguments are multifold. First, they call for a departure from paternalistic approaches to welfare and development, which are often designed without genuine engagement with adivasi realities. Policies rooted in assumptions of adivasi alienation have

not only marginalized these communities further, but have also failed to recognize the diversity within them. Second, they underscore the need to redefine 'welfare' in ways that address the structural inequities perpetuated by both the state and the capitalist economy. Welfare must move beyond tokenistic concessions to become a tool for empowering adivasis as equal stakeholders in India's development narrative.

A key way forward involves reimagining state interactions with adivasi communities through a participatory, rights-based approach. Non-governmental organisations like Ekjut and Antara have devised community platforms like PLA (Participatory Learning Approach), where communities come together to discuss government policies and propose better ways to execute them. Such efforts, however, require incorporating adivasi voices, meaning policymaking must actively involve adivasi representatives<sup>3</sup> to ensure that schemes reflect their diverse aspirations. Addressing intersectionality is also an important step that would help recognise intra-community differences shaped by class, gender, and generational dynamics, which is essential for equitable welfare implementation. Lastly, bridging the welfare-market divide is also a vital step towards encouraging a participatory approach. Policymakers must consider how welfare schemes and market interventions can be aligned to reduce marginalization rather than exacerbate it. For instance, empowering adivasis with control over

their resources through legislation like the Forest Rights Act can balance conservation with economic opportunity.

The questions raised in this paper hope to open up new avenues for scholarship. How can welfare policies better accommodate the distinct cultural, economic, and political contexts of adivasi communities? What frameworks can address the tensions between local autonomy and state-driven development? Can adivasi demands for recognition, redistribution, and participation serve as models for rethinking welfare in diverse societies?

The answers to these questions lie in challenging existing paradigms and fostering a deeper understanding of adivasi agency. One thing, however, is clearer than ever - the adivasi today is not a helpless victim of modern political and economic processes. They are subject-citizens of the Indian republic (Chandra, 302), with their own mix of anxieties and accomplishments as well as constraints and opportunities.

<sup>3</sup> While it is a common belief that tribes or adivasis are adequately represented through reservation in seats for members of Scheduled Tribes (STs), this administrative term does not precisely match all the peoples called 'adivasis'. Out of the 5,653 distinct communities in India, 635 are considered to be 'tribes' or 'adivasis'. In comparison, one finds that the estimated number of STs varies between 250 and 593 (Bijoy 55).



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# 06

## **Conflict Over Content:** *Shadow Banning and Ideological Warfare*

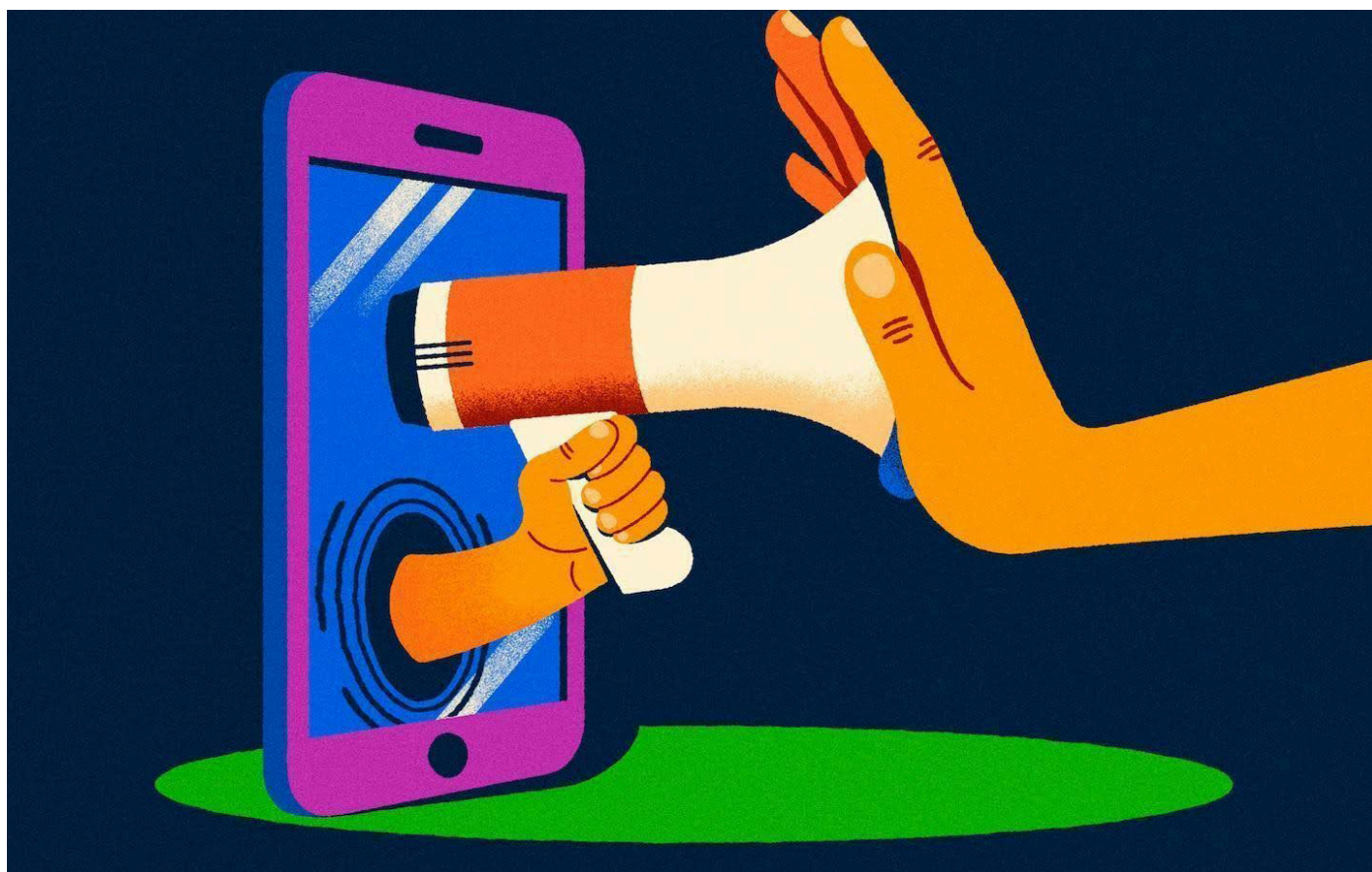
*Katyayani and Zahanat*

### **Abstract:**

*Social media is becoming an increasingly popular source of information, particularly on crises, conflicts and disasters bypassing traditional news outlets, once seen as gatekeepers of credible, valuable, and timely content. However, while users perceive platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X) and the like as 'neutral', these actively shape global discourse through algorithms that direct who interacts with whom and what content we consume. Algorithmic moderation often proves erratic and biased, rather than rational or objective. Content moderation policies, intended to balance free speech with safety, frequently mask the personal biases of platform owners, under the guise of regulating harmful content which culminates in a sort of 'ideological warfare' involving owners, creators and consumers.*

*This paper is an attempt to analyze the aftereffects of such bias which manifests itself in subtle censoring mechanisms like "Shadow Banning", through a closer look at the social media scene during the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. Divided into five sections including Introduction and Conclusion, it begins by examining what shadow banning is and how it interacts with curated algorithms, impacting the reach and credibility of competing narratives and truths online. It then investigates why platforms don't outrightly ban instead of shadow ban. Next it carefully traces its lingering proof and impact on public opinion and support during the Israel Palestine war through select cases of shadow banning. The paper concludes by assessing the real-world implications of such censorship practices and questioning the ideal of free speech that social media platforms once promised to deliver.*





Encapsulating a multiverse of trends and serving as the go-to global bulletin for many, the internet, especially trending social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and the like, has assumed supreme significance in not just passively reporting but actively shaping (if not dictating) what goes on around the globe. This is because these platforms actively intervene through carefully designed algorithms to direct who interacts with whom and what content we consume. That is to say, they are forever involved in a process of 'algorithmic content moderation', to filter out what ultimately features on our feeds to ostensibly enhance user experience. While we users believe them to be neutral/unbiased platforms for self-opted content consumption and circulation, recent discoveries highlight how instead

of being rational, objective or 'rule-based' (at least in a humanely ascertainable way), algorithmic moderation systems are routinely experienced as being prone to error, capricious and tyrannical. They are trained to first identify our likes and dislikes through targeted inter-app data analysis covering search histories, groups/communities, etc., and accordingly feature content or advertisements that certainly increase our chances of engagement.

This, more often than not, gives birth to 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers', which reinforce our confidence in the finality of our opinions. As Chinyanganya puts it, "[an] echo chamber is the way in which we only encounter information from like-minded people [and a] filter bubble is a space where our previous online behaviour (search history, likes, shares and shopping



habits) influences what we see online and on our social media feeds and in what order” (Chinyanganya). For example, if one’s search history and content viewed, liked and shared establish them as a Donald Trump supporter, the algorithm is designed to dump tonnes of Trump favouring reels—validating his popularity and prospects as the ideal President of the US—and anti-Kamala Harris content, yet again ‘artificially’ aligning with and confirming the dearly held beliefs of the user. The algorithm manipulates the truth to deliberately handpick bits that convey only one side of the story. Such selective delivery of information means that the user may never be prompted to engage with the other side—the pitfalls of the Trump administration or the promising potential of Harris’s manifesto, in this case. This is a case of algorithmic bias, which “occurs when algorithms make decisions that systematically disadvantage certain groups of people...because certain populations

are underrepresented in the data used to train AI algorithms or because pre-existing societal prejudices are baked into the data itself” (Friis and Riley). It has assumed its most controversial form in the recent phenomenon of ‘shadow banning’, which moves a step further in the direction of moulding the truth for the user by limiting/erasing one distinct side, not on account of the audience or their preferences but apparently because the platforms, i.e., their owners, do not wish for the world to engage with this side. Truth here is not perceived as one absolute reality, but as a provisional, collective fabric stitched together from individual, subjective, even contrasting narratives, which acts as a point of balance for the audience. So how exactly does this happen?

Savolainen describes shadow banning as “a controversial and hard to detect type of social media content moderation...[because] ‘the problematic

## How has 'shadowbanning' as a search term seen growth in the last five years across the world

BUSINESS  
INSIDER  
INDIA

Interest over time



Source: Google Trends

user' does not perceive the ban, they continue posting to a fictional audience instead of creating a new account" (1093). While content deletion or post removal is a frequent phenomenon for photos and videos found in violation of terms and policies and 'community guidelines', prompting users to identify issues and rectify their content, what distinguishes and complicates the case of the shadow ban is the fact that it is near impossible to be detected by the one who posts in the absence of transparent communication on part of these platforms. Consequently, engagement plummets to such shocking levels that it is almost as if users speak but no one listens, they post but no one sees, and absurdly, they themselves can't see that no one else can see, because for them the post is still visible with only a handful of views. Fowler writes how "shadowbanning victims experience a kind of moderation we might call silent reduction...[there] are signs, but rarely proof — that's what makes it shadowy" (Fowler). What further problematizes this 'shadowy' procedure is the explicit denial of its existence by companies that often veil them as a 'glitch' or 'borderline' content by popular sites like Meta and Google's YouTube. Authority without accountability for the company leads to the content's (in)visible vulnerability to (not so) arbitrary selection criteria. 'Governance by' platforms then becomes a more pressing issue than 'governance of' such social platforms.

Interestingly, the term 'shadow banning' isn't limited to contemporary social media: "[even] in the 1980s, 'twit bit' limits were imposed by Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) i.e. computer servers running software for information exchange" (Sharma). Here, anyone who acted immaturely was labeled a 'twit'

and given restricted access, with only the admin and the censured individual able to see their flagged message then onwards. Given that visibility is an obvious prerequisite for any form and level of engagement, shady measures like 'twit bit' or the present-day shadow banning are undeniably intended as means of indirect censorship by platforms that claim to be free and objective.

With a recent survey by the Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT) proving that "nearly one out of ten (9.2%) social media users believe they have been shadow banned sometime in the last year by a social media service" (Nicholas, 21), this paper is an attempt to explore the underlying considerations that govern who and what ought to be shadow banned (and not simply banned), especially in times of crisis like the recent Israel-Palestine conflict, and how algorithmic biases are set up and sustained by online platform managers to decisively position one group at a disadvantage compared to the other. It then ventures to examine the possible implications these actions bear on the larger, popular narrative, which goes beyond the online realm and shapes real world debates and discussions among the public, who are thus conditioned to believe only one side of the story—the half-truth—given that the other side has been strategically and discriminately silenced.

## Shadow Banning and 'Plausible' Propaganda: Metrics, Numbers, and Truths

Social media is a high-stake gamble for engagement – how fast your content is engaged with and how quickly it becomes the talk of masses can determine whether you become an online sensation for entertainment reels, travel tips or mini vlogs; a credible, go-to source for news, updates and debriefs on policy, and so much more—you become an influencer. In the rat race for reach that unfolds between digital creators on popular online sites like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, etc. the winner (in terms of numbers) is more likely to influence public opinions and thought processes around sensitive, political issues, especially during wartime, when the world at large is pushed into picking a side, between leaders, countries, and/or ideologies. With newer impulses frequently pouring in, social media users often find it difficult to stay 'non-aligned' and are forced to form an opinion really fast on whose actions are more justified and which of the two sides is the 'correct' one. This choice is very often governed by the news posts, political clips and content that manage to make it to our feeds first and which can also brag of substantial support (in terms of numbers).

As Savolainen argues, "[in] the case of social media metrics, numbers transform from 'cold', objective signifiers into measures of individual worth and success that people are emotionally responsive to" (1099). These metrics extend beyond the individual to further include clusters and communities whose credibility and ideological influence directly derive from these numerical figures. The higher the numbers, the greater the belief in the

post's version of 'truth' regarding who ought to be defended during a conflict, reinforced through the power of social proof. For example, if I, as an absolutely clueless individual, have no knowledge of the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict, but am expected to have a take, solid enough to share on my story and maintain a pretense of presence and participation, I will probably watch the first few most viewed reels that summarize the conflict, see what most of my friends and family and my larger online community is saying and sharing, and premised on that, form a belief that aligns with them, because so many people cannot be lying—they simply cannot be wrong.

More often than not, the numbers are accompanied by the recurring names of activists and news pages, who too are shared between two opposing camps—the right and the left, the extremists and the liberals, the communists and the capitalists, the Zionists and the pro-Palestinians, etc. Once a name or a page has been designated as such, people from either extreme attempt to take advantage of such labels: the supporting group awaits posts to strengthen the credibility of their truth, while the opposing group engages with these posts to reiterate planted propaganda in order to further push their truth. According to a study conducted by Delmonaco, et al, "users from marginalized sections were more prone to shadowbanning on social media platforms targeted both by algorithms and human content moderators" (Delmonaco et al 154:5). These shadow bans were independent of the numbers of followers



of the user. This research demonstrated that shadow banning is not arbitrary, and people with a large number of followers are not immune to being shadow banned. Delmonaco shows how Cardi B, “a musical artist, issued a request to Twitter in January 2021, after it appeared that some of her content was not appearing in fans’ Twitter streams” (Delmonaco et al 154:2). Similarly, in the cases of Bella Hadid and Mohammad el Kurd, which are discussed later in this paper, despite millions of followers, they were shadowbanned and so were many other activists during the Black Lives Matter movement. What seems to be common in these instances is the marginalized identity (Palestinian and African American) of the influencers, and the content they posted.

Who is marginalized cannot elicit an objective or universal answer at a given point in time. It is a fluid rather than a fixed category of identity and yet a crude but logical simplification enables us to infer that the ideological supporters of those wielding political power and influence will automatically have an upper hand over its detractors, therefore pushing the latter into the category of the marginalized. Since social media platforms claim to be unbiased and apolitical, reduction then becomes a silent tactic for these platforms, and is significantly less hazardous for them politically than completely eliminating content. Shadow banning then becomes reductive as a form of content moderation simply because demotion i.e. reduced reach can decisively amplify or suppress select voices. If your voice does not reach my feed, I will most probably believe that your truth is not true enough. What then becomes important is to critically understand, who selects these select voices and on what basis?

Facebook documents brought forth by whistleblower Frances Haugen revealed a complex system for ranking content, with algorithms scoring posts based on factors such as its predicted risk to societal health or its potential to be misinformation, and accordingly demoting it in the Facebook feed (Fowler). Now while this algorithm sounds promising and unproblematic in theory, it soon becomes problematic if one looks into its functioning in critical moments of conflict and clash of motives between the platforms and the people, especially mass movements and wars. Evidence from the Russia-Ukraine war distinctly demonstrates how Meta fails to be ‘free and fair’ when it comes to documenting conflict developments. It had previously disseminated internal policy language directing its moderators not to remove graphic documentation of Russian airstrikes against civilians in Ukraine; however, there is no known history of such a caveat being granted to Palestinians during the recent Israel-Palestine conflict. In order to address the rapidly evolving nature of posts with reference to the former, Meta had also begun modifying its content policies internally—“[it] made more than half a dozen content policy revisions since Russia invaded Ukraine [within a] month” (Richtel). It notified its content moderators on February 26, 2021, two days after Russia invaded Ukraine, that “it would allow calls for the death of Mr. Putin” and “calls for violence against Russians and Russian soldiers in the context of the Ukraine invasion” (Richtel). However, after backlash from the Russian Government, Meta reversed course and created new policies. According to internal documents, it also temporarily suspended its hate speech policies in March 2021, allowing users to post about the “removal of Russians” and “explicit exclusion against

Russians” in 12 Eastern European nations. However, within a week, Meta changed the rule to specifically state that it should only apply to users in Ukraine.

## Lurking in the Shadows: Why Not Simply Ban?

In the name of security and social safety, content moderation policies often claim to balance free speech and societal well-being by regulating harmful, disruptive, or illegal content, yet aforementioned instances reveal how such discriminatory practices are a means to mask the personal bias of the owners and operators of such platforms. The math is simple: Meta is owned by America, and America supports Ukraine, and so algorithms and policies are both deliberately modified (read manipulated) to enable pro-Ukrainian posts to spread like wildfire and invoke empathy across the world, while the exact opposite holds true in case of Palestine and its supporters. They are therefore subjected to unjust measures like shadow bans, where one struggles to even convey their words to the larger audience, let alone showcase pictures of Israeli air strikes or issue death calls for Netanyahu. Cotter argues that social media companies engage in what she terms as “Black Box Gaslighting” in order to deny and shift blame to algorithms. She argues that this “rests on the black box nature of algorithms, which results from corporate secrecy and technical complexity...black box gaslighting is not merely a means of shouting down criticism...[it] is a means of configuring users (and other stakeholders) as incapable of assessing algorithms independently of what platforms say about them” (Cotter). This practice reinforces the platforms’ perceived authority over their algorithms, effectively silencing external critics and diminishing their credibility. This creates an echo chamber where only

the platform’s narrative is deemed valid, weakening meaningful outside scrutiny.

One wonders, if indeed no ideological propaganda intervenes in such mechanisms, why is the user not notified about the future course of their posts—their predetermined invisibilization—and left to engage within an illusionary world? This dilemma incites doubts and debates, as users struggle to navigate their way ahead amidst uncertainties. Why not simply ban the post? Why not send warnings and alerts to nudge modification, to rectify policy breaches? One glaring reason uncovered from such evidence is that companies cannot openly discriminate, they cannot outrightly claim that engagement shall be restricted or rejected because the users and the platform owners represent contrasting camps of the conflict. They cannot quote a ‘policy breach’, because their policies are inherently twisted—this proves how policies are weaponized to victimize and demonize as per convenience. How, after all, can you declare that images of Russian bombs dropped on Ukraine are safe for the site and its users, almost essential to incite empathy and gather support worldwide, across borders via the internet (because isn’t that what the internet claims to do?), but Palestinians under attack rather die in silence than graphically showcase the potent Israeli war technology because it may be visually disturbing for consumers (read the US and its propaganda of manipulating public sympathy)?! They do not ban because they cannot ban—if they

do, their implicit biases would become explicit and invite boycotts and other backlash from the users, who may even blacklist them for being discriminatory under the garb of ‘free speech’ with ‘reasonable, healthy’ restrictions—after all, these restrictions are clearly rooted in ideological biases.

A more convincing argument that follows from the one above is that shadow banning enables these companies to maintain their facade of ‘net neutrality’ i.e. “the idea that Internet service providers (ISPs) should treat all data that travels over their networks fairly, without improper discrimination in favor of particular apps, sites or services” (Electronic Frontier Foundation), especially Meta platforms led by Facebook and Zuckerberg, who even introduced internet.org (Free Basics) as a tool to revolutionize the internet and its accessibility and affordability for all users. However, what followed was a realization on the part of many disillusioned and disappointed users that ‘Basics’ was not a given, universal category, and apparently the internet in its entirety was not so ‘basic’ after all—or at least that’s what Facebook established when it arbitrarily generated a limited list of basic websites that shall be free for customers. This was worrisome on two levels. On the one hand, it discriminated against websites based on whimsical parameters of what is basic and what not; on the other hand, it deprived its users of the right to choose, to decide

for themselves what is desirable for them. This sparked debates—initially about the inevitable threat of monopoly over the internet that Facebook had cleverly/cunningly headstarted, and later about concerns of net neutrality, given that some sites were forcefully fed to users free of cost, while others were still reserved for the exclusive, fee-paying users. Such attempts to coerce consent from Free Basics users for personal favorites on the part of Facebook led to protest slogans like “Poor Internet for Poor People” (Doctorow) in relatively poor countries like India (where the application was banned in 2016). At a deeper level, it also echoes the overshadowing desire of big giants to control content, consumption and, by extension, people’s lives, through translucent (Free Basics) or almost opaque (shadow banning) mechanisms that predominantly decide what gets seen and what doesn’t, who gets access and who doesn’t, as people navigate through this apparently free, neutral world of the web.

What does this imply in these tumultuous times of war and conflict, when posts and stories refuse to remain mere expressions of everyday life and luxury and become empowering tools for spreading (mis)information about ground realities and voicing contrasting perspectives? Does social media then stay put as an objective platform, or do its subjective biases alter dominant discourses and incline popular perceptions in this ideological warfare?

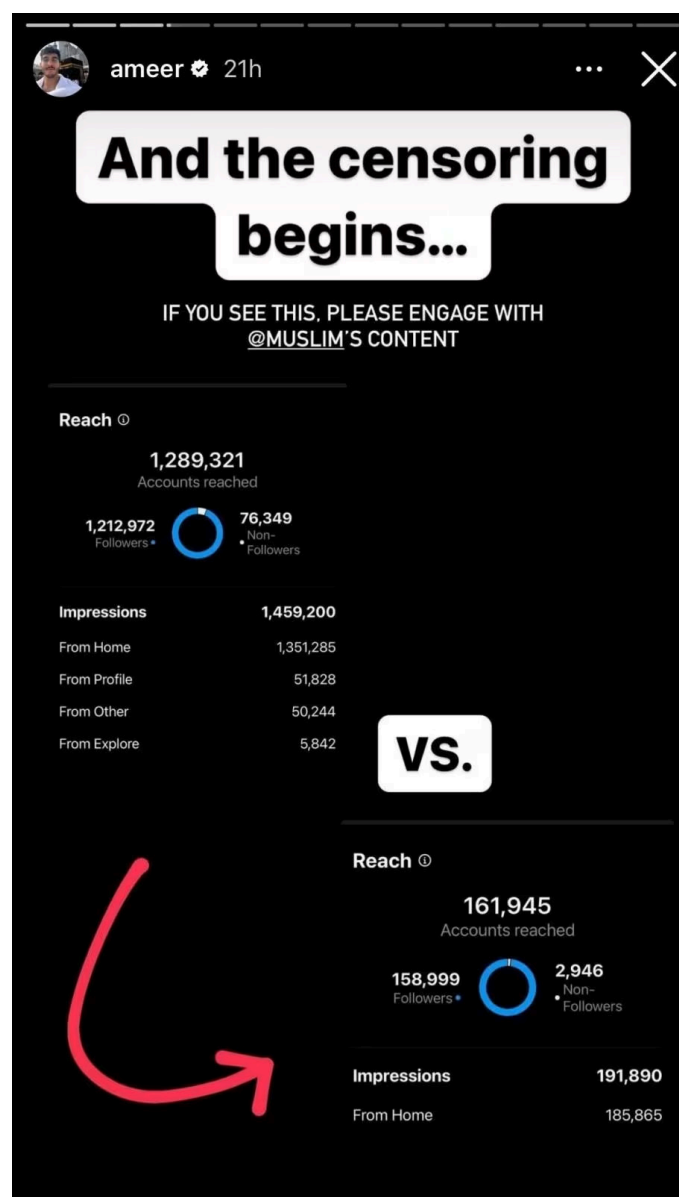
## **Mediating the Perpetrator-Victim Dichotomy: Shadow Banning and the Israel-Palestine War**

Social media is becoming an increasingly popular source of information, particularly information about crises, conflicts and disasters. With the ongoing proliferation



of new media, users are no longer bound by what passes via traditional gatekeepers like news channels, once thought to provide credible, valuable, and timely information. One of the causes for this, according to a study by Newman and Fletcher, is that the public believes powerful people use the media to advance their own political or economic goals, rather than representing regular readers or viewers. Most news outlets are chastised for failing to expose lies, withholding information, or creating a false equivalence between partisan viewpoints that obscure facts and comprehension. Social media, on the other hand, is regarded as reliable due to its broad range of views and authenticity, since it helps users to bypass gatekeepers entirely and go directly to primary information sources, many of which are themselves information consumers. What this has meant is that disasters, conflicts, wars, and crises are reported and posted about in real time. Often, the front lines of information comprise eyewitnesses who are reporting on very recent events.

In the wake of this bypass, in recent years, prominent social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Tiktok, and X have begun to establish public 'community guidelines'—written prohibitions on a variety of undesirable activities such as hate speech, and violence. What this has meant is that these social media platforms control what kind of information reaches the users. While social media platforms claim to be unbiased when it comes to their community guidelines, users claim to have experienced otherwise. Meta, the company that owns Instagram and Facebook, two major social media platforms, has been accused of discriminating against marginalized and vulnerable people in order to serve the economic and political



goals of technology businesses. Meta has also been accused of a lack of transparency because of its imprecise internal norms, and of limiting and clamping down on certain types of content, especially that related to the Middle East and specifically Palestine. In an interview with Fatafta, policy manager for the Middle East and North Africa at Access Now, she claimed that "[the] disparity in measures in comparison to Palestine, Syria or any other non-Western conflict reinforces that inequality and discrimination of tech platforms is a feature, not a bug" (Chandran and Gebeily).

Although moderation of content pertaining to Palestine is not new, it has proliferated since the October 7, 2023 attack on Israel by Hamas. Meta has been accused of ties with governmental organisations such as the Israeli Cyber Unit, established to send takedown requests to platforms in order to delete anything deemed to promote violence and terrorism, as well as to prevent any promotion of groups labelled as terrorists by the Israeli government. Critics have argued that clampdown on pro-Palestine content can be characterized as 'digital apartheid', particularly in the face of what has now been termed, by Amnesty International, as the most documented genocide in history.

Palestinians and civil society organizations have long taken advantage of the use of social media to illustrate the reality of their experiences and amplify their voices, publishing photographs and videos from under occupation which the mainstream media often conceals. A study of major US media over 50 years (1970-2019) revealed that only a few Palestinians wrote the thousands of opinion pieces on Palestine and Israel (Nassar).

During the recent events that culminated in Israel's bombardment of Gaza, the world's most widely circulated and viewed news agencies relied almost entirely on Israeli official sources and talking points, presenting them as fact. Thus, social media, to an extent, became crucial for Palestinian activists and voices, who created an online information landscape that combated the failed Western media by being transparent about sources, having creative autonomy over content, and employing Palestinians. However, the social media giants are moving towards

more censorship tactics to interfere with the dissemination of news and silence voices expressing concern for Palestinians.

According to Human Rights Watch, censorship of Palestine-related content on Instagram and Facebook is systemic and global ("Meta's Broken Promises"). Meta's inconsistent application of its own regulations resulted in the erroneous removal of content about Palestine. A BBC investigation into Palestinian content moderation that interviewed current and former employees at Instagram, revealed that the Instagram algorithm was modified, which intensified the monitoring of Palestinian comments on posts (Nour). However, Meta has claimed that the 'policy change' has now been reversed. Ferras Hamad, a former Meta employee, has accused the company of discrimination in its handling of content linked to the Gaza war, claiming in a lawsuit that Meta fired him for attempting to help fix flaws that were causing Palestinian Instagram postings to be deleted. He noted procedural irregularities in the handling of an SEV or site event, an emergency procedure designed to troubleshoot severe problems with the company's platforms. He witnessed restrictions on content posted by Palestinian personalities on Instagram that prevented the posts from appearing in searches and feeds, for which he was later fired, his complaint said. (The Guardian)

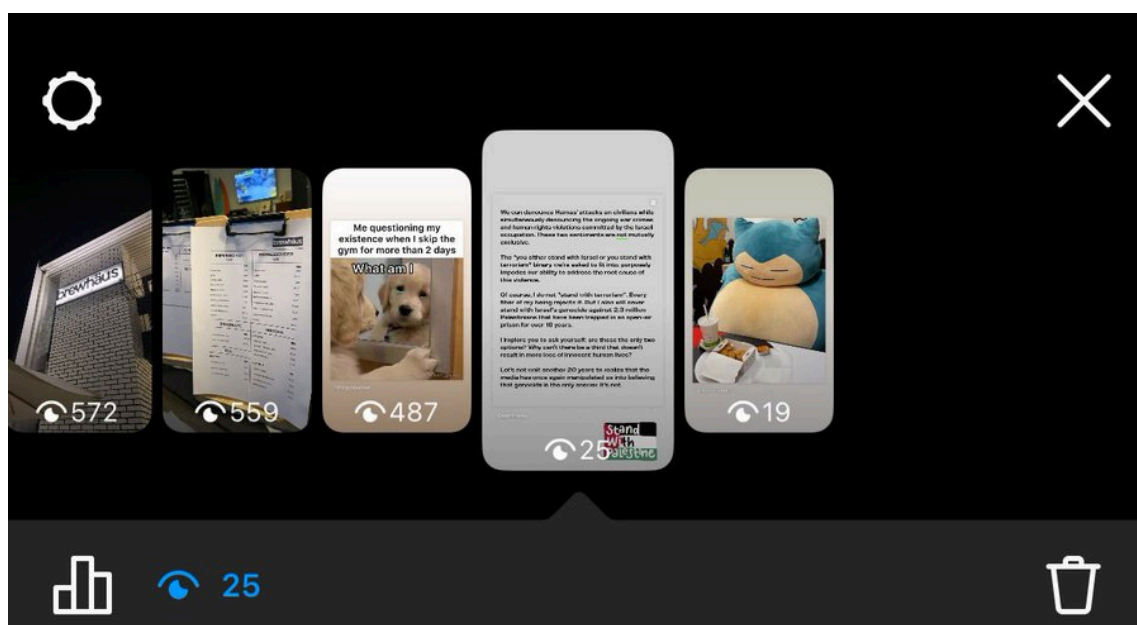
In response to the accusations of bias and restriction of Palestinian content, social media and digital platforms attributed these incidents to widespread global technological problems or errors, and in certain cases, imprecise assertions of posts violating community guidelines. However, mounting evidence has forced these tech giants to resort to other approaches, one

of which is shadow banning. Tech giants have long denied its existence, and often refer to it as an algorithm issue or a bug.

Shadow banning has been used to viciously target Pro-Palestinian content, and has amplified the issue of surveilling and censoring such acts without the knowledge of either uploaders and/or viewers especially at a time when Israel is committing war crimes in Gaza. Pro-Palestine Instagram users constantly see their accounts being shadow-black-listed on the platform. Numerous users in different sections of Palestine, including journalists covering Israeli airstrikes and the destruction they cause in Gaza, have been unable to upload or share content, and many have expressed frustration with their narrow audience.

Meta shifts accountability to 'sentient'

algorithms, arguing that algorithms learn through datafied feedback which might sometimes make errors, but the implication that Meta deliberately and systemically suppresses particular voices is false (Graham). However, users and rights groups argue that shadow-banning is becoming a more nuanced and meticulously executed agenda. Shadow banning is usually recognized through visibility metrics—observing significant declines in engagement (e.g., reach, likes, clicks) compared to a user's average level of engagement. In the case of Palestine content, shadow banned Instagram users spotted a decline in their average views on posts related to Palestine compared to unrelated posts, which had more engagement. Screenshots of stories about Palestine on the platform show a significant decrease in views compared to other stories posted on the same day.



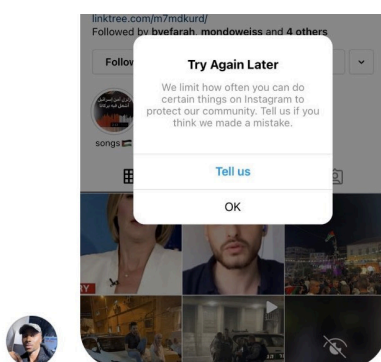
Users, especially with public accounts, claimed that their engagement would immediately drop, strongly suggesting a shadow ban if they mentioned the terms 'genocide,' 'Palestine,' or 'Palestinian

flag.' Simultaneously, emoji like 🇵🇸- containing comments have been hidden after being marked as 'potentially offensive'. Additionally, users reported deliberate mistranslation of sensitive



content during this period, which included willfully labelling Palestinians as terrorists. The issue was first reported by a Tiktok user, *ytkingkhan*, who showed how his Instagram bio “Palestinian [Palestinian flag emoji] الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ”, was wrongfully translated to “Praise be to God, Palestinian terrorists are fighting for their freedom.” On trying again with just the الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ portion of the phrase in the bio, without the word Palestinian or the flag emoji, it translated to “Thank God.” Meta was quick to save itself by blaming the translation ‘error’ on a bug. “We corrected a bug that momentarily resulted in incorrect Arabic translations in several of our products. We deeply regret that this took place”, an official said (“Instagram Issues Apology”). Digital rights groups condemned the restriction, requesting greater transparency about how moderation standards are developed and ultimately enforced.

Palestinian activist, journalist and writer Mohammed el Kurd, with over 797,000 followers, reported that his Instagram story views went down from 150,000 to 50,000, and users were unable to find his feed after he posted stories about Israel’s assault on Palestine.

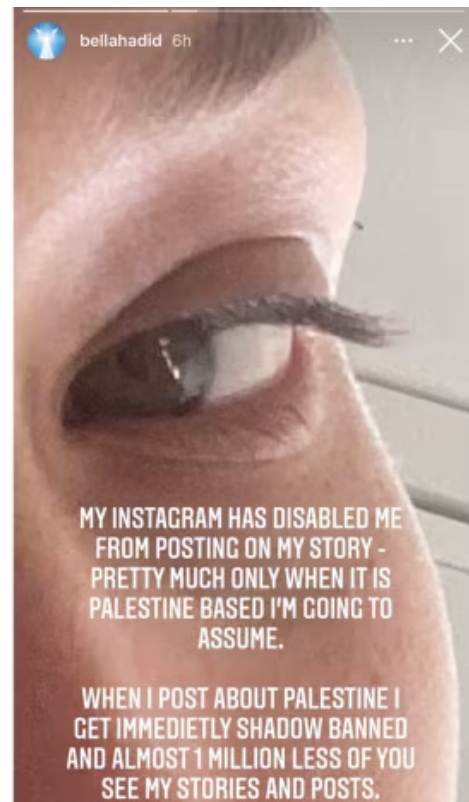


??? When I tap on your profile I get this. Your stories also don't show on the top of my IG anymore I've been searching your profile to watch your stories but now I get this screenshot..... just FYI



Mohammad el Kurd shared on X, where an Instagram user and follower of Mohammed el Kurd notified Kurd of him being shadow banned. (credit: Mohammad el Kurd X, 2023) (<https://x.com/m7mdkurd/status/1398274537364590595>)

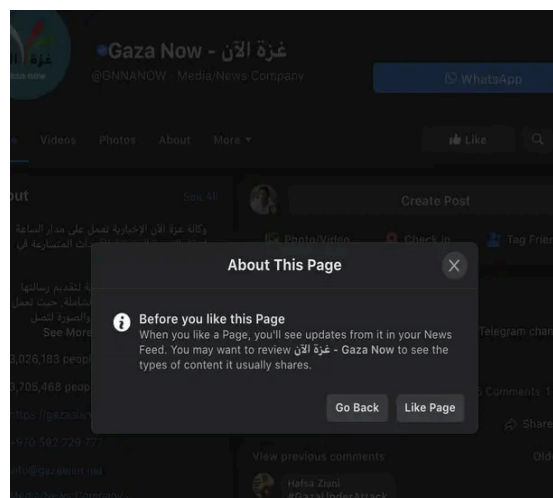
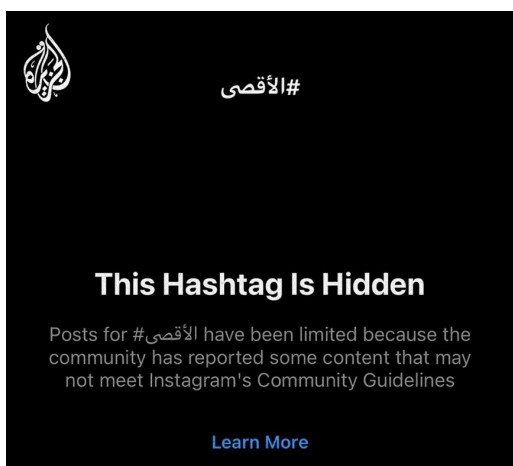
Similarly, Bella Hadid, a supermodel of Dutch - Palestinian descent and a strong advocate for Palestine with over 60 million followers on Instagram, posted screenshots of her stories being shadow banned and her being unable to upload content related to Palestine. Calling out the platform and warning users, she said, “When I post about Palestine I get immediately shadow banned and almost 1 million less of you see my stories and posts” (Sanchez).



Credit: Instagram @bellahadid / 2022

Years' worth of complaints from both inside and outside the company have shown that Meta platforms have an underlying bias against Palestinian users. Instagram deleted posts in 2021 about the potential deportation of Palestinians from a suburb in East Jerusalem, subsequently blaming technical glitches. Some of these alleged cases of censorship, according to Meta, were caused by 'technical problems'. The blocking of **#الأقصى** (Al-Aqsa Mosque)—the holy site where Israeli police and Ramadan worshippers clashed—was attributed to human error, because the site was mistaken for a terrorist organization known as the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades.

According to Zeitoon, the head of policy for the Middle East and North Africa region from 2014 to mid-2017, this was not a convincing reason since he argued that the company employed terrorism experts who would be able to differentiate between Al-Aqsa from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades. However, at the same time, Meta did not remove content asking for the killing and displacement of Palestinians in Jerusalem. In another case, the video of Jerusalem's deputy mayor, Arie King, telling a Palestinian activist, "it's a pity (he) wasn't shot in the head" was not taken down, and no response or clear policy addressing such posts was published.



In an internal investigation of Facebook's bias towards Arab content in 2021, an engineer from Egypt carried out a series of experiments to demonstrate how Meta's policy got more lenient and stricter when it came to posts and content about Israel and Palestine respectively. The engineer provided evidence in the form of a screenshot of Gaza Now, a verified news source with almost 4 million followers. When Gaza Now was liked on Facebook, a 'disappointing' pop-up message with the message "You might want to review غزة الآن - Gaza Now to see the kinds of content it usually shares" appeared. The engineer claimed that the company's systems were biased against Arabic content in his post. "I made an experiment and tried liking as many Israeli news pages as possible, and 'not a single time' have I received a similar message," the engineer wrote (Wisconsin Muslim Journal).

In response to huge backlash and concerns presented by rights groups, Meta published a third-party due diligence report regarding the platform's moderation during the Israel-Palestine conflict in May 2021. According to the report, Arabic content was more frequently flagged as possibly violating than Hebrew content,

and it was also more likely to be mistakenly removed. The report pointed out that because Hebrew is a “more standardised language”, Meta’s moderation system might not be as accurate for Arabic content as it is for Hebrew content. It also suggested that reviewers might not be culturally or linguistically competent to understand less common Arabic dialects, such as Palestinian Arabic. It deemed the systematic and unjustified censorship of Palestinian users constituted a violation of their human rights (Human Rights Due Diligence).

## Conclusion

Shadow banning has emerged as a subtle, backdoor mechanism used by social media giants to restrict content without being held accountable for discrimination and biases. This promoting-restricting exercise not only actively filters feeds for its users, but passively triggers hegemonization of narratives by a preferred side, pushing it to victory in ‘ideological warfare’. “They [YouTube and Google] still shadow ban people, mostly for ideological ‘crimes’. No one ever sees your videos, no one ever reads your comments, you become persona non grata forever. These incidents of shadow banning demonstrate that platforms can take a side in active conflicts and influence public opinion by suppressing or exposing certain material.

However, this is not to suggest that shadow banning is weaponized only during wartime, victimizing one selected party in the conflict. Further real-life examples such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the Covid 19 pandemic situation have revealed inherent biases on part of these

The pretext of a technical problem is not only incongruous with the date, rate, form, and magnitude of the hundreds of examples of content removal and account suspension for Palestinian users, but it also fails to match the treatment of Israeli posts that constitute incitement and hate speech under Meta’s community guidelines. Even if the bias was initially unintentional, it eventually turned intentional after years of knowledge of the identified issues and related inaction.

platforms vis-a-vis verifying information via an objective lens and filtering what gets propagated and what gets lost in the “shadows”. During the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020, TikTok users observed their videos being removed, muted, or hidden from followers. Some TikTok creators claimed to have been experiencing all of these troubles as a result of releasing Black Lives Matter content. Furthermore, in early May 2021, Indian Instagram users saw their stories and posts that amplified Covid-19 resources disappear overnight. According to Udbhav Tiwari, public policy advisor at the non-profit Mozilla Foundation, “there is little to no transparency” on whether shadow bans were executed on government request or if the practice was regulated (qtd in Ravi).

These patterns and incidents have raised concerns about the credibility and ability of social media platforms to properly and equitably govern free speech. This influence over what is visible and what is not, should be of concern to everyone. There is a genuine cause for concern about



these digital biases sneaking in, shifting sentiments and prompting violence. What is concerning is that these platforms have the capacity of shaping real world ideology and the decisions of the masses, which can turn either way. Another glaring example of this is the genocide of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. Around 2010, Myanmar witnessed a case of selective content censoring governed and guided by Meta's insensitivity and the promotion of propaganda by the extremist Buddhist Burmese majority against Rohingya Muslims (Amnesty International, "Myanmar: Facebook's Systems Promoted Violence against Rohingya; Meta Owes Reparations"). In a situation where 38% of

the 40% internet users in the region relied solely on Facebook for their everyday news, the platform not only failed to ban hate speeches and violence-inciting content by the Buddhist extremist leader Ashin Wirathu, but actively promoted his social media outreach with profit-driven malicious motives (Harris, 8:48). Such historical instances establish us as targets of social media platforms' own biases and imposed opinions, which compel us to submit to a hegemonic herd mentality. They make us wonder if, in this era of conflicting opinions, shadow banned narratives, selective truths and ideological warfare, free speech, or rather free reach, will remain a distant utopia.

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## Meet the Authors



**Aparajitha Sankar**

Aparajitha spends most of her time reading and running her family's independent bookstore in Bengaluru. Before joining the YIF 24' cohort she completed her Bachelor's degree in English at the University of Calgary. She loves all things pop culture, macabre and her academic interests include literary theory and the intersections of gender and media.



**Sulagna Maitra**

Sulagna Maitra is the Content and Communications Lead for InHERIT, a film-and-podcast-based project by Ashoka University and the Helen Hamlyn Trust, documenting culinary and natural heritage in India. She is a communication professional by day, and a culture, food, and gender scholar by night. As founder of Wine and Wasabi, she organised dinners in Kolkata encouraging reflection on foodways and systems. With an MA in com-

munication and journalism from Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, and training from Le Cordon Bleu, London in gastronomy and culinary arts, she has collaborated on multiple research projects on gender, digital media, and gendered experiences around food.



**Katyayani and Zahanat**

**Zahanat** is a literature graduate working on gender, identity, and representation. Besides this she has been a contributor and is the co-editor of Maaj Zewve (translation: Mother tongue), a feminist literary magazine catering to Kashmiri culture preservation and representation. She was also the recipient of Students Excellence Award 2024, Ashoka University. An avid reader and movie watcher Zahanat believes writing and talking about issues makes all the more difference in the current time. When not writing, she travels and likes to click photographs hoping to not run out of storage!

**Katyayani** is a keen storyteller who likes to weave narratives at the intersection of gender, culture, media and representation. She is an English graduate from Miranda House, University of Delhi and has published papers in international journals like Journal of International Women's Studies. Passionate about people, she has worked with organizations such as Letters to Strangers (Pune Chapter) and Pratham Foundation. She is currently charting out her next course of action while sipping sham ki chai at the ghats of Banaras, her hometown.



**Rohana Jeyaraj**

**Rohana** likes to describe herself as a cultural omnivore who, through scavenging across a wide range of cultural forms and ideas, tries to make sense of the world at large. She completed an undergraduate degree in computer science and engineering but abandoned a career in IT for one in the contemporary arts. She grew as an arts professional during her time working with the Kochi-Muziris Biennale and other cultural initiatives. Rohana enjoys writing angry emails to government officials lobbying for more funding for culture (a.k.a., cultural policy). She also has a deep, unwavering belief in the value of the museum as a source of knowledge, as a key public space, and a site of cultural activation and preservation. She is a reluctant Bharatanatyam dancer, a novice photographer, and an occasional theatre kid.



**Tusshar Yadav**

**Tusshar** hails from Lucknow and is currently working with a maternal and childcare NGO in Chhindwara, Madhya Pradesh. Be it memes on social media or human development

and social policy, Tusshar's writing has been an effort to move away from the centre and focus on the periphery. His time studying and working in the Marathwada and Mahakoshal region has made him believe that India's development in the 21st century relies on its vast rural landscape and small towns. Writing isn't the only thing that Tusshar relies on to express himself, he also enjoys theatre and dance. He spends his free time playing cricket, traveling and lifting weights. He dedicates this paper to the frontline workers he works with and for the communities he works for, who guide him through an India he had not seen before.



**Sai Motupali Nair**

After graduating with a BA in Culinary Arts, Sai worked in R&D and food production in kitchens before joining the YIF, where she was driven to explore the intersection of food systems with society, culture, science, and art. She thinks that food can be a powerful medium for education and research. She runs Ithaca by Sai, a passion project that doubles as a food blog, with the occasional pop-up sale. Most recently, she worked on a project by the Centre for Genomic Gastronomy at the Serendipity Arts Festival 2024. She aims to bring an interdisciplinary approach to solving food systems issues in the long term.





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