

The Indian Collection of Early 20th Century Prints With Slovene Ethnographic Museum Ljubljana: Between Colonialism and Indian Nationalist Discourse

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Abstract: The Indian collection with Slovene Ethnographic Museum Ljubljana (hereon referred to as SEM) has some rare prints and photographs from early 20th century India which open a set of discourses around colonialism and upper caste Hindu nationalism and the patriarchal structures embedded within these. The stylistic features seen in these images are a product of the social cultural milieu they come from and it is impossible to examine the aesthetics of these in isolation. The imagery seen in these prints is a repercussion of the discourses of colonialism and nationalism which continue to remain imperative in the Indian context till date. This paper attempts to examine this imagery as part of a continued dialogue in Indian social and cultural history and raise concerns around what was consciously excluded, that which has been suppressed and subjugated since long, while also seeing the formalistic aspects of this visual language as non-deterministic and grafted upon the indigenous aesthetics of the colonised at the cost of a complete breakdown of the latter.

Keywords: Indian bazaar art, Propaganda prints, Formalistic analysis, Nationalism, Colonialism, Gender, Gaze

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian prints with the Slovene Ethnographic Museum Ljubljana (SEM) consist of the so-called 'bazaar art' collected from the markets of Kolkata from early 20th century. Though such prints proliferated in the markets of those times in India and were easily available to city dwellers at what was quite an affordable price to the masses, these are now becoming increasingly rare across the globe. While a few institutions within India today (Priya Paul Collection) are able to boast about several such prints in their possession, various aspects make the collection in Slovenia particularly remarkable. It holds a diverse set of themes which include propaganda prints, Brahmanical deities, landscapes, monuments and secular romantic imagery. The few photographs of Indian actresses in this collection make it further exceptional adding to the variety in which the Indian female body and identities have been portrayed within this genre. Compiled by the missionaries of Slovenia during their stay in India, these prints are a part of Slovenian history as much as they belong to their land of origin.

Slovenian missionaries who were part of the Yugoslav mission in Bengal at the time compiled the prints. The establishment of the Yugoslav mission was only made possible by the presence of Belgian Jesuits, who had established a mission there in 1859. Not only a lack of funds and missionaries, but also Pope Benedict XV's 1919 apostolic letter, *Maximum illud*,¹ which envisioned the Church's transnationality, prompted Belgian Jesuits to seek assistance from other countries. Father Anton Prešeren, the head of the Yugoslav Jesuit province, made an agreement with the Belgian provincial, Father Willaert, in 1924, for Yugoslav missionaries to start with missionary tasks in the deserted areas of the Ganges Delta's 24 Parganas district. Croatian missionaries first arrived in Bengal in 1925, followed by the first group of Slovene missionaries in 1929. The mission was covered in both daily newspapers and missionary publications, the most comprehensive being *Bengal Missionary*, a supplement to the monthly Jesuit journal *Sacred Heart of Jesus Journal*. The start of the Second World War put an end to the idea of a large Yugoslav mission in Bengal (Kolar 1998: 154-155; Motoh 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Formalism has been used as an important art historical tool in analysing the visual imagery in these prints. This methodology always presents the potential of revealing more than stylistic affiliation to an art movement. In his work Kannal (1996, 2019) has employed this methodology to interrogate the growth of guilds and individual master sculptors in Indian sculptural tradition. In this writing, this method has been used to interrogate the social and political implications of the style that is seen in these prints and how this imagery is a consequence of the colonial and nationalist discourse. Social and formalistic art histories go hand in hand in this case and implicate the other. The same discourse is also seen in the aesthetics that develop in photography in this period (Luther 2003). The female imagery, their pose, the action they are engrossed in and their surroundings compliment the prints and result from the same social and cultural environs. A plethora of female images implicates questions of gaze and patriarchal structures which are impossible to ignore. This deep-rooted patriarchy operates along with Brahmanical caste structure and in conjunction with colonialism results in the imagery seen in the prints and photographs. These discourses continue in present times (Ashcroft 1995, 7; Slemon 2002) and are in a constant state of dialogue with those they attempt to suppress and subjugate (Chatterjee 1986; Spivak² 1988; Chakrabarty 1992).

CULTURAL MILIEU

Early 20th century in India is a period of considerable change. The nature of transitions taking place at this time was to have a path breaking impact on the coming times. India was going through a struggle for independence and the trauma of partition. On the front of cinema, the talkies arrived (Dharamsey 2010) leading to the formation of an ever-growing large film industry. The aesthetics of the camera greatly influenced the Indian visual culture and its impact is easily visible on the prints in the museum collection.

Scholarship has described the rise of what is termed as Modernism within this period in multiple ways and with diverse views. Notably questions on the idea of Modernism within the Indian context have been raised by Geeta Kapur (2000), Yashodhara Dalmia (2001), Siva Kumar (1999), Tapati Guha Thakurta (2007) and ParthaMitter (2007) with a special focus on visual art. Siva Kumar focuses on Bengal school of art and points at the possibility of the beginnings of Indian modernism in the revivalist art practices at Shantiniketan. This art movement was a strong trend which attempted to look “back” at the art traditions that India had inherited. It can definitely be seen as a reaction to the establishment of the British Academic art schools across India which completely side-lined Indian aesthetics and

art traditions and focussed on the European methods of studying, learning and practising arts (Pinney 2004, 23). Still life study and understanding anatomy through life drawing of the nude among other ideas were completely alien to traditional Indian art practise which depended upon memory drawing and conceived time and space in vastly different and creative ways. The impact of this was so dramatic that in most Indian art schools a study of the Indian traditions of art practice was completely given up for modules on European and American art alone. The impact of this cultural colonialism continues to affect Indian art education to this day.

Another group, the Bombay progressives (Khullar 2018) attempted at an alternative to British academic art tradition, however, the visual language this group adopted came from the European understanding of modern art.

In one of his lectures Deepak Kannal³(2020) has argued that between the 13th to 17th century Indian sculptural tradition is almost ossified. However, 17th- 18th century saw, in the Indian sculptural tradition, an emergence of an attempt towards a new sculptural language within the larger tradition of Indian sculpture. Kannal points at the social and historical parallel to this trend in the works of Arvind Deshpande and Raja Dikshit, who contest the idea of an orthodox, regressive and stagnated Indian society in 18th century. Kannal calls the changes a healthy interaction of Indian artists with different traditions they encounter. The codification of sculptural language between 13th to 17th centuries is questioned in 18th century leading to an interaction between elite art and popular art or between different religious art traditions among other influences. He gives several examples for this including Rajasthani folk sculpture and wood carvings of Gujarat and Odisha, painted wooden sculpture of Tanjore palace and stone sculptures of Maheswar, Madhya Pradesh patronised by Ahilyabai Holkar among many others. There is also a healthy interaction between painting and sculptural traditions. 18th century art in India attempts to portray the life of its times and not simply gods. A new naturalism is seen at this time which comes from the Indian tradition and not from the British academic style of art making which was soon to be established thus causing a rupture in the indigenous art practices. Importantly he notes that the Ganesh, Lakshmi idol makers of India were seen with much contempt by the British academia of the time. A reaction to Indian art by the European world has been significantly noted by ParthaMitter (1992), but the worst reaction was perhaps reserved for the community of lower castes, potters responsible for the making of terracotta imagery to be used during specific rituals for the festivals of Diwali, Ganesh chaturthi and Durga puja to be submerged into holy waters after use⁴. Kannal notes that the visual tradition thus emerging in the 18th century India was not simply affected, but completely aborted by the establishment of the British academic art schools.

Viewed in this perspective, modernism in India as well as the visual language of the prints of early 20th century India cannot be seen as a deterministic process, but a mimetic one, dictated by colonialism, industrialisation and the rise of capitalism which was consciously grafted upon an existing tradition at the cost of some basic principles and aesthetics of the latter.

REINVENTING THE PANTHEON OF BRAHMANICAL DEITIES: RAVI VARMA AND BEYOND

The establishment of British academic art schools in mid-19th century in, then Madras, Bombay and Calcutta (Mitter 1994, 14) led to, as noted above, a reaction in a few Indian artists which strove for a different aesthetic value system. And yet what changed the entire visual culture of the following century were the aesthetics of the camera and the art practise of artist Ravi Varma (Thakurta 1986; Ramanathan 2016; Neumayer 2003, 2005). Ravi Varma⁵ was a genius who pictured Brahmanical deities in elaborately decorated and jewelled clothing of his times and painted these in the European

oil painting tradition, a technique he most successfully mastered. Further, he set up a printing press in Mumbai in which this imagery proliferated and became easily accessible and affordable for much more people than ever before⁶. The Slovene Ethnographic Museum (SEM) collection consists of many prints from Ravi Varma press and prints of the works of several other artists who followed the aesthetics introduced by him in their own way (Jain 2007, 32). The imagery created by several other artists' certainly did not restrict itself to Brahmanical deities. Following the obsession with a depiction of the female form in Indian art, these artists envisaged Indian female body of their times, as perceived by them along with the traditional and modern values that they were expected to subscribe to. Many folk stories and local traditions were painted as well as propaganda art subscribing to the idea of India as a nation embodied by a female deity clad in a saree. The collection with the museum, also points at the role that camera played, which must not be underestimated, in the further development of visual culture of the Indian subcontinent. There are several other threads which worked upon the imagination of those who created this imagery and the SEM collection demonstrates these many strands significantly.

MIMING THE EUROPEAN ICONIC IMAGERY

There has been an influx of European imagery in the form of prints in India ever since at least Mughal period (Natif 2018; Singh 2017; Schrader 2018). The impact of these prints is also many times seen in the Indian painting tradition, especially being produced by courtly patronage. However, there are certain prints in this collection which display a distinct way in which the European style is being used. Considering a print which shows Krishna surrounded by females (Fig.1), probably not made in the Ravi Varma press, it is evident that the human figures and perspective come from a European understanding but just like in the works of Ravi Varma, everyone is dressed in Indian clothing of those times. In this case, in fact, the artist has gone a step further and poses his characters like in a typical European oil painting with Christ in the centre, surrounded with people with distinct hand gestures almost mimicking European tradition. Even Krishna's garment looks very much like the loincloth on Christ. In another print (Fig. 2) Krishna is surrounded by females dancing around him in a circle much like the three Graces of Greek mythology. And yet the print does not simply stop here. Perhaps imbibed subconsciously, it has a certain orientalist feel to it, in the way in which it looks ethereal. The European gaze is absorbed by Indian artists sometimes, and he begins to look at his own tradition in a way completely divorced from the tradition itself. Representations and the logic and aesthetics of Indian art was perceived as loathsome and lacking any trace of 'correctness' in it. It did not follow the European idea of one point perspective and therefore was condemned and called monstrous for the many arms and heads that the Indian gods possessed (Mitter 1992). But with Europeans emerging as new patrons Indian artists began to imbibe European idea of naturalism and created art works, for instance dolls, which could please the taste of this new patron and satisfy their colonial curiosity of knowing the people they had colonised while also ridiculing them sometimes. This phenomenon can also be seen in some of the Ghurni, Krishnanagar dolls from the SEM collection in which the European taste has been gratified by almost mocking the Indian rural body. It does seem rather surprising, that such works came from Indian artists and not Europeans, but it must be considered that Europeans were the new patrons. And this new patronage was not simply a parallel trend existing along with the patronage of Indian local rulers. Indian rulers suffered a fate well known in the hands of colonisers and with them their patronage of the arts too was vanquished. Industrial manufacturing was rapidly destroying the crafts sector (Sharpe 1989) and with it the indigenous aesthetics of it were compromised. Thus, when the indigenous artist shifted his work to suit the taste of its new patrons, the beginnings of which can be seen in Company school of art (Archer 1992; Dalrymple 2020), it is not surprising that sometimes, the European colonial humour too came out from Indian hands.



Fig. 1: Krishna surrounded by females, 178



Fig. 2: Females dancing around Krishna in a circle 203

STRANDS OF INDIGENOUS AESTHETICS

In several prints, part of this collection a flavour of diverse local Indian painting traditions is discernible. And yet it is not entirely that tradition, which is reflected, especially since it is put through the process of mass production. In most cases, within this (SEM) collection such stylistic prints come from either Ravi Vaibhav press, Ghatkoper or some unknown press. Pinney (1995) discusses prints from another press in his work and others have mentioned them in their work (Thakurta 2006; Mahadevan 2015)⁷.

Taking the first example of a print produced by Ravi Vaibhav press, A.K Joshi & Company of Shri Nathdwara deity (Fig. 3), the visual language is evidently derived from Nathdwara imagery (Jain 2012) and yet there is an attempt at drapery in the clothing of the two priests. The process of printing undeniably compromises on the aesthetics of the form. No doubt this is true for most of the prints made, but the deterioration is most evidently seen in the prints based upon indigenous art traditions. Another print draws upon the 19th century Kalighat painting style (Fig. 4) and depicts the renunciation of Gourang dev, that is, Krishna Chaitanya, a 16th century Bengali Vaishnavite saint. The saint is seen walking away while his wife is asleep. They are dressed according to the times in which the print is made and the body forms and pointed clothing of the female are derived from the Kalighat painting tradition. This print was produced by Gaya Art press, Calcutta and published by a Bandhu Singh of Mechuabazaar street, Calcutta, perhaps justifying the choice of the art tradition it draws upon (Kalighat painting tradition belongs to the same region as the print was made in).

There are other prints by Ravi Vaibhav press, for instance one titled, Setubandha Rameshwar (Fig. 5), takes on the south Indian style of painting, close to Tanjore school. The print depicts Ram

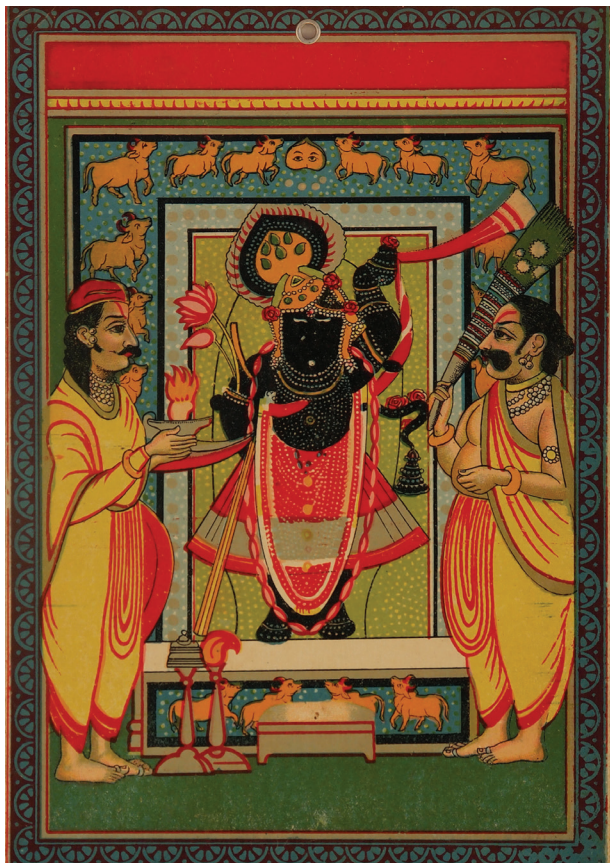


Fig. 3: Jaggannatha from Nathdwara 175



Fig. 4: Gourang Dev in Kalighat Style, 188

and Sita worshipping a Shiva linga at the holy pilgrimage centre Rameshwaram in South of India. It is intriguing to note the connection between the style and the place in which the protagonists perform the ritual. Another print, also from Ravi Vaibhav press, depicts the three deities of Jagannath Puri from Odisha (Fig. 6) and are made in the patachitra style, that is, palm leaf manuscript painting style, from the same place. In one print from Ravi Vaibhav press, labelled Bhatihar ji, Shri Ram devji Maharaj, Deari Bai, naming the three characters depicted in the image (Fig. 7), the style is derived from Rajasthani mural tradition and the narrative also refers to a Rajasthani local lore.

It is possible that the artist who made the originals for all these prints came from the respective local art traditions, but in most cases, the aesthetics do not entirely conform to the indigenous practise alone. The artist who made the painting and from which prints were made probably came from a local art tradition, for instance Tanjore painting or Patachitra painting tradition from Odisha.

CAMERA: ELITE AND POPULAR

An embellished print made from the photograph of the Prince of Gwalior in the museum collection (Fig. 8) is an example of the aesthetics of photography emerging in 19-20th century India (Gutman 1982; Gordon 2004). Indian photographer of those times, DeenDayal, made photographs for royalty from many princely states of India as well as landscapes among other subjects⁸. The print being discussed here belongs to the same aesthetics that developed in the works of the photographs of the royalty of that time. It is impossible to not notice the parallel between the works of painter Ravi Varma and these photographs. The subjects wear their traditional costume, are heavily bejewelled to put their riches on display, they hold props like a sword in this case which furthers their identity as royalty,



Fig. 5: Setubandha Rameshwaram in Tanjore Style, 363



Fig. 6: Jagannath Puri From Odisha, 320



Fig. 7: Print in Rajasthani Mural Tradition 155



Fig. 8: Prince of Gwalior, 190

belonging to a certain caste, class and thus proclaiming a certain status. But the prince of Gwalior in this image is seated on a chair foreign to Indian traditional taste. The furniture and the curtain behind, like in most other similar imagery is an import from the British idea of grandeur, which the prince here subscribes to in order to claim the status and privileges that the colonial rule seemingly promised. The photograph abides by the European idea of naturalism and perspective. The prince of Gwalior poses for the camera; he does not sit straight but at an angle with his face towards the camera, typical of portrait photographs like these. And yet, the subject of the image is Indian, the Gwalior prince. The posture of the prince calls for a special study. In many photographs from this period, Indian royalty, even women some from royal houses and some from other communities, caste and class are seen with their backs straight. But in many cases, like the prince of Gwalior here, the body languishes in the chair, not in a commanding pose, but rather giving ones weight to the furniture as if surrendering to it. Similar body postures are seen in some photographs of photographer DeenDayal in which a few Indian “nautch girls” are seated in front of apparently their clients, men from royal houses. The pose suggests the position of the subject which is subordinate in the case of the Gwalior prince to colonial rule. Though many royal houses were granted support from the British, it was only in return for complete subjugation and surrender to the terms the British dictated. The pose is reflective of this submission to colonialism, not just on a political level, but also culturally. The prince attempts to retain the mask of status by subscribing to the coloniser’s idea of majesty and yet, his posture in the chair gives away his helplessness and failure in retaining what he inherited.

Another print particularly influenced by the presence of camera shows a mother with her two sons (Fig. 9). It is titled Yashoda Balaram, and shows one of boys in blue colour, obviously indicating Krishna as the other child, apart from Balaram. The image is much closer in its composition to a photograph than a painting. The mythological trio probably draws on a real mother and with two children. It is the costume of the two boys, the crowns on their heads, peacock feather and the blue colour in case of Krishna that gives the image a mythological touch. This imagery is far away from the traditional modes of depicting this theme seen in Indian painting traditions. The idea of posing for the camera influences many other prints. For instance, in one God Shiva is seen with his consort Parvati, son Ganesha and his bull Nandi more like a family man posing for a family portrait with his arms hanging around the shoulders of Ganesha and Parvati (Fig. 10). Ganesha and Parvati too rest one of their arms on his thighs. Without the iconographic elements to identify these as mythological figures, this image would simply be of a family posing for the camera typical of 20th century India.

There is one print in the collection which juxtaposes camera naturalism in the background with stylised bodies, a couple, in Indian attire in the foreground (Fig. 11). The man with blue skin depicting Krishna, along with a lady placed on the other side of the image looking at him can be read as an epitomised Indian couple of the times. Curiously, though not made in the technique of oil on canvas, it fully subscribes to the agenda of oil painting as theorised by art historian John Berger (1972) of showcasing one’s possessions. It depicts the possessions of the couple, a big house with a garden along with them, both in their best of clothing enhanced with further embellishment on the print. The female looks at her husband conforming to her status of an ideal Indian woman, willing to comply with his wishes. The stylisation of the bodies also gives the feeling of an image made with collage, superimposing different kinds of imagery, typical of pop art genre. One is reminded of the work of British pop artist Richard Hamilton, *Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?* (1956) which tends to show the aspirations of the artist’s society. Hamilton’s work can be seen as subversive, but the Indian print here definitely subscribes to all the values it portrays adding a touch of the divine with the blue male skin.



Fig. 9: Yashoda with Krishna and Balram, 224

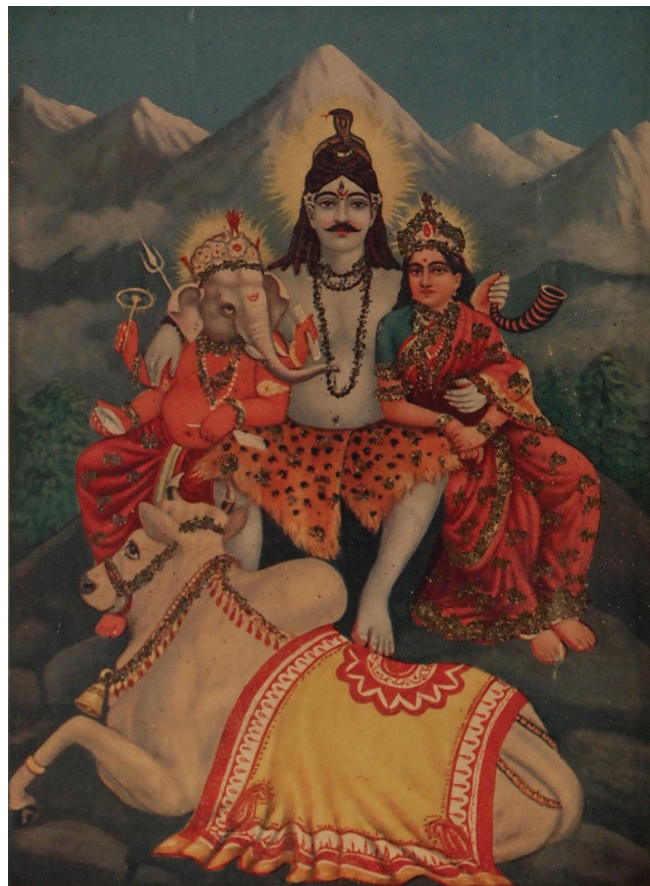


Fig. 10: Shiva with Parvati and Ganesh, 110



Fig. 11: Krishna and his Palace, 197

IDEAS OF NATURE

When Ravi Varma painted scenes from the Indian epic Mahabharata and stories of Shakuntala or simply Lakshmi and Saraswati, the Indian deities, in many cases he put these characters with a background consisting of only trees, a water body, flowers and rocks. The forested background and the absence of any architectural form gave the image a sense of timelessness, despite the fact that all the characters are dressed according to the times of the painter. It is possible that this portrayal of nature in the background positively deprived of any architectural form was a conscious devise used by the artist to make the image more convincing in his depiction of mythological stories, characters and deities. But the presence of nature in these images, painted with an attempt to render the breathtaking beauty of it, also complimented the various lyrical descriptions of the bewitching enigma of forestation and nature in its various forms in literature, perhaps subconsciously on the part of the artist. Many of the scenes in folklore and other narratives occur in forests, on the banks of a river or a water body or in a garden the beauty of which is often spectacularly described. A typical example is the character of Shakuntala and its portrayal in the play *Abhijnanashakuntalam* by Kalidasa, a theme painted on more than one occasion by Ravi Varma. A bower of flowers or in the midst of blooming trees is the most appropriate spot for the lovers tryst in Indian painting, literature and dance traditions. For instance, the Vaishnavite text *GeetGovinda* is full of such references to flora and fauna, as much as the rendering of this text in visual form in Pahari schools of Indian painting, the dancing and singing traditions built around it. It is this element of nature in its full bloom that is retained by other artists whose works found their way in the marketplace in India in the form of prints. Taking the example of a print from the SEM collection (Fig. 12), lovers here are probably meeting in secret on the forested riverbank. In this image nature is as much a character as the lovers and without the enchanting impact that the foliage creates

surrounding the lovers and almost hiding them in secrecy, the magical moment would be lost on the viewer. The rendering of this background is done following the style set by Ravi Varma. It does not draw upon the Indian painting tradition depicting almost the same theme not too far apart in time in the Pahari painting tradition. However, nature continues to play a pivotal role especially when lovers are delineated. Another print can be taken which demonstrates this point quite well (Fig. 13). In this print Radha has come to visit Krishna on the riverbank in wilderness to keep their tryst. Suspicious of her movements, her parents-in-law follow her without her knowing. Krishna being aware of the fact that she is being followed takes the form of the deity Kali, shown in the print with Krishna's tongue pulled out, and instructs Radha to worship him in this form. It is a deception they play to trick her family, thus keeping secrecy of their love affair. Again, though conceived in non-Indian style, the scene is set in a charming forest with two peacocks, a couple, behind the seated Radha, flowers everywhere in full bloom and the blossoming tree intertwined with a flowering creeper. The symbolism of this image is in keeping with the Indian painting tradition. The pair of birds replicates the lovers, Radha and Krishna, in front of each other. The tree flowers as if red with passion being caressed by his lover, the creeper. The flowers in full bloom everywhere are reflective of the moods of the lovers. According to the Rasa theory of aesthetics by Bharata from the ancient Indian text on drama called *Natyashastra* (dated between 2nd century BC to 2nd century AD), *vibhava* is the actor and the actors' surroundings, that is, in case of drama, the theatre set and these must support the *bhava*, the state of mind which is to be communicated to the audience⁹. If, for instance, the lovers are together, like in this print, then their surroundings flourish just like them. Thus, the artist who made this image though follows a non-Indian style, he takes many elements from the Indian tradition and the most significant of these is the blooming wilderness and its symbolism.



Fig. 12: Lovers in a forested river bank, 121



Fig. 13: Radha and Krishna meet in the Forest 134

COMMUNITY INTERVENTION: OMNIPRESENT AND IGNORED

The museum collection has many prints which are further embellished with silver sparkle. Several such prints are found in many art collections in India and across the world. The subject matter thus embellished is not confined to godly imagery. In fact, one finds all sorts of imagery including actresses of those times and other secular themes most sensitively, delicately and skilfully embellished. Taking an example from the collection, here is an anonymous female posing shyly for the camera typically in the way an early 20th century Indian woman would be expected to by her patriarchal social value system (Fig. 14). Flowers and foliage bloom around her replicating the age and spirit of the young lady. There is also colonial architecture and probably a marble angel to include the colonial element within the Indian context. The female in this image is a married Hindu woman, this is delineated by the sindoor or kumkum, that is, red vermillion made of lead oxide in the parting of her hair. Her saree which also covers her head and her neck ornament is further adorned with silver particles. But the identity of female remains unknown to us. The Indian title on the print mention *anmana?* which could mean absent minded (the meaning of the word is not clear).

It must also be noted that the company which made this print was not responsible for the embellishments which further enhance many others like these. After such prints made in Ravi Varma press and many others, left their place of production, they seem to have been widely circulated and



Fig. 14: Female Posing for the Camera, 244

were bought widely throughout south India as well as Burma, present day Myanmar. Reaching many middle and upper class households within some communities, like the Chettiar caste in south India, such prints were embellished by the women of the household. The women decked certain parts of the image with gum and sprinkled artificial gold or silver on it. Even patches of fabric are pasted on many images as garments for the characters in the image. The same process was also carried out on photos of divinities and other secular imagery, many of which were printed in bulk in Germany.

Today within India, such embellished prints and photos are available with many art galleries, auction houses, antique shops, temples and private collectors and households. But very little has been written about the process of embellishment on these prints or about those who were responsible for doing it. The women who did these enhancements remain as anonymous to us as the female in this particular print. Should this come across as a surprise? Despite the large number of prints which went through the hands of women working further on them, it is unfortunately not unexpected that the contribution and identity of these artists should go completely unnoticed since anonymity has been a sad reality in much of the works produced in clusters¹⁰ especially done by specific communities in certain parts of India. In this case, this cluster happens to be comprising of women which only added to their supposed insignificance.

THE MODERN INDIAN FEMALE: WITHIN THE HOMELY THRESHOLD

In 19th century India, women from certain sections of the society were introduced to European systems of education, began writing and some of their works came to be published and thus circulated. In her lecture, Uma Chakravarti¹¹, says that in contradiction to previous beliefs and practise when women along with lower castes were barred and tabooed from education, in the 1870s and 1880s a new class of educated Indian men emerged. These men seek companions who in their opinion must match or compliment themselves and their western liberal mindset. Quoting the diary of an anonymous Hindu male, she notes the desires of this new modern Indian man of 19th century India, “where is the Hinduani, wise and pure, who can quote Shakuntala and the Merchant of Venice, play the Sitar or Sarangi and sing divinely. Every educated Hindu would like to have such a Kumud, the heroine of the famous 19th century Gujarati novel called Saraswatichandra, such a lovely maiden for his wife. But where are these phantoms of delight in Hindu society? They exist in the brains of those who have read Kalidasa and Shakespeare, but otherwise we know them not.” This piece was written in 1884. There is, therefore, a class of men who not simply encourage but insist that their wives study. And Chakravarti takes the example of Mahadev Govind Ranade, known as Justice Ranade, who on his wedding night chose to teach the alphabet to his new eleven-year-old wife Ramabai Ranade. Within these newly emerging expectations, some women chose to learn the alphabet in secret and some had no choice but to make their husbands happy.

Drawing attention to social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy among others from 19th century, Chakravarti notes that though these people argued in favour of widow remarriage, they exclusively spoke for virgin or child widows, that is, those girls who had not yet entered the house of their husbands, being married at a very young age. Importantly, all the debates at this time, about women, were made by men and accepted or contradicted by men.

And yet, once some women receive education, they begin to write and many go on to write their autobiographies. A notable example that Chakravarti takes in her lecture is that of a Bengali female, Rashundari Debi who describes her life in a matter-of-fact way without making complaints in her autobiography. Binodini Dasi, a Bengali thespian artist, born in a lower caste family also wrote her biography. The star theatre in Kolkata was built with a donation from her but her request to name it after her was rejected due to the stigma associated with her as an actress (Majumdar 2009:24).

Thus, the turn of the century is full of contradictions in several ways, especially for Indian women (Uberoi 1990). There is an emergence of a new idea of an ideal modern Indian woman. She is expected to be educated but only to be able to serve as a worthy companion to a man with English education. She has access to life outside of her household but within the boundaries demarcated stringently. The imagery in the prints in this (SEM) collection with several anonymous female figures in different poses (Thakurta 1991) is a reflection of these ideas. In the first example from this category, there is a female lying on her bed, fully decked up, reading a book, with colonial architecture and furniture around her (Fig. 15). She is the image that the anonymous man described above would have had in his mind. She reads and is fully equipped to enjoy Indian and English literature with her husband and is available for him for all other kinds of pleasures. There are other phantoms of delight within the collection. In one, a female is seen wearing heels along with a saree (Fig. 16), in a pose which just slightly exposes her leg within the boundaries of what is permissible. She is also, like her counterparts, surrounded with colonial furniture with fabrics lying on them replicating drapery of the European tradition. In another case, a female is seen reclining on cushions with a gramophone placed on a table, enjoyed a cup of tea, an exotic drink for those times with a smoke (Fig. 17).

There is one print which extends the Indian male fantasies of the time further and yet draws from Ravi Varma's women in translucent drapes (Fig. 18). The female in this case is seen reclining on her stomach on the bed with probably a cup of tea, with the kettle being brought to her by another female help. Since the painting of a female nude is obviously socially forbidden in this time, there are devices that the male artists adopt to fulfil the desired end, definitely satiating their own gaze in the way John Berger describes. The translucent fabric of the saree comes to their rescue, in this case sufficiently exposing the lower body of the female. In other imagery made from this time onwards, this device is explored on several levels and becomes a celebrated tool in Indian cinema. The female body, clad in a



Fig. 15: Female reading a book, 236



Fig. 16: Female wearing heels, 240



Fig. 17: Female with a gramophone 234



Fig. 18: Female with a cup of tea, 250a

saree is bathed in water, with the effect that the fabric sticks to the skin. A highly developed parallel of this device is later seen in a film made in 1978, titled, *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*. Parul Dave Mukherji points to the fetishisation and eroticisation of the body of the character Shakuntala by the converging colonial and nationalist gaze (Mukherji 2011, 90-110). The making of the ideal modern Indian woman in the minds and imagery of Indian male consumer and creator of these prints attempts to find a balance between a similar desire with permissible eroticisation and time-honoured values of family and religion by placing her in appropriate acts. These ideal women are the ones suitable to inhabit with. They are perfect homemakers fulfilling their duties by keeping the husband intrigued as well as holding on to the homely expectations and values. In this kind of imagery, they are not mythological characters. They are homely, to be espoused and yet remain anonymous to the viewer. There is an emergence of a set of very high expectations from the modern Indian female. She must study, but only to intrigue her husband and must not question him or the rigid value system she is expected to honour. Within the boundaries of her household, she is the ideal and yet she is not entitled to an individual identity and must always place her husband and family before her own self. Like in these prints she is condemned to be anonymous.

It is also important to note who are the women being portrayed in this kind of popular imagery when there is a mention of a specific name on them and not simply a mythological character or an anonymous female. None of the prints show a real Indian identifiable female who left a mark in late 19th or early 20th century, like Rukhmabai or other women who were some of the first from India to study European medicine system, as recently elaborated by Kavitha Rao (2021) in her book or educationist and social reformer Savitribai Phule, writer and activist Tarabai Shinde or educationist and activist Pandita Ramabai (Chakravarti 2014; Kosambi 2016). This is not to say that a traditional Indian medicine system did not exist and there were no female experts within this system like in many

other areas. Those women and their identities have either been erased or made redundant by modern scholarship.

THE WORLD OF INDIAN FEMALE IDENTITY: KNOWN YET FORGOTTEN

It is not a matter of coincidence that most of the actresses in early twentieth century India came from the households of the so-called nautch girls or courtesans. The status of courtesans in India differed with place and time. In 18-19th century India, the institution of courtesans was well established and the best among them were artists, composers, keepers of music and dancing traditions, well versed with poetry, literature and famous in their respective towns for their wit, intellect and talent for conversation with the most remarkable men (Nevile 1996; Oldenburg 1990). Within Shahjahanabad, that is, old Delhi built in front of Red Fort, an entire street was reserved for courtesans of various degrees (Khan 1989). The lowest in rank were those who were not trained in the arts and the highest was the lady known far and wide for her talents. Apart from being custodians of the arts many courtesans are also noted for a playing a role in the Indian freedom movement since British officers of high rank were often their clients and thus, they had access to secret information which they passed on into the hands of Indians. When cinema, especially the talkies arrived, women were needed to play a part. But girls from respectable families were forbidden training in dance and music and the profession of cinema was considered too lowly, a very shady one for them (Majumdar 2009, 71). It was only from the families of courtesans that the foremost actresses in Indian cinema made their way. It hardly means that they escaped social stigma or were given due recognition in every case. As courtesans and actresses, they made a lot of money, and were therefore independent but never considered respectable.

Even within the women who came to be in Indian cinema of this period, not everyone became a subject for prints and photographs widely circulated like the ones in the SEM collection. Taking the example of a film titled *Hunterwali* (1935), an actress called fearless Nadia of Australian origin played the character of Madhuri in this film (Majumdar 2009, 104). In the film she is able to not just defend herself but also defeat many men in a fight singlehandedly. Being a stuntwoman, before being cast for films she worked in a circus and was a favourite with the audience. Nadia never really made it to the imagery widely circulated.

Taking a few names from within the museum collection of actresses whose photographs were in circulation and thus preserved, Miss Mukhtar Begum, Miss Shahila, Miss Rose, Miss Zubeida and Miss Kajjan are either seated passively or stand in a pose displaying her charms as in case of Zubeida (Fig. 19). Their pose in these photographs is in conjunction with other female imagery in this collection, especially the anonymous ones. They are seated and surrounded with colonial furniture, in case of Miss Rose a gramophone is placed next to her and she wears heels, Miss Mukhtar Begum has a book in her hands and Miss Kajjan holds a bunch of flowers with eyes lowered and looking away passively.

On screen and in popular printed imagery, no matter how much these women attempted to fit into the socially acceptable norms, they were never quite accepted in society with dignity. They were made to fit into the patriarchal structure in the films they worked in. Fully utilised for furthering patriarchal propaganda, these women yet remained outside the order of respectable womanhood. Outside of the screen they could acquire wealth and temporary fame but not social acceptance. They remained in their lifetimes the women who worked in an undignified space for females, the cinema and came from lowly family backgrounds from professions which a respectable girl must never seek. Those who ventured into films like *Hunterwali*, did not quite make it into popular imagery. Uma Chakravarti tells us that the star theatre of Kolkata still retains its name, though there was ample opportunity to rename it with the one who profusely donated for its making, Binodini.

PROPAGANDA BAZAAR ART

The nationalist freedom movement in India used art and popular imagery as a tool to further its interests within a narrow purview. Therefore, the art thus resulted ended up becoming propaganda with a limited scope. It served the concerns of the upper caste patriarchal world alone. To say the least it was extremely exclusionary and propagated a discourse in which the entire Indian territory was represented as an upper caste Hindu married female, seen as a goddess, whose honour was the responsibility of few men exclusively, all of whom belonged to upper castes. As seen in a print from the collection (Fig. 20), the map of India is represented with Bharat *mata*, Mother Indiastanding with chains in her two hands. She looks forlorn and expects someone to come to her rescue. The heroes of this image are four upper caste Hindu men, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, M.A. Ansari and Bipin Chandra Pal. In the nationalist discourse, three of these men are together referred to as “Lal Bal Pal”. Bal Gangadhar Tilak was one of the orthodox nationalists who opposed the Age of Consent Act, 1891 as well as the right of a Hindu woman to divorce.

This kind of representation sidelines the idea of diversity within India and erases the identity of so many communities outside of the Hindu upper caste fold. The worst affected by such a discourse have been those communities which have lived in forests for centuries at least. Many of their local religions, for instance, Sarnaism of the Ho and Munda community are still not recognised by administrative bodies in India¹².

The female in the print, with open hair, which can be seen as a parallel to Draupadi, who refuses to tie her hair till her public humiliation is avenged with blood, is not simply the Indian nation personified, she also represents upper caste Hindu social order and values, patriarchal and caste ridden, which must be preserved in the face of an enemy. This enemy is not simply the British whose interference in the



Fig. 19: Miss Zubeida, Indian actress, 263



Fig. 20: India as mother goddess, 324



Fig. 21: Gandhi and Bharat mata, 323

established social order is uncalled for, but also the attack on these time-kept values and customs by many other forces from within the Hindu fold. These are the voices of some women and men who wished to demolish established caste and patriarchal structures. And the foremost name which must be mentioned in this regard is B.R Ambedkar (1936).

It is interesting to note that Ambedkar or women like Pandita Ramabai or Savitribai Phule never appear as saviours of Bharat *mata*, though they are all Hindus and their work had a far more drastic impact on the social fabric on India. The debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar, and the political implications of Pune pact are well known (Alone 2017, 140-169). Ambedkar was a visionary who did not simply wish for an independent India with an upper caste, Brahmanical, patriarchal order replacing the British rule. In the constitution of India, which he drafted, it is evident that he wished for a more just and equal society. Despite, the immense work and political movement successfully led by him, which continues to inspire the minds of young Indians even today, he never really figures in the popular nationalist imagery within these prints. As demonstrated in another print (Fig. 21), it is Gandhi who is almost deified when Mother India with vermilion in the parting of her hair makes Gandhi sit comfortably on her laps. On the top the blue skinned Vishnu with his *chakra* looks down upon them with satisfaction.

Like in the epic *Mahabharat*, Draupadi is never made to pick up weapons herself, an act forbidden to women, nor does she seek vengeance on her own in any other way, like the character Amba¹³ in the same narrative, Bharat *mata*, depends solely on a few men to do the job for her, fully surrendering to the social order dictated by these very men. Though rescued from the British, this MotherIndia would then prefer to remain a subordinate to an older order, those of the men who rescued her.

After the death of Ambedkar in 1956, a major part of his writings and unpublished papers were uncared for by the newly formed government of India for a long time¹⁴ until J.B Bansod filed a suit against the government at the High Court of Nagpur seeking that either he be allowed to publish the remaining unpublished writings of Ambedkar or the Government of India be directed to do so. Some of his writings were published as late as 1989 (Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 5, 14th April 1989).

The way the reducing forest cover, industrial mining among other activities has affected the forest communities in independent India in the last few decades is unparalleled in known history¹⁵. On 24th August 2021, two poems by Tamil feminist writer Sukirtharani, a selection from English translation of Tamil novel Sangati by Tamil Dalit feminist novelist Bama and the short story “Draupadi” by Mahasweta Devi were deleted from the syllabus from the paper English literature by Delhi University¹⁶. Students from across the country have raised a voice in this concern. From one of their signature campaigns,

“The deleted texts are seminally important as they help realise the systemic oppressions of the Dalit and Adivasi communities, especially in gendered terms, and provide a better appreciation of our contemporary ethos and polity. Is this not something that the young men and women of independent India need to know and engage with? How else will a better and equal world be shaped? Or are we to relegate the protesting woman and the Adivasi to the peripheries of the syllabus of Delhi University 2021? What are we afraid of?

Decades after 1947, Indian literatures in translation and in English were allowed entry into the colonised precinct of English syllabus of Delhi University. Is the process to be halted in terms of caste, class and gender contours of authors and the worlds that they bring alive?

We urge the University to revisit its decision.”

Crime against women¹⁷ and caste atrocities continue in their most gory incarnation (Dalit Human Rights Defenders Network (DHRDNet)2020).

On 31st July 2021, the Lakshadweep Administration invited global tenders for building 230 beach villas and 140 water villas in Suheli, Minicoy and Kadmat islands. This was done without any consultation with the local communities of that region and obviously poses a threat to the eco-system of those islands¹⁸. The Indian private company Adani has a mining lease in Queensland, Australia which is occupied by indigenous people¹⁹. Will India do to its own people and others what was done to it under the British? Is this not the new face of colonialism? Modern science and technology have always aided imperialism (Bishop 1990).

It would be a mistake to think that these prints exist in isolation and the political and social milieu they portray is a past frozen in history. In fact, the prints are a part of a discourse which continues till date.

CONCLUSION

The immense variety within the prints in the Indian collection of Slovene Ethnographic Museum opens it up for research with different perspectives. There is also much stylistic variation within these prints. While folk art traditions which survive in India till date have a presence in this collection, most of the prints belong to the art style which began with Ravi Varma and his oleographs made in neoclassical European oil painting tradition. This style is grafted on an existing Indian art tradition and as a repercussion, the aesthetics of Indian painting and sculptural arts are compromised and given up. The establishment of British academic schools in India along with the demeaning colonial gaze upon Indian art traditions, the latter suffer irreparably. The colonial gaze and white man’s burden

or syndrome gets deeply embedded in the minds of Indians who begin to look up to the “west” as overpowering and superior. Art education is established on the European model and Indian arts and aesthetics are sidelined, a trend that unfortunately continues even today in most art, design and fashion colleges in India. This process can definitely not be deterministic and natural. It is part of the colonial agenda of conquering by suppressing an entire civilisation along with its cultural and artistic ethos. As seen in the propaganda prints here, the reactionary nationalistic discourse to colonialism was unfortunately extremely exclusionary and biased against its own people. It fully subscribed to the European neoclassical style of image making without a single thought to the ethos of Indian aesthetics. There are exceptions to this, like Nandalal Bose and later K.G Subramanyam, but these are very few and it is not their imagery that becomes part of these popular prints and godly imagery. The nationalistic prints evidently portray the bias in Indian society based on caste and gender in their exclusion of personalities like Ambedkar and Savitribai Phule.

The photographs of actresses and the embellishments on many images further open the feminist discourse within this collection. There is a profusion of female imagery within this genre as well as this collection which has been a trend in Indian art. The artist or the photographer in case of these prints is always a man and that is abundantly evident in the imagery. The portrayal of the new modern Indian anonymous cultured woman is a combination of colonial and nationalistic discourse fully realised in the subject matter and the choice of style of the imagery. The social aspect of these prints is in conjunction with the formalistic choices made. Either of these is a result of the other and it is impossible to delink them.

NOTES

1. *Maximum illud* made significant contributions to the reformation of the missionary framework. It was a response to the Church's previous close relationship with national governments, which undermined the Church's credibility and hindered missionary success. The emergence of nationalist struggles in Europe, as well as decolonisation processes on other continents, both contributed to the Church's desire to disconnect from national frameworks (Motoh 2019: 38-40).
2. Y.S. Alone's critique of Gayatri Spivak's idea of subaltern has been acknowledged by the latter.
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4eH7isRGDg&t=1567s> , accessed on 20 November 2021. Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), Regional Centre Vadodara, conducted a Webinar on Indian Art on the 23rd of May 2020; Titled: 'Evolution Atrophied: The Aborted Modernism in Indian Art'. This was done online due to the pandemic Covid 19.
4. Many such terracotta images are preserved as part of the Indian collection of Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana.
5. Shilpi Siddhanthi Siddhalinga Swami was an artist well versed with iconographic texts who took the Ravi Varma Style forward who had a school at Mysore and taught many students.
6. Gita press is an example which propagated Hindu nationalism quite successfully and continues to thrive today (Mukul 2017).
7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVybYQtPz6I&t=4s> This film tells the story of Ravi Varma press. "An artefact, as director Vikas Urs terms it, the film traces the story of the Ravi Varma Press, based on diary entries made by C. Raja Raja Varma, the youngest brother of artist Raja Ravi Varma. The film has been produced by The Raja Ravi Varma Heritage Foundation." (Accessed on 29 November 2021.) <http://www.rrvhfoundation.com/> Ravi Varma Heritage foundation, accessed on 29 November 2021.
8. Many of his glass plate negatives are preserved with Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Delhi. His works are also with the Alkazi Foundation, Delhi.

9. A translation of Natyasastra is done by Manomohan Ghosh (1956).
10. When I use the word cluster here, I mean a craft cluster. There are many traditional arts, crafts and handloom traditions living in India. These belong to a specific region and have been given Geographical Indicators by the Government of India. For example, Maheshwari sari and fabric is made in a place called Maheshwar in Madhya Pradesh and can be considered authentic only if it is made by a handloom weaver from that region. This is done to protect these age-old living traditions.
11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElcW3klxIhs> Accessed on 20 November 2021. This lecture was part of an online series of lectures organised by a student-led Heritage Exploration Initiative Called Karwaan on 17th June 2020.
12. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/sarna-dharam-code-of-ativasi-identity-and-ec-nationalism-74569> Accessed on 20 November 2021. On November 11, The Jharkhand State Assembly in a special session sent a resolution to the Union Government asking for a separate religion code for the tribal population in the upcoming census 2021 exercise. The resolution named it 'Sarna Adivasi Dharam'.
13. Amba is a character in Mahabharata who ends up being humiliated time and again. She is first kidnapped along with her two sisters from their swayamvar, marriage ceremony and is later rejected by her lover. Unlike Draupadi, she takes matters into her own hands and resolves to take her own revenge instead of depending upon a man. Alas, in order to do so, in the Brahmanically oriented text Mahabharata, she is reborn as a eunuch and thus defeats her sworn enemy Bhishma who refuses to take up arms against him seeing the woman in him.
14. The story of how Ambedkar's unpublished papers were treated is recounted by S.Anand in his preface to the edited version of the book 'Riddles in Hinduism' written by Ambedkar, published posthumously. This edition was published on 14th April 2016, on the 125th birth anniversary of Dr B.R. Ambedkar by S.Anand's publishing house called 'Navayana'. He mentions that it is possible that some of his writings were destroyed in this time.
15. Arundhati Roy has been writing extensively on this area (Roy 2019). Her introduction to Ambedkar's Annihilation of caste "The doctor and the saint" is to be noted. Sanjay Kak's documentary films (Words on Water 2002, Red Ant Dream 2013) are noteworthy as well. Both have also been involved in talking about over construction of water dams, especially Narmada River dam in their respective works. Both these people have also been heavily criticised for their Marxist views and bias. In response Gail Omvedt, an American born Indian social activist wrote an open letter to Arundhati Roy critiquing her stand (July 1999). Arundhati Roy has also been criticised for being selectively critical of Hindu fundamentalism only and not, for instance, Islamic fundamentalism. There have been several protests against Narmada water dam one of which is Narmada Bachao Andolan founded by Medha Patkar. The latest work of fiction to be noted on the struggles of forest communities is the film, Spring Thunder (2018) by Sriram Dalton. India has a long history of struggles by forest communities against encroachment, illegal mining and human rights violation in independent India. It is beyond the scope of this writing to delve into this area.
16. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-news/1100-academics-petition-president-du-v-c-to-reinstate-three-women-authors-in-english-syllabus-101630952925951.html> Accessed on 20 November 2021. 1100 academics petition president, DU V-C to reinstate three women authors.
17. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_Unnao_rape_case Accessed on 20 November 2021. This case is a recent one but the unkept history of such cases is sadly a very long one. Some of the cases in which women fought most courageously are those of Phoolan Devi and Bhanwari Devi.
18. <https://www.change.org/p/shri-ram-nath-kovind-the-president-of-the-republic-of-india-halt-unsustainable-tourism-development-in-lakshadweep> Accessed on 20 November 2021. This is the petition running against this proposal.
19. <https://thewire.in/world/australia-police-will-not-remove-indigenous-people-occupying-adani-mine-site> Accessed on 20 November 2021.

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