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Scars of a Culture

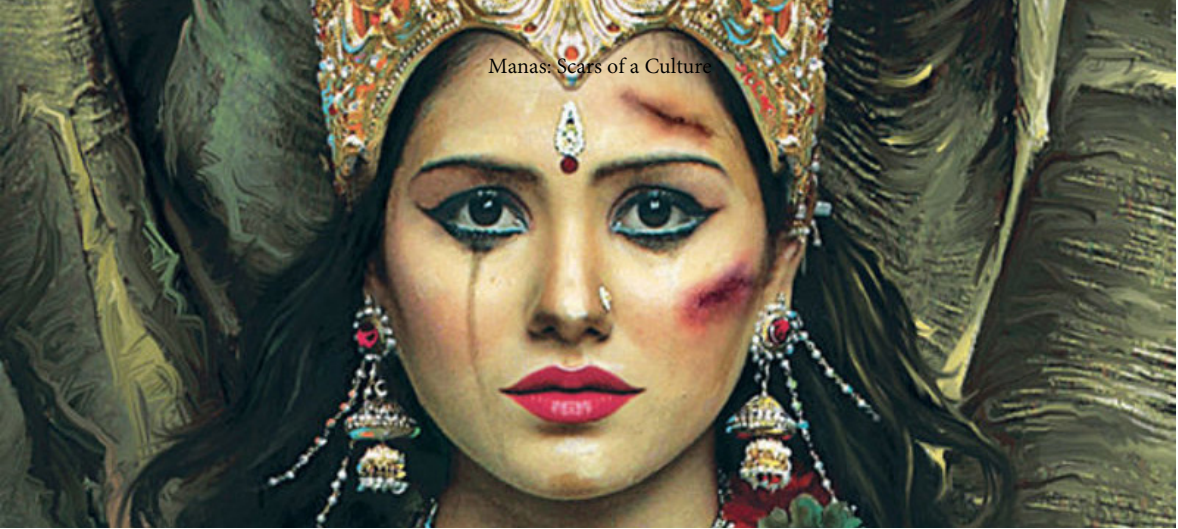
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SCARS OF A CULTURE

Puhup Manas

In September 2013, there was an explosion of online activity across India centered on a set of three images. Commissioned by the international non-governmental organization Save the Children India, and created by the Mumbai-based advertising agency Taproot India, these images were designed for a campaign against domestic violence. Entitled *Abused Goddesses*, the campaign depicts domestic violence victims through the bruised faces of revered Hindu goddesses and raises questions about the place women occupy in Indian society.

The *Abused Goddesses* campaign consists of three photographs, each representing a prominent goddess of the Hindu religion. One depicts Saraswati, the goddess of music, nature, and knowledge; another shows Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity; and the third shows Durga, the goddess of valor. In Hindu mythology, these three goddesses comprise the *Tridevi* or the “three goddesses.” The power and divinity typically associated with these goddesses

have been shattered by Taproot India’s depictions. India is not the safest country in the world for women; in fact, it is often listed as one of the worst (Lahiri). In what could be called a fairly bold move, the *Abused Goddesses* campaign contrasts this grotesque reality faced by the common Indian woman with notions of divinity and spirituality—a very substantial and intrinsic part of Indian culture. By showing scars, bruises, and other signs of abuse on the faces of revered goddesses, the campaign merges the sacred with the abusive and distinguishes itself from other domestic abuse campaigns in India.

The images themselves, minus the signs of abuse, bear a stark resemblance to the portraits of gods and goddesses adorning many households in India. This is no coincidence. Taproot India explicitly states, “Hand-painted posters of Gods and Goddesses can be found in every place of work, worship and residence [in India]. Hence, we recreated the hand-painted poster style to emotionally communicate

to the TG [Target Group].” Their image of the goddess Saraswati features many of the usual elements, including flowing water, a swan near her feet, and a peacock. Normally, she is portrayed as a very fair woman dressed in white, holding a stringed instrument, the Saraswati Veena; her depiction in the Abused Goddesses campaign stays true to all these traits.

This attention to authenticity is an integral part of the campaign and plays a major role in making the images connect with the Indian audience on an intimate level. It would certainly have been possible to convey a message against domestic abuse without any religious imagery at all, but such an approach tends to suggest that our normal lives—in which we socialize, eat, drink, and sleep—are separate from the dull and gloomy place where women are disrespected and abused. The Abused Goddesses campaign’s integration of domestic abuse with an item of everyday prevalence shatters this imaginary boundary and makes us come to terms with domestic abuse as something all too real. It enforces the fact that abuse is not as rare and infrequent as some may claim, but something that is a disturbingly prominent part of many Indian households.

Along with forging an intimate connection with the Indian audience, use of religious imagery from Hindu mythology also serves to effectively convey one of the greatest hypocrisies of Indian culture. Indian women are continuously deemed to conform to the virtues of purity and greatness, and encouraged to transcend the baseness of men through their faith and devotion. In return, they are supposed to be honored with deep respect and admiration. This seems to be at odds with the fact that around seventy percent of women in India are subject to domestic abuse, keeping in mind that these figures generally tend to be underestimated (Fernandez).

But there is more to this interplay of religious overtones and facial scars. Because India tends to be so predominantly religious, religion itself, as a prominent and important factor, is often spared the prying eye. The unique nature of the campaign allows us to explore deeper connections between the mistreatment of women and their deification. To fully appreciate the significance of this, we first need a slightly nuanced understanding of the role religion plays in Indian culture.

Every morning in the average Indian middle-class household, you will hear the



Layout by Jaye Michelle Harris. Illustrations by Taproot India.

ringing of melodious bells, accompanied by prayers sung by the mother in the prayer room of the house. The aroma of incense fills the air. When young children throughout the country go to take their examinations, they do so with a *tika* on their foreheads, a quick bite of some *prashad*, and prayers on their lips. The richest businessmen in India fly in helicopters to offer prayers on auspicious occasions, while the lowest of untouchables believe their sorrows are justified by sins in their past lives. India is a developing country,

neta Jha has the following to say about the deification of women:

"Pedestalisation of women as goddesses is as damaging as portraying them as sex objects. Both dehumanize women. Both leave no space in between for women to exercise their will or have feelings and opinions and flaws and desires as human beings. Trapping women into images of a supposed ideal is one of the oldest strategies of patriarchy—and if we do not fit the image, it is deemed alright to 'punish' and violate us" (Jha).



and Indians face many hard problems on a daily basis. Religion serves as a source of strength, a comforting belief that justice is eventually served. Religion gives a reason to look beyond one's petty worries and believe in a greater cause.

Religion also tends to give people a specific place in society. Particularly, it gives women a specific space in Indian culture. The ideal woman is selfless, catering to the needs of her family over herself. Her duty is to tend to her husband, raise her children, and take care of the household chores without question or hesitation. It is her duty to ignore whatever hurt or pain is bestowed upon her and to suffer silently.

In her article in the *Hindustan Times*, Pra-

The same view is reiterated in an article by Vaishna Roy, featured in *The Hindu*, which says, "Deification conveniently places the woman on an impossible pedestal from which it takes very little to fall off and thus invite abuse." All of this suggests that domestic violence is not so much an independent act as it is the outcome of a sociocultural system that consistently dehumanizes women. Sanjay Srivastava, a Delhi-based sociologist, mentions another aspect of the deification of women: "Given India's patriarchal status, the worship of goddess[es] and the iconic status of a deity bequeathed to domesticated female figures is 'a symptom of male anxiety and guilt'" (Tilak).

Many may see blaming religious prac-

tices for the abuse of women as a bold and mistaken step. For instance, such practices are something not usually found in Western societies; yet do they not suffer from the problem of domestic abuse as well? Yes, but there is a crucial difference between domestic abuse in countries like the United States and domestic abuse in India.

Perhaps the best way to summarize this difference is to simply quote the headline of a *Times of India* article: "57% of Boys, 53% of Girls [in India] Think Wife-beating is Justified" (Sinha). The figures took me by surprise. When I mentioned this to a friend in India, she responded in an unnervingly plain voice, "I thought the percentage would be higher." There is a troublesome belief in India that blames the woman for provoking domestic abuse. When a normal human being has to fit the shoes of a goddess, how can she not consistently feel at fault?

There is a certain blankness in the face of the abused goddess who sits adorned with the pretty dress, makeup, and the Veena. Her face is not one of anguish, nor of anger, but one of silent acceptance. I think about the multitude of women I know in India who are beaten regularly by their husbands. I look at this image, and I see a similarity. When a woman is said to be treated as a goddess, how could she possibly complain? Beautiful scenery, majestic animals, gushing water, and fabulous jewelry do not seem to fit a scarred and bruised face. Instead they feel like a façade, a mere illusion to hide the grotesque nature of the truth, an attempt to soothe male anxiety and guilt. How is our deification of abused women in real life any different?

In the end, the hard truth remains that the intellectual insights offered to us by

the campaign will probably do little for the woman who is currently being beaten by her husband because the curry contained too much salt. However, the exposure of society's unwritten rules and invisible customs that keep the oppressed in their place is the first step to radical change. The unique nature of the Abused Goddesses campaign visualizes the control that dominant religious beliefs have over women in India. Hopefully, in the long run, it will be these systematic deconstructions of oppressive customs that will motivate the Indian woman to stop seeing her abuse as something she deserves, and instead ask what the true worth is of the respect she is proclaimed to command. There is undoubtedly a long way to go, but the Abused Goddesses campaign is certainly a step forward.

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