

**INTEGRAL Season Three: Gender Justice and The Common Good
Bannan Institute, Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education, Santa Clara University**

“Gender Justice and the Indian Comic”

**Sharmila Lodhia, Associate Professor, Women’s and Gender Studies Department and
Bannan Faculty Fellow, Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education, Santa Clara University
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THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Welcome to INTEGRAL, a podcast production out of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University; exploring the question: Is there a common good in our common home?

I’m Theresa Ladrigan-Whelpley, the director of the Bannan Institutes in the Ignatian Center and your host for this podcast. We’re coming to you from Vari Hall on the campus of Santa Clara in the heart of Silicon Valley, California. This season of INTEGRAL, we’re looking at the ways in which gender justice intersects with our pursuit of the common good.

STEPHANIE WILDMAN: Society needs to acknowledge gender.

PATRICK LOPEZ-AGUADO: We can see the clear evidence of the dangers involved in socializing practices that tie masculinity to power.

SHARMILA LODHIA: While there is a long history of feminist activism in India and a vibrant advocacy community working to address gendered violence in the region, there was something different happening here.

SONJA MACKENZIE: We must build movements in solidarity with those whose equal dignity is unequally endangered as we address the pressing societal, moral, and ethical dimensions of gender justice.

MYTHRI JEGATHESAN: Do they see women as extractive commodities and subordinated clients to patriarchal patrons? Or do they see them in the context of their desires and aspirations for the future?

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: To unpack these questions, we’re joined today by Sharmila Lodhia, Associate Professor in the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies at

Santa Clara University and Bannan Faculty Fellow in the Ignatian Center. Professor Lodhia is a graduate of Hastings College of Law in San Francisco, and she earned her PhD in Women's Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research examines legal responses to violence against Indian women through a transnational lens, highlighting the impact of migrating spouses, traveling cultures, and shifting bodies of law. Welcome Sharmila!

SHARMILA LODHIA: Thanks Theresa. I'm really thrilled to be here today.

I'd like to begin with a story. On December 16th 2012, Jyoti Singh, a 23 year old physiotherapy student, was gang raped by six men on a bus traveling through South Delhi, India. She died several days later of the brutal injuries she sustained.

The crime itself was not extraordinary. Gender based violence on a global scale is far too common. What was notable about this crime, and its aftermath, was the diverse and hypervisible public responses to this case and the innovative forms of activism it inspired. The Indian public spoke loudly and affirmatively back to the sexist and patriarchal logics being articulated by government officials in the wake of the attack. Statements suggesting that the victim had invited the attack by wearing the wrong clothes, by being out at night with a man who was not related to her, and by acting too Westernized.

While there is a long history of feminist activism in India and a vibrant advocacy community working to address gendered violence in the region, there was something different happening here in terms of the level and breadth of public engagement. Marchers demanded the right to a safe city and meaningful legal protections for women, and a reversal of a long history of police and judicial inaction in rape cases. Protesters carried signs that read: "My body my right!" "My dress is not a yes!" and "Don't tell your daughter not to go out. Tell your son to behave properly!" Other forms of advocacy explored the roots of toxic masculinity and highlighted growing evidence of moral policing. Community activism, visible in the streets and on a range of social media platforms, sought to reclaim and reaffirm women's right to safely access public spaces.

One especially innovative project that sought to engage some of the non-legal dimensions of the case was the augmented reality comic book *Priya's Shakti*³, created by Ram Devineni. Devineni was in Delhi, India in December 2012, and participated in the protests that followed the attack on Jyoti Singh. Devineni was inspired to create the comic book after having the opportunity to speak with survivors, families and activists working on gender based violence. He, in collaboration with artist, Dan Goldman and co-author Vikas Menon, developed *Priya's Shakti* in order to highlight particular manifestations of gender-based violence and discrimination. Having researched and written about the legal, social and political ruptures prompted by the Delhi rape case, I had been struck by the significance of shame, which I traced to a longer trajectory of judicial responses to cases involving sexual violence in India, and how the crime of rape is conceptualized under Indian law. *Priya's Shakti* intrigued me because it was conceived as a tool to challenge these very assumptions about victimization and the societal stigmas surrounding rape.

The project incorporates a familiar medium in India and the Indian diaspora (the comic book) and the parable of the relationship between humans and the gods, to tell a story about a young woman struggling in the aftermath of a sexual assault. Comics are a readily available form of visual culture in India. Many come to learn about Hindu mythology, history and culture as children through the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic series published by India Book House. These comics serve as transmitters of a larger archive of religious and cultural knowledge and also as purveyors of the broader moral/cultural values embedded in their tales of triumph of good over evil and in the human cost of displeasing the gods. *Priya's Shakti* in its form echoes this more traditional use of comics as a pedagogical tool, but at the same time transgresses these boundaries. Disrupting what scholars have identified as the more patriarchal and nationalist framework of more traditional Indian comics, *Priya's Shakti* offers a counter-hegemonic narrative that elevates a new type of female protagonist.

The comic begins with a tale of injustice rooted in gender inequality and violence and weaves readers through a proscriptive narrative for advancing social change. Building on the real-life moment of national awakening and discussion about the status of victims of sexual violence in India, the comic places as its center a survivor of sexual violence in the form of Priya. Priya is not only a survivor but one whose cause is taken up by the divine, in the form of the goddess Parvati, when she is shunned by her family and community. Society's failure to recognize her suffering ultimately serves to threaten the balance of the universe and the future of humankind.

I had the opportunity to speak with Ram Devineni about the origins of the Priya's Shakti project.

SHARMILA LODHIA: Why did you select the comic book as the medium for this particular advocacy intervention?

RAM DEVININI: Well originally, I looked at many different formats including documentaries. You know I'm a documentary filmmaker so initially that was my impulse, but I realized that at that time, in particular, the issue was way too difficult and too hot and that there was no way that I could tell an honest story. I was very much inspired by what DJ Spooky did with a film by D.W. Griffith who made, who was one of the pioneers of American cinema who made a film called Birth of A Nation which told race from the perspective of the KKK, so it was a very racist film and what he did, DJ Spooky being an African American, was he remixed the film to tell it in the perspective of the African Americans, the slaves portrayed in the film.

So I looked at that as a possible medium so what I did is I looked at some of the old 1970's Bollywood films, especially the Hindu mythological tales that were presented on screen, especially the ones in big technicolor in the 1970's featuring the Hindu gods. And I took about a dozen of those films and recut them into the storyline which eventually became Priya's Shakti. And I finished that and one day I had all these clips together and I went to a

meetup in New York City and I met up with Dan Goldman who just by chance was there (this was our first encounter), and he looked at the videos and he said “Wow, this looks like a comic book.” And he was right, I mean the videos, the images were of very high contrast, high color, and they looked like a comic book and that was sort of where things changed from all the other mediums to the comic book format.

You know art is never so concrete, so direct, you have to sort of fail at certain mediums to eventually get to the medium that worked. And in terms of advocacy, the reason why we decided to do the comic book is, you know, I started thinking about the comic books I read as a child: the Hindu mythological comic books in India where I learned about Hinduism, where I learned about Indian culture and I remember those were incredibly popular all over India and I said, “That might be the medium to really reach young teenage boys,” and that became the core of Priya’s Shakti.

SHARMILA LODHIA: One of the things that really strikes me about this project is the relationship that you have fostered with advocates and survivors which informs the narrative storytelling you adopt in the Priya’s Shakti series. I find in my own research that people are most interested in telling sensationalized stories about gendered violence (particularly when it comes to issues like rape, acid violence and sex trafficking), but that they often have no links to, or interest in learning about the actual advocacy work that groups are engaged in at the ground level in response to these problems. Can you talk a bit about why you pursued this project in the collaborative way you did, and how you built trust among the advocates and survivors you worked with?

RAM DEVININI: As a documentary filmmaker, it is really critical that I make the projects or the core essence of the projects honest and especially portraying and presenting the real life story of survivors, that’s pure documentary filmmaking right there; and as a documentary filmmaker, one of the critical things you have to do is build trust and build a relationship with the subjects that are in the film and in this case the comic book. So that

was very important in really telling the essence and the core of the story and it took awhile, this was not a simple overnight process, building trust, finding relationships, finding the women that wanted to tell their stories. That is the most important thing. That all the stories that are in Priya's Shakti and Priya's Mirror are by women that want to tell their stories and that have in a sense become advocates so they, *their* stories they felt, would help others and to challenge the culture or the patriarchy that surrounds the problem of gender violence in India. Now, the case with Priya's Shakti, which deals with rape, the women there are protected, in fact in India you cannot portray rape survivors in video media or publically, it's against the law, so even if they want to be portrayed and want tell their stories. So we animated them and had their voices and you can hear their voices and their stories in their own voices being told. But as a result of that there's an enormous challenge, we couldn't involve them in the advocacy, so we ended up partnering with NGO's that dealt with gender violence issues to help be the advocates for them. Now in the case of acid attacks, it's entirely different because the women who have survived these horrific acid attacks have also become advocates and want to tell their stories, want to be in front of the camera and more importantly, want to be out in public because they feel if they are not public or if they are concealed away or hidden away in the back rooms of their houses that works against the movement. So being open in public was very critical for them.

SHARMILA LODHIA: Had you had prior experience working on issues related to gendered violence or anti-violence activism?

RAM DEVININI: I had no experience at all working with gender violence issues or anti-violence activism, and working on this project really opened my eyes, really gave me empathy and understanding for this problem and more importantly for myself as a man I came to the realization that in order to really address or to solve this problem, men also have to be engaged, and in addition men also have to be advocates.

SHARMILA LODHIA: Why was it important to you to incorporate the element of divine intervention (via Parvati) in Priya's story?

RAM DEVININI: It was very critical that we included the Hindu mythological stories in the comic book and now I need to emphasize we were not preaching Hinduism, rather we were very inspired by the mythological stories that everyone in India knows, no matter what religion you are. Its part of the culture, it's part of, its everywhere around you and one of the core essence of Hinduism that really intrigued me was the idea of conquering your own fears.

The reason why we decided to use the goddess Parvati and Lord Shiva in the story is because the goddess Parvati has a very specific role in relationship to Shiva and in relationship to humanity. Shiva has a tendency to be very aloof and very distant from human problems and often living up in his cave meditating and it's the Goddess Parvati who challenges and opens Shiva to the problems of humanity and to human problems, and she does that in the story. In essence, she opens Priya's eyes to the problems that exist around her and also that she, Priya, needs to be the guiding light that has to solve this in the end. So that was really critical that the goddess Parvati plays that motif that she plays what her role is in Hindu mythology in our story.

SHARMILA LODHIA: In what ways do you think stories like that found in the Priya's Shakti series can advance social change or serve as a transformative force in other realms of civic life?

RAM DEVININI: I think Priya's Shakti and especially the image of Priya on the tiger and what she stands for is a symbol, is a very powerful symbol that is being passed and being shared and being used in education to address gender violence. I also believe you know, Priya's Shakti cannot work in a vacuum, it's part of a bigger movement that is happening now in India, especially after the horrible gang rape that happened on the bus, which

became an awakening, a guiding light, a very pivotal moment in gender violence advocacy and history in India; so I think Priya's Shakti is a symbol, is a very powerful symbol, is a story that can really empower people. I mean, what I always found unique about what we were trying to do is one, we wanted to really change people's perceptions towards rape survivors. You know most advocates focus on either the victim or the perpetrator.

What we decided to do with Priya's Shakti is focus on how society perceives gender violence and how society perceives rape survivors, because they, their perception really defines the healing process, how we create legal issues, laws around that. And also more importantly, how to make concise and long lasting change, so our focus has always been on society's perception towards gender violence. And then secondly, it was very critical that we had a very specific audience of teenage boys. You know teenage boys are going through a critical age where in which are learning about gender, sexuality, relationships, all of those things that are very transformative which will affect them in their future. And comic books and stories are very much a part of their lives. And we wanted to embed Priya and what she stands for into those lives.

SHARMILA LODHIA: I believe comics and graphic novels have tremendous potential to serve as advocacy tools. Their pages offer generative arenas for new complex subjectivities and identities to be represented and explored. Storylines incorporating the supernatural, science fiction, and fantasy have resisted the static boundaries of gender, race and national identity, and offered readers alternative spaces of *belonging* and *being* in the world. They offer a blueprint for more rich and nuanced explorations of the complexities surrounding gendered violence, and one with the potential to reach new audiences.

Priya's heroism stems not from a traditional superhero power such as flight or invulnerability, but from being able to deploy her own inner strength and power as a woman, her "shakti" to resist being shamed and to speak out against the stigmatization that many survivors of rape endure. There is tremendous power in this representation.

Through its augmented reality components, Priya's Shakti also embeds real-life stories and voices of women as a tool for education and outreach to address gender-based violence. These narratives enable us to temporarily inhabit the experiences of another and to expand our understanding beyond a sensationalized or gratuitous recounting of the acts of violence themselves². Stories like these have the potential to open up new sites of transformation, to cultivate empathy, and to expand societal consciousness about the realities of gender-based violence.

According to Catholic social teaching, "The common good embraces the sum total of all those conditions of social life which enable individuals, families, and organizations to achieve complete and effective fulfillment." I understand this good as being grounded in larger societal contexts and communities, but at the same time aspiring towards something more spiritual and transcendent. As a transnational feminist researcher, I am both hopeful and cautious about the potential solidarities that might derive from a commitment to gender justice and the common good. The discourse of "common oppression" within feminist theorizing has not always been a useful framework for thinking about the intricacies of gender justice, particularly when *common* has referred to a universalizing and reductive common, rather than one that is more nuanced and complex. I am also wary of concepts like solidarity and accompaniment that resist active engagement with the structural realities that render certain gendered subjects more precarious than others.

My research and teaching are informed by these feminist politics and a belief that the law, when meaningfully actualized, can be a powerful tool. At the same time I recognize that the law is an incomplete remedy for addressing the root causes of violence in the form of social and cultural norms and behaviors, which reinforce patriarchal ideologies. The Justice Verma Commission, a judicial committee brought together to consider possible changes in criminal law in the aftermath of the Delhi case, devoted an entire chapter to tracing the role of educational institutions in reproducing static ideas about gender and gender socialization.

Priya's Shakti, by targeting young readers and seeking to disrupt certain normative familial and community responses to sexual violence is one step in seeking to fill this critical pedagogical gap. While it is clear that more work needs to be done, the aftermath of the Jyoti Singh case suggests that activism and sustained engagement by the broader public has the potential to transform cultures of violence and this is significant for those of us who are concerned about gender justice and the common good. How we actualize this good remains an open question.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Thanks for listening to INTEGRAL, a Bannan Institute podcast of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University. Special thanks to Sharmila Lodhia and Ram Devinini for their contributions to today's episode. Coming up next week is Patrick Lopez-Aguado, Assistant Professor in the Sociology Department at Santa Clara, who will be examining how perceptions and embodiments of masculinity are shaped through California's prison and juvenile justice system.

Technical direction for INTEGRAL was provided by Fern Silva and Tim Rose. Our Production Manager is Kaylie Erickson, and our Production Assistant is Manuel Sanchez. Thanks to Mike Whalen for advisory and editorial support. You can find us on the web at scu.edu/integral, or subscribe via iTunes, SoundCloud, Stitcher, or Podbean.

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1. Ram Devineni, Founder and President of Rattapallax, <http://www.rattapallax.com/>
 2. Voice of Rape Survivor from Priya's Shakti available at:
<http://www.priyashakti.com/survivors/>
 3. Free digital copies of Priya's Shakti and Priya's Mirror can be downloaded at:
<http://www.priyashakti.com/>