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Author(s): Deepti Misri

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## "Are you a man?": Performing Naked Protest in India

What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?

—Mahasweta Devi (1988, 196)

**S**o speaks the raped tribal revolutionary Draupadi in the eponymous story by Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi (1988). In the story's conclusion, Draupadi refuses to put on her clothes after she has been taken into custody and then raped by soldiers of the Indian Army. By refusing the disciplining power of shame scripted into the act of rape, Draupadi becomes, in the words of Mahasweta's translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a "terrifying superobject" (Spivak 1988, 184). At the end of the story it is Senanayak, the army officer who has sanctioned her rape, who stands before the naked Draupadi—"an unarmed target"—in a state of terrified paralysis usually associated with the victim (Mahasweta 1988, 196).

In July 2004, a group of Meitei women staged a naked protest in Imphal, the capital of the state of Manipur in Northeast India, a region that has seen a long history of separatist movement against the Indian state.<sup>1</sup> The women were protesting the torture, rape, and murder of thirty-two-year-old Thangjam Manorama while in the custody of the Indian Army's Assam Rifles Battalion, which had been holding her on the charge

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<sup>1</sup> The Meitei are the majority ethnic group in Manipur. They reside largely in the valley of Manipur, while the surrounding hills are largely populated by other tribes, such as Naga, Kuki, and Hmar. "Northeast India" refers to the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura. Peripheral to the Indian nation-state, this region is widely understood by its own residents as belonging outside rather than within India. For a history of the term in colonial and postcolonial usage, see Baruah (2005).

of militancy. According to press reports, an Assam Rifles officer, with hands joined in supplication, walked up to the group, pleading with them to put on their clothes, and it was only after much pleading that the group walked away (Thokchom 2004).

In July 2007, a twenty-two-year-old woman in the Indian state of Gujarat, Pooja Chauhan, walked in her underwear through the streets of Rajkot, followed by television cameras. She held a baseball bat in one hand while dangling a bunch of bangles and a red rose in the other. Chauhan was protesting police inaction in response to her complaints that her in-laws had been emotionally harassing, physically abusing, and even threatening to kill her for failing to provide a dowry and to produce a male child.

In this article I want to consider what it might mean for women in India to deploy nakedness as a tool of embodied resistance against the patriarchal violence of the state. What is the cultural imaginary from which these radical protests materialized? How and to what extent do such protests succeed in interrogating the gendered violence of the state as well as the patriarchal scripts underlying gendered violence more generally? Commentators in India were broadly sympathetic to the protests by the Meitei women as well as by Chauhan, but there has been relatively little analysis of why nakedness served as a particularly apposite form of protest against the violence of the state or indeed if nakedness may have signaled something more than just a desperate bid for publicity. If the viability of these protests is to be gauged in terms other than mere theatrical displays, shows of angry desperation, or even heroic sacrifices of modesty, then they must be examined in terms of the meanings and stakes of nakedness in each specific context. In what follows I attempt to show that, although naked protest effects a radical break from everyday norms of feminine modesty in India, there is nevertheless a somewhat coherent repertoire of representations around women's nakedness or shamelessness in which these protests participate, intentionally or otherwise. At the same time, each of these deployments of nakedness also posits a particular relation between women, gender, and violence that deserves scrutiny. Accordingly, my analysis will alternate between mapping the wider context of representation within which the above protests emerge into meaning and examining the gendered logics specific to these individual protests.<sup>2</sup> It is only by doing both that the upshot of these protests may be adequately gauged from a feminist perspective.

<sup>2</sup> While the representational sites and stakes of literary fiction and political protest are admittedly very different, what holds them together in my analysis is the ideological discourse in which they participate and the ways in which they inflect each other.

### Apprehending "Draupadi"

The Bengali writer Mahasweta's (1988) story "Draupadi" is an apt place to begin this examination, not only because it is chronologically the earliest of the instances I consider here but also because the story's content as well as its remarkable social life situate it as an important intertext for the subsequent naked protests in India. I will begin, however, with an analysis of the story itself, which is useful both for the profile of the state that Mahasweta sketches at the intersection of gendered, caste, and feudal modes of power and for its suggestion that violence inheres in a system of meaning as much as in a physical act.

The story "Draupadi" is set against the backdrop of the Naxalite revolt, a major peasant rebellion that began in the late 1960s in the Naxalbari region of the Indian state of West Bengal.<sup>3</sup> The peasant rebellion was inevitably also a caste rebellion by the largely lower-caste cultivators against the upper-caste feudal landowners. The revolutionary movement in favor of agrarian reform grew in response to several generations of feudal exploitation in the form of extremely low wages, exorbitant rates of interest charged by landowners, and sexual exploitation of tribal women, among other things. This is the broad context within which the action of the story takes place: the protagonist Draupadi and her husband Dulna are among the tribal revolutionaries who are engaging in guerrilla warfare against the landlords, using methods like attacking police stations, stealing guns, and even murdering landowners. In the story, the Special Forces of the Indian Army—long in cahoots with the upper-caste landlords—are now going after the revolutionaries with a vengeance, trying to suppress the rebellion. As chief instigators in the Naxalite revolt, Draupadi and Dulna have become prime targets of the state. Dulna is hunted down and shot to death, and after a long search Draupadi is also finally apprehended—the word "apprehended" appears in English in the Bengali text and constitutes a central trope within the story, compelling the reader to ask: what is it to apprehend somebody or something?<sup>4</sup> Once apprehended, Draupadi is brought to Senanayak, a government specialist "in combat and extreme-Left politics" (Mahasweta 1988, 188). He utters a single command to his men: "Make her. *Do the needful*" (195). What follows this abstruse command is, of course, the brutal sexual torture of Drau-

<sup>3</sup> West Bengal is a state in the eastern part of India, lying fairly close to the territory known within India as the Northeast. Also see n. 1.

<sup>4</sup> I have used Spivak's translation of the story, in which the English words in the original are reproduced in italics.

padi—a violence clearly deemed unspeakable even by Senanayak himself, who will not say the words for the act he has sanctioned.

In “Draupadi” Mahasweta renders the state as a gendered institution that bestows on its male, upper-caste representatives a prosthetic masculinity that stems from official power. The masculinity of the army officers Senanayak and Arjan Singh derives from precisely such an institutional arrangement: thus Mahasweta writes that “Arjan Singh’s power also explodes out of the *male organ* of a gun” (Mahasweta 1988, 188); later in the story, Draupadi’s rape is figured as the rise and fall of “active *pistons* of flesh” over her body (195).<sup>5</sup> But while it is true that the male organ of a gun keeps the law in place by backing up its foundational authority, Mahasweta shows that the power of the state is also contingent on the obedience and docility of its subjects. In the story’s conclusion, the multiply-raped Draupadi issues a brazen challenge to the state agents whose masculinity resides in state power. The soldiers come to summon her before Senanayak and throw her cloth at her, but Draupadi tears her clothes, refusing to cloak the violence that her injured body bears witness to. Instead, she forces Senanayak to come face to face with the violence he has sanctioned but does not want to witness: “You asked them to make me up, don’t you want to see how they made me?” (196). Advancing menacingly toward Senanayak, she demands:

“What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?”

She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak’s white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, “There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, *counter* me—come on, *counter* me—?”

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid. (Mahasweta 1988, 196)

With this image of the terrorized bureaucrat in the bloodied bush shirt (perhaps the most recognizable sartorial emblem of bureaucratic masculinity in India), the story concludes. What generates this stricken terror on Senanayak’s part? The story suggests that it is a sudden loss of comprehension—a falling away of established ways of knowing the tribals—that stymies this man of the state. The moment at which the raped

<sup>5</sup> The italicized words “male organ” and “piston” are in English in the Bengali original. The image of the gun in the context of the male organ, also the instrument of rape, emphasizes the official, sanctioned, militaristic nature of this rape.

subject refuses the obedient, shame-ridden femininity that is scripted for her is the moment when administrative masculinity falls apart, if only for a moment. But if the raped woman's disobedience in itself poses a challenge, the tribal Draupadi's disobedience gathers charge in light of the long-standing and commonplace practice in India of stripping and parading of Dalit ("untouchable") and *adivasi* (tribal) women.<sup>6</sup> Naked parades of Dalit women are a stock form of humiliation used against Dalits to "show them their place."<sup>7</sup> Draupadi's parading of her own naked body necessarily recalls and inverts this infamous mode of caste violence.

In his book *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott (1998) demonstrates how modern states assert power over their subjects by attempting to make them legible in the codes of the state. This explains, for instance, the state's quest to settle its itinerant populations so that it can see where they are and thus include them within the purview of its control: by including them in census counts or subjecting them to taxes, for instance. Mahasweta's Senanayak may be similarly understood as the eager agent of the state's pan-optical desires. This is why Senanayak is always engaged in "seeing" the tribals by learning about them: "*In order to destroy the enemy, become one*" is Senanayak's dictum (Mahasweta 1988, 189). Senanayak's strategies for overcoming the tribal rebellion therefore involve an anthropological will to know: to measure, catalog, document, render legible—and finally to apprehend—the other. At the same time he tells himself it is for their own good, that he is on their side: "He is Prospero as well," Mahasweta writes (189). Senanayak's chosen method of getting rid of the young revolutionaries is by "*apprehension and elimination*"—the English word "apprehension" in the story referring at once to his efforts to physically capture the revolutionaries and to know and understand their modes of organization (189). Thus will he bring them into his grasp.

For the rebels, then, an important strategy of resistance is to frustrate legibility by becoming suddenly unknowable. The story dwells frequently on the unimaginative nature of state methods of comprehension and control: the persistent drive toward knowledge is repeatedly compromised by the state's inability to transcend book learning and incorporate practical

<sup>6</sup> "Dalit" is the preferred term of self-description by communities previously designated "untouchable" or lower-caste in India. It means "downtrodden" or literally "broken to pieces" in Hindi and Marathi.

<sup>7</sup> Some of the perceived aggravations that result in the naked parade of Dalit women include upward mobility, Dalits objecting to encroachments on their property, refusing implicitly or explicitly to take a subordinate position, imagined or real relations between Dalit men and non-Dalit women (typically interpreted as rape), and Dalit women's refusal to submit to the sexual advances of upper-caste men.

knowledge into a method of reading and writing. As Spivak points out, “Senanayak’s project is interpretive: he looks to decipher Draupadi’s song” (1988, 179). But his texts are no good: the primitive guerrilla warfare scorned by the army handbook prevails in favor of the revolutionaries more often than not; the dictionaries used by the government’s “tribal specialist types” prove to be useless compared with the local knowledge of the water carrier, Chamru (Mahasweta 1988, 189). The project of interpretation fails to the last when Senanayak is confronted with Draupadi’s uninterpretable behavior. Draupadi’s body, which has been made and presumably known by so many, asserts its absolute unknowability in the end. Her theatrical disobedience appropriates the power of signification over her own raped body by rendering that body unreadable—resistant to patriarchal scripting while producing its own script. If the state agents try to interpellate Draupadi as victim, Draupadi refuses the hegemonic script of shame that the wounds of sexual violence are meant to evoke, resignifying her own raped body to produce an inscrutability that escapes Senanayak’s interpretive grasp. This is why, as Spivak points out, “the army officer is shown as unable to ask the authoritative ontological question, What is this?” (Spivak 1988, 184; see also Mahasweta 1988, 196).

Senanayak’s disabling incomprehension arises from two competing modes of embodiment in Draupadi’s shame-less challenge: how the raped tribal woman’s body looks and how it acts. After repeated rape, Draupadi stands naked, the very icon of a victim: “Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds” (Mahasweta 1988, 196). In what follows, however, we witness a theatrical unyoking of appearance from demeanor: Draupadi looks like a victim but acts like an agent. Indeed, the binary of victim and agent falls apart as Draupadi effectively separates violation from victimhood. As she stands insistently naked before her violators, Draupadi manages to wield her wounded body as a weapon to terrify them. Refusing the self-evident testimony of her victimized body, she enacts a new testimony that contradicts the installation of her injured body as evidence of her total apprehension—her state of being apprehended as well as her fear.

Custodial rape is frequently understood as a signal to the extended rebel community, but it also functions as a violent putting back into place of the shameless female rebel who flouts bourgeois feminine decorum, participates in violent revolution, and roams alone. As a counterinsurgency tool, rape attempts to script the insurgent’s body as a dual metaphor: Draupadi’s raped body is made allegorically representative of the rebel community but also (and specifically) of female rebels who are particularly

susceptible to this form of disciplinary violence. Draupadi, however, intercepts both these communiqués at once: as a rebel she refuses discipline (“I will not wear my cloth”; Mahasweta 1988, 196), as a woman she refuses shame (“There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed”; 196)—and, fusing the two in a single act of resistance, she sutures rebel and woman. The state is finally rendered as the subject of a serious misapprehension.

It is arguably the story’s striking ability to imagine into being this crisis of meaning as a successful moment of resistance that has assured it an enduring status within the postcolonial feminist canon. Since its publication in Bengali in the 1970s and Spivak’s English translation in the 1980s, “Draupadi” has reappeared in influential collections in India such as *The Inner Courtyard* and *Women Writing in India* and has become a staple on women’s studies and postcolonial literature syllabi in India and globally. In the next section I chart a more recent trajectory through which the story has traveled within India, gathering meaning through a sequence of translations, including those that Mahasweta’s text itself performs. In the process, I suggest the story partly constituted the regional discursive context for the Meitei women’s protest in 2004—which itself, in turn, became a national media event that set the context for Chauhan’s protest three years later. Equally, however, these subsequent protests inscribe Mahasweta’s story with new meaning in a contemporary context where the Indian state today faces a veritable crisis of political integrity. Putting aside the question of whether the protests by the Meitei women and by Chauhan represent intentional citations of Mahasweta’s story and its subsequent translations, we might see how the three nevertheless resonate against one another within various regional and national contexts of reception that shape their meanings.

### **Translating “Draupadi”: From *Mahabharata* to the Manipuri stage**

The concluding scene in “Draupadi” is, as is well known, a rewriting of a key scene from the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata*, which has since at least the nineteenth century been a source text for the mythology of the Indian nation in anticolonial as well as postcolonial phases of Indian writing.<sup>8</sup> In the epic, Draupadi is the polyandrous wife of the five Pandavas,

<sup>8</sup> Mahasweta’s story is part of a wider tradition of postcolonial (including feminist) literary, cinematic, and theatrical appropriations of the *Mahabharata*. For a useful overview of theatrical and televisual adaptations of the *Mahabharata*, see Dharwadkar (2005) and Mankekar (1999),

who stake and lose her in a game of dice with their enemy cousins, the Kauravas. Summoned to the Kaurava court after being thus won, Draupadi first refuses, whereupon the Kaurava prince Dushasana drags her in by her hair. As Dushasana pulls at Draupadi's sari in an effort to disrobe her publicly in the Kaurava court, Draupadi prays to be rescued by the male Lord Krishna; miraculously her sari extends to never-ending length even as Dushasana pulls on it, and Draupadi cannot be disrobed after all. This is the tale that Mahasweta adapts, or translates, to the political context of Naxalism and counterinsurgent state violence in West Bengal in the 1970s. In the foreword to her translation, Spivak highlights the terms of Mahasweta's rewriting: unlike the mythological Draupadi, who is saved by Krishna, the tribal Draupadi (or Dopdi, the tribal version of her name) can neither hope for nor aspire to being thus rescued. "Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine . . . comrade," Spivak points out, "the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops" (Spivak 1988, 184).

If Mahasweta's story represents a feminist literary appropriation of the *Mahabharata* toward an excoriating critique of the Indian state in the 1970s, its own recent adaptation to the stage marks an equally significant moment of translation. In 2000, the renowned Manipuri theater director Heisnam Kanhailal adapted Mahasweta's "Draupadi" as a performed play in the Manipuri language. As mentioned above, the canonical status of Mahasweta's story is based partly on the theatrical moment at its conclusion, which exemplifies how women's nakedness may perplex the scripts of gendered intelligibility that enable the violence of rape—thus, its selection for stage adaptation is not surprising. But there is also a continuing political context that has made it useful for fresh adaptation. In the intervening decades between the publication of "Draupadi" in the late 1970s and its adaptation by Kanhailal, separatist insurgencies against the Indian state in Kashmir and Northeast India have grown, as has the presence of Indian military personnel in these areas, where the Indian military are popularly detested for their counterinsurgency tactics (including rape) exercised indiscriminately against insurgents as well as civilians.<sup>9</sup>

Kanhailal's play imports the willfully naked figure of the raped Draupadi into the political framework of counterinsurgency state terrorism in Man-

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respectively. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker points out that, unlike the neonationalist Hindu imaginary established in the influential television adaptations of the *Mahabharata*, theater practitioners, particularly in the postindependence period, have interpreted the *Mahabharata* toward "critical self-scrutiny" in imagining the new Indian nation (2005, 217; see also 181).

<sup>9</sup> The growth of insurgency in the Northeast is frequently attributed to the Indian state's counterinsurgency backlash.

ipur where, as of this writing, over thirty insurgent groups remain in a violent deadlock with the Indian state.<sup>10</sup> Performing the role of Draupadi was the veteran actress Sabitri Heisnam, a woman in her sixties, who in the final act of the play appeared completely naked onstage, provoking a fair amount of discussion in the Manipuri press.<sup>11</sup> One of the key aspects of translation from text to performance is grounded in the body of Sabitri herself—not in her nakedness alone but in the particular body-centered performance style (which encompasses her powerful voice) for which she is known. Watching Sabitri's rendition of Draupadi, one cannot help but be immediately struck by the stylized movement with which she takes the stage as well as the expansive rage compressed in the few words she utters. In the segment of the performed play included in Amar Kanwar's 2007 documentary *The Lightning Testimonies* (*Roushan bayaan*), Sabitri, her back to the audience, advances menacingly toward the soldier, initially holding together at her front the single length of cloth that has been handed back to her after her rape. As she approaches the now cowering soldier, she opens her cloth all at once with a bloodcurdling scream: "*Confront my body!*" Swirling the cloth around to almost completely cover the soldier, she stands naked over him. The cloth functions aptly as the material signifier of the shame that Draupadi turns back on the soldier.

This performance and the public reviews it prompted in Manipur (which I will turn to shortly) are beyond doubt a flash point in the cultural imaginary that precipitated the Meitei women's protest in 2004.<sup>12</sup> Before

<sup>10</sup> Manipur was one of the last states to be incorporated into the Indian union in 1949, in what is widely perceived as a merger forced upon Manipur by a duplicitous Indian state. This unratified accession to India remains one of the resentments fueling insurgencies in the region, in addition to the Indian government's failure to respond to democratic voices demanding people-oriented development. Manipur today registers the largest number of underground groups in India's Northeast. For an overview of the "bewildering array" (Mehrotra 2009, 58) of these groups, their varying agendas, political influence, and popular perceptions of them, see Baruah (2005) and Mehrotra (2009).

<sup>11</sup> My discussion of the play relies on Amar Kanwar's documentary *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007), which features a segment from a stage performance of the play as well as a separate performance by Sabitri for the documentary itself. In my discussion of Sabitri's rendition of Draupadi I refer to the stage performance. Significantly, the role of Draupadi in the play is shared by a younger woman, but it is Sabitri who plays the final scene—in cognizance of, or concession to, the very different sexual valences of young women's and older women's bodies.

<sup>12</sup> Yet, strikingly, this connection was largely unremarked in the national coverage of the event, testifying perhaps once more to the remove of the Northeast from the Indian mainstream. I myself encountered this connection for the first time in the article by Nava Thakuria (2004), cited below, which I found in the Centre for Education and Documentation in Mumbai, although others have commented on it since.

I turn to that discussion, however, I wish to pause briefly over some of Sabitri's other performances in the early 2000s, which are also relevant, if less obviously so, to the discursive milieu in which the women's protest took place. Interestingly, the tactile body of this performer itself comes to be a site of transmission for some of the diverse traditions of representation around women's nakedness in India, across various sites of feminist cultural performance. While the commitment to physicality over the verbal among Kanhailal's actors has sometimes been critiqued, it also renders their performances mobile across regional and linguistic boundaries and possibly explains Sabitri's casting in projects seeking to specifically explore the construction of meaning around women's bodies.<sup>13</sup>

In 2000, Sabitri appeared in Madhushree Dutta's *Scribbles on Akka* (2000), a documentary that explores the contemporary relevance for women of the twelfth-century, naked *bhaktin* saint Akka Mahadevi.<sup>14</sup> Akka, one of the several women poets in the Vaishnavite *bhakti* tradition, was said to have renounced her clothing along with conjugal life when she declared herself wedded to the Lord Shiva. Wandering naked thereafter, she composed the devotional verse (*vachanas*, much of which thematized her decision to be naked and without shame) through which she has endured for over eight centuries in South India, where she continues to be revered today, and in the Vaishnavite tradition more broadly.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, not only has Sabitri played both Draupadi and Akka—two ur-figures of female nakedness in the Hindu imagination in India—but in 2001 she played Draupadi at the Akka Theatre Festival in Mysore, a women's theater

<sup>13</sup> Rustom Bharucha, for instance, finds that the emphasis on physicality and nonverbalism in Kanhailal's actors comes "at the expense of confronting the spoken word" (Bharucha 1991, 751).

<sup>14</sup> The *bhakti* movement began in the sixth century in South India as a movement that attempted to democratize religion by questioning the Brahminical stronghold over Hindu religious practice. As Madhu Kishwar (1989) points out, by moving the language of worship from Brahminical Sanskrit to colloquially spoken languages the movement allowed for the expression of women's creativity in devotional discourse.

<sup>15</sup> Incidentally, most of the Meitei, Manipur's majority ethnic group to which the naked protesters belong, are Vaishnavite Hindus. Like Akka in the Vaishnavite tradition, the fourteenth-century Kashmiri *bhaktin* Lal Ded also renounced domestic life and discarded clothing. In *Scribbles on Akka* (2000), two women retell the myths around Akka's nakedness in a way that seems to be clearly mediated through the Draupadi myth. As the popular legend goes, when Akka rejects a proposal of marriage from the king Kaushika, he attempts to strip her; she then sheds her clothes herself and from that moment on, it is said, wanders alone naked. But in the two women's telling of the legend, Akka prays to the lord (Chennamallikarjuna) for rescue and grows a heap of hair that covers her as she is being stripped—a (male) godly intervention that echoes clearly the mythological Draupadi's endless sari.

festival organized by the Karnataka state-run repertory, Nataka Karnataka Rangayana.<sup>16</sup> The Akka Festival was meant to bring together women in theater, as well as to put on productions about women or gender to pay “tribute to the spirit and power of Indian womanhood”—all in honor of the twelfth-century Akka, whose poetry was also performed at the festival (Mehu 2001). I mark these intersections to observe how the circulation of Sabitri’s naked performances in these varied sites (the Manipuri stage, Kanwar’s and Dutta’s documentaries, and the state-sponsored Akka Theatre Festival) functions to unify a scattered genealogy of female nakedness in subcontinental memory, to transmit it across regional and national contexts, and to suture it to a critique of counterinsurgent state terrorism. That this should sometimes occur under the auspices of the paternalist Indian state itself, in its touted commitment to “cultural development” or “the spirit and power of Indian womanhood” (Mehu 2001), is of course a crowning irony.

The Manipuri response to Sabitri’s portrayal of Draupadi in Kanhailal’s play is most directly relevant to the Meitei women’s protest. Perhaps predictably, this performance met with some controversy in the Manipuri press. In *The Lightning Testimonies* Sabitri reflects upon the negative response to her performance, urging her critics to look past the mere fact of her nakedness and to consider what, and how, her naked body signifies within the political and dramatic context of the performance:

Many people in Manipur said, “Sabitri, what you have done is disrespectful to women. . . .” You write this because you don’t think it through. Not one, many women have been stripped, and their rape took place in front of their husbands and fathers in law. The Indian Army raped them while making their fathers and husbands watch. Their fathers in law and husbands could only keep looking. You, who are educated, and write books . . . you don’t understand that when I play Draupadi and take my clothes off, it’s nothing to take my clothes off, it’s about my insides, my feelings. (In *The Lightning Testimonies* 2007)

Shrewd to the theatricality of the very violence to which her own performance responds, Sabitri invokes the regular stripping and rape in Manipur of women like Draupadi and specifically the fact that such sexual violence is frequently *staged* by the Indian Army for the captive audience

<sup>16</sup> I owe this information about the date of the performance to the Web site of Natarang Pratishthan, a resource center dedicated to documenting Indian theater history. See <http://www.natarang.org/documentation/SavitriHeisnam.pdf>.

of the woman's male relatives. Sabitri insists that her own nakedness on the stage forces upon the (thoughtful) viewer a consideration of these realities. Her performance must be read within a frame where being a woman is constituted as a condition of violability rather than within some abstract frame of idealized or respectable womanhood.

This discussion was already in progress when the Meitei women's protest took place in Imphal, Manipur, in 2004. In July of that year, Thangjam Manorama had been picked up from her home and taken into the custody of the Indian Army's Assam Rifles Battalion. The Assam Rifles were acting under the powers granted to them by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which gives the army extraordinary powers to "maintain order" in the Northeast.<sup>17</sup> Manorama's arrest warrant stated that she was apprehended on suspicion of being a militant with the People's Liberation Army; it also stated that no incriminating evidence had been found in her house. Her bullet-riddled body was found a few hours after she had been picked up, and a postmortem report also revealed bullet marks on her genitals. Later that month, twelve Meitei women stood naked outside the Assam Rifles headquarters, holding up banners (in English) that challenged in red text on white: "Indian Army Rape Us!" and "Indian Army Take Our Flesh!" (Thokchom 2004). The group left only after much pleading on the part of an Assam Rifles officer. Asked why they chose such a dramatic form of protest, one of the activists responded: "We decided to strip as our protest against extra-judicial killings and molestation of women in Manipur went unheeded. We are Manorama's mothers. We do not believe in judicial probe. We demand public trial of the guilty" (in Thokchom 2004). They also reiterated the long-standing demand for the withdrawal of the Special Powers Act.

Coming fairly soon after Sabitri's naked performance and the discussion surrounding it, the women's protest came to be read at least by some as an enactment of Kanhailal's play. A few months after the protest, Guwahati-based journalist Nava Thakuria wrote: "The highpoint situation of the Padmabhusan S. Kanhailal directed play had turned into reality on the streets of Manipur capital Imphal on July 15" (Thakuria 2004, 25). Kanhailal himself recounts in Kanwar's documentary that no

<sup>17</sup> The Armed Forces Special Powers Act allows military personnel to shoot and even kill anyone on grounds of suspicion. It is a descendant of the colonial Armed Forces (Special Powers) Ordinance introduced by the British in 1942 to quell the Quit India Movement. In independent India this ordinance passed through several avatars until it came to be the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958, which has been enforced in some parts of Manipur since 1960 and across the entire state beginning in 1980. For a complete history of this act, see Mehrotra (2009, 62–72).

sooner had the protest occurred than he received a phone call from his friend, who remarked: "Your play *Draupadi* was performed today by 12 Imas [mothers] in Kangla [headquarters of the Assam Rifles in Imphal]. The newspapers are calling you a prophet, and the people as well" (*The Lightning Testimonies* 2007). And of course *The Lightning Testimonies* itself situates Sabitri's performance and the Meitei women's protest in relation to each other. In thus bringing together protest and play, I would suggest, the documentary stitches together a new site of meaning for remembering both enactments in a continuous frame where each may be regarded as constituting the meaning of the other in retrospect.

In this section I have attempted to map a wider representational context that set the stage, so to speak, for the political protests by the Meitei women and Chauhan, which otherwise seem to have appeared out of nowhere. Knowingly or not, the protests draw authority from the circulation of these earlier and contemporaneous representations of resistantly naked female bodies. I turn now from these framing contexts of representation to the representational logic specific to the protests themselves. A close reading and comparison of the gendered ideological discourses utilized by the protesters will demonstrate the contestatory potential of naked protest as well as the risks implicit in some framings of it.

### **Unmanning violence**

Perhaps the most immediate question that hyperbolic, theatrical modes of protest inevitably raise among those who view them is whether the protests succeeded. Was anything besides a grand show really achieved by the performance? The measures of efficacy are many: the success of a performance protest may be gauged by outcome; by the extent of the local, regional, national, or even international notice it garners; by the kinds of conversations initiated, carried forward, or reinforced by the protest; and not least, by what the performance reveals about the thing it stages. In the case of all the protests examined in this article, the thing staged is women's vulnerability to the patriarchal violence defining state authority in India. If the success of these protests arguably depends on their ability to destabilize such patriarchal authority, then it is worth scrutinizing how they attempt to do so and whether the attempt itself succeeds.

But let me begin with the more mundane measures of success to evaluate what these protests may have accomplished, while also considering what local contingencies made it possible for these protests to have been taken seriously at all, as undoubtedly they were. A brief look at the outcome of the protests in Imphal and Rajkot shows that a responsive action

was indeed taken, though closer examination shows even more clearly how the state rushed to “cover up” following the naked protests. Immediately following the Meitei women’s protest, the Indian government set up a committee to review the Special Powers Act. The committee recommended repealing the act, but the government has not yet done so, apparently because of protest from the armed forces, whose violent behavior was at issue in the first place. The act remains in place as of 2010.<sup>18</sup> In Chauhan’s case, a previous attempt to immolate herself at the office of the police commissioner drew no formal action from the police (who managed to thwart that attempt). In contrast, the police moved swiftly after her naked march through Rajkot, arresting Chauhan’s husband and in-laws but also threatening to arrest Chauhan herself for indecent exposure. In response to both the Meitei women’s and Chauhan’s naked protests, the state acted so as to be seen as working to remove the causes compelling the women’s nakedness, thereby covering up the naked women in question as a good patriarch should do. But also in both cases, the superficiality of the state action taken reveals that the gestures really were cover-ups for what had been revealed about the state itself. Still, it may have been more than what had been done previously to address the grievances raised by the women.

Media attention to these women’s grievances following these protests was also markedly greater than it had been. Tellingly, the naked protest in Manipur achieved the kind of international notice that the equally dramatic fast by activist Irom Sharmila, also against the Special Powers Act and then in its fourth year, had not yet elicited.<sup>19</sup> In Chauhan’s case, her attempt to immolate herself at the police commissioner’s office barely came to media or public notice until her naked protest the following week. The disproportionate attention received by naked protests in the press raises an uncomfortable question: do the protesters’ naked bodies serve to interrogate the patriarchal scripts enabling violence or rather to reinforce it by making female bodies once more available to the commodifying gaze of the media (notwithstanding the protestors’ intentions or even those of sympathetic media persons)? Especially given the wide

<sup>18</sup> The concession that the government did make, under pressure from the tension in Manipur, was to open the historic Kangla Fort to public entry in November 2004. Kangla had been occupied by the Indian security forces since independence and barred to civilians in Manipur. Since Kangla has been a site of great mythological, historical, and political significance, as Deepti Mehrotra points out, this must be counted as a political gain even if it served the government as a way of putting off the main demand of withdrawing the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (Mehrotra 2009, 196–99).

<sup>19</sup> Sharmila, in 2010, is in the tenth year of her fast.

circulation of objectified, exposed women's bodies in the mass media at large (including the formidably influential strain of Hindi cinema known as Bollywood), might women's naked protest necessarily run the risk of reinscribing the commoditization of women's bodies?

On the one hand, both protests may have played on the scandalous media appeal of nudity in general and female nudity in particular: the first in order to draw attention to the extrajudicial rape and killings of women at large in Manipur; the second to bring attention to dowry-related harassment and police inaction endured by the individual protestor herself. Although it is impossible to predict or control the terms in which nakedness may be read in any given context, in neither case did the protesters seem inclined to (or in the Meitei women's case, able to) objectify themselves in the mode of the aestheticized women's bodies circulated in the mass media.<sup>20</sup> In the Meitei protest, the women's age, combined with their affective register of rage, as well as their ironic invitation to be raped ("Indian Army Rape Us!"), explicitly contested the visual language of availability through which naked women's bodies are often commodified in the popular media. In contrast, Chauhan's relative youth compared with the Meitei women and the fact that she was not completely naked made her more vulnerable to media objectification: television cameras followed Chauhan closely, while they had maintained their distance from the Meitei women's completely naked bodies. The fact that Chauhan was on her own, rather than within a collective of enraged and combative women, may have contributed to her objectification. On the other hand, in both cases it was the pervasive regulatory cultural discourses about Indian women's modesty—encoded firmly in the Indian Penal Code—that paradoxically may have shielded the protesters from charges of frivolity and the dangers of open objectification.<sup>21</sup> The sheer outrageousness of such a mode of protest would seem to render it a desperate measure of last resort, even lending it a certain ethical validity: this appears to have been the sentiment underlying the broadly sympathetic response of the press to both protests.

While the potential objectification of the twenty-two-year-old Chauhan's naked body may remain one concern for feminists, the symbolic

<sup>20</sup> Compare this with the objectifying use of naked female bodies in the U.S. animal rights organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), for instance.

<sup>21</sup> Indian feminists have been campaigning for reform of India's rape law, covered under Section 354 of the Indian Penal Code, which states: "Whoever assaults or uses criminal force to any woman, intending to outrage or knowing it to be likely that he will thereby *outrage her modesty*, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine or both" (quoted in Baxi 2001, emphasis added).

logic of her own performance raises other pressing concerns—not least for the representation of failed masculinity caricatured in Chauhan’s carefully assembled performance. As mentioned earlier, Chauhan walked in semi-undress through the streets of Rajkot to protest dowry harassment from her husband and in-laws, as well as the apathy of the police to her complaints. Hers was an elaborate performance: she proffered a bunch of bangles and a red rose in one hand, and somewhat surprisingly, a baseball bat, thrown over her shoulder, in the other. The performance tauntingly suggested an ironic reversal of gender roles. It was she, a woman violated by those men of family and state who should have protected her, who had to take in hand the means of self-defense (the baseball bat); in exchange, she offered the feminizing symbols of the bangles, the red rose, and her own exposed body.<sup>22</sup> Ensnared within this paraphernalia, her naked body seemed to testify to the breakdown of the normative structures of gender that would ordinarily include a need for modesty on her part. If the Meitei women’s naked bodies, like that of Mahasweta’s Naxalite Draupadi, evoked violation without suggesting victimhood, Chauhan’s exposed body signified a vulnerability from which she sought masculine protection. In a television interview Chauhan said that an “unrelated man” (intriguingly she used this phrase, “*ghair mard*,” to refer to either her husband or her father-in-law) should not have raised his hand against her; it was an insult to womanhood (“Driven to Despair” 2009). Such men, she said, should be made to wear bangles (“*chudi pehmani chahiye*”)—this being a well-worn figure signifying emasculation in Hindi. Chauhan also brought up the fact that police apathy had enabled her abuse, thereby including the state in her emasculating gesture.

Framed by the *chudi* (bangles) gesture, Chauhan’s naked protest made a clear appeal to a “logic of masculinist protection” (Young 2003).<sup>23</sup> The dangers of protectionist appeals by women to community and state have been well elucidated by a number of feminist theorists. Feminists in India have frequently objected to the *chudi* gesture, which historically has been

<sup>22</sup> Of all Chauhan’s repertoire, the baseball bat is perhaps the most striking element, apart from her undressed body. Given that baseball is not traditionally a sport played in India either at the professional level or even on the streets, Chauhan’s access to and use of the baseball bat as the masculine element in her repertoire may be read as one index of the thoroughly mediatized nature of her protest. The bat speaks to the penetration by the same global media apparatus that she now sought to activate through her protest—testifying to its effectiveness in relaying American cultural codes of sport and masculinity, both to her and to the media audience she hoped to address.

<sup>23</sup> Iris Marion Young attributes the phrase to Judith Stiehm (Young 2003, 3).

used by men as well as women to goad other men into violent action.<sup>24</sup> While the gesture stigmatizes and entrenches femininity as a condition of inaction, the proactivity demanded of men as proof of manliness also produces the realm of circumscribed activity to which women have been historically confined. Wendy Brown (1995) reminds us that apart from justifying women's exclusion, protection codes have also historically served to link femininity to race and class privilege, thus functioning as markers for divisions among women, distinguishing those considered violable from those considered inviolable. This has surely been true in India, where upper-caste women have been represented as inviolable and in need of protection from religious and caste others; conversely, protection has not been a viable term in relation to Dalit men and women, who frequently suffer the violence of protection codes.<sup>25</sup> Angela Davis (2000) sums up the dilemma of appeals to state protectionism this way: "Can a state that is thoroughly infused with racism, male dominance, class-bias, and homophobia and that constructs itself in and through violence act to minimize violence in the lives of women? Should we rely on the state as the answer to the problem of violence against women?" In a similar vein, Iris Marion Young observes that "central to the logic of masculinist protection is the subordinate relation of those in the protected position" (2003, 4). In this logic, women surrender decision-making autonomy to good, gallant men in exchange for protection from bad men who threaten to breach the familial walls fortified by the good men. This image of good masculinity may appear to be opposed to bad masculinity, but Young reminds us that the latter in fact provides the most effective foil for the former's goodness to appear in relief. Thus "dominative masculinity . . . constitutes protective masculinity as its other" while assigning to women the subordinate position of the protected (4). It follows that the false binary of good and bad masculinity also keeps firmly in place the male-female binary to which feminists have often traced the violent power of patriarchy. By

<sup>24</sup> For example, Bal Thackeray, the head of the right-wing Shiv Sena in Mumbai, used it to criticize those Indian politicians who do not take an antagonistic stance toward Pakistan on the issue of terrorism ("Indian Politicians Wearing Bangles" 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Where the politics of protection has been mobilized by the Indian state to protect minority subjects, it has often been marked by a failure. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan observes that "the failure of the state's functioning as a protective agency is indicated by the increase in the incidence of violence despite the laws [to check violence against women], the virtual absence of court convictions in most cases of violence, the paucity in the numbers and amenities of custodial institutions for victims, and the instances of custodial rape" (Sunder Rajan 2003, 26).

alternately invoking both good and bad masculinities, Chauhan's lament reinforced an idealized masculinity by marking its absence and revealing in its stead a failed (bad) masculinity, which in the relational logic of gender is no masculinity at all. In effect her naked body functioned not as a challenge to masculinity but as a signifier of its proper role.

The Meitei women's protest signified the relation between violence and women's bodies somewhat differently, resisting such invocations of chivalrous masculinity and instead foregrounding violence at the intersections of gender and citizenship. Evident in Chauhan's protest was a conflation between gender identities and gendered modes of power that is commonplace when gender is taken as a reference point for protest. As Brown points out, "while gender *identities* may be diverse, fluid and ultimately impossible to generalize, particular modes of gender *power* may be named and traced with some precision at a relatively general level" (1995, 166). What we understand as masculinist (violence, for instance) is not reducible to the behavioral propensities of men. Likewise, gender- or caste-specific violence and vulnerability must be understood as functions not of the relative attributes of men and women, upper and lower caste, but of mechanisms of domination through which women as well as men may be subjected to gendered violence by male or nonmale actors across the spectrum of race and caste.

Rather than staging women's bodies as the grounds of essential feminine vulnerability, the Meitei women's protest staged women's bodies as sites of violence and their vulnerability to custodial rape as the historical, legitimated, and legislative product of a state in which gendered and caste-based (as exemplified by Mahasweta's Draupadi) modes of power converged in the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. While the women's positioning of themselves as Manorama's mothers certainly established a feminine relationship of care, protection, and nurturance, the maternal here also symbolizes the bonds of political solidarity with the dead woman rather than a natural care-giving femininity. It possibly also represented a claim to respectability that may have provided the women with a strategic legitimacy.

Furthermore, the Meitei women's protest retains the protestors' viability as political actors rather than exhorting men of the state to relieve them from the burden of action. Unlike Chauhan's performance, the Meitei women's protest refrained from appealing to a notion of chivalrous masculinity, focusing its ire instead on the violent triumph of masculinity in its dominative aspect. As in Mahasweta's "Draupadi," the willful nakedness of the protestors mimes, but also inverts, the enforced nakedness

and vulnerability of rape. If the protesting women's naked bodies signified vulnerability by a metonymic association with Manorama's absent(ed) body, their peremptory signage bearing a pseudo-invitation to rape ("Indian Army Rape Us!") undercut and turned that vulnerability into a performance of agency. Their protest thus forgoes the gender binary of vulnerable women and violent men, as well as that of good and bad men of the state.

Finally, I would like to return to Draupadi's question, "Are you a man?" (Mahasweta 1988, 196). The question provides an opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which nakedness frames the relationship between masculinity and femininity by reference to shame, an affect in every way integral to the violence of rape. "There is no man here that I should be ashamed," Draupadi asserts (Mahasweta 1988, 196). The statement implies that if there was a man present, then she would be ashamed; but since she stands unashamed in her nakedness, surely the one witnessing cannot possibly be a man. But Draupadi's utterance, while powerfully unmanning her assailants, leaves intact the logic of women's shame as an effect of a properly masculine presence. The gesture is particularly taunting because it invokes good masculinity in order to evacuate its bad other: the (absent) patriarchal ideals of honor, valor, and protectionism are invoked in order to overwrite rape's masculinist script of domination. Indeed, the efficacy of Draupadi's protest lies precisely in its ability to hijack the hermeneutics of rape by calling the patriarchal state to account on its own discursive terrain. Her naked protest tauntingly punctures the triumphalist structure of rape as power. It recodes rape as an unmanly act of cowardice. Like Chauhan's *chudi* gesture, the question "Are you a man?" is a taunt that derides the failure of the norm and in so doing upholds it. The ideal of masculinist protection remains.

This is the logic that the Meitei women's protest usefully sidesteps by framing itself as a challenge rather than a taunt: the women are unashamedly naked in spite of the presence of men. By resisting the draw of symbolic castration as a counter to masculinist state power, the women effectively sever the causal relation between the male gaze and the interpellative effect of female shame, which literally adds insult to the injury of rape. If there is an unmanning here, it is directed at the masculinism of state violence, not the manliness of men. In marking this final distinction my aim is not to valorize the Meitei women's naked protest as the best possible method of protest on the landscape of women's organizing in India.<sup>26</sup> Regardless,

<sup>26</sup> A closer analysis of the Meitei women's activism in general reveals some dissatisfaction

we can, I hope, make productive analytical use of the ability of this particular protest to destabilize masculinism without reifying manliness and to situate patriarchal and state violence within gender- and caste-based modes of power rather than in individual gender and caste identities.

### **Conclusion: Theatricalizing rage, rescripting violence**

As a mode of embodied resistance, naked protest instantiates what Judith Butler has called the “theatricalization of political rage” (1993, 232). Writing in the context of U.S. queer politics, Butler observes the increasing reliance in queer activism on theatrical methods like kiss-ins, die-ins, cross-dressing, drag balls, and so on. The conjunction of theater and politics in these methods, Butler argues, allegorizes a “recontextualization of ‘queer’ from its place within a homophobic strategy of abjection and annihilation to an insistent and public severing of that interpellation from the effect of shame” (233). A similar strategy of recontextualization, I believe, is at work in the naked protests described above, which appropriate naked female bodies from a normative discourse of feminine victimhood and shame, or of feminine seduction and guile, to one of (feminist?) resistance. To this extent, these defiant protests broadly challenge the rape script underlying the disciplinary violence of the state. The rape script is famously defined by Sharon Marcus (1992) as the set of gendered cultural narratives that enable the violence of rape by producing women as subjects of shame, fear, and violence and men as subjects of aggression backed up by physical prowess. Rather than ascribing rape to the “terrifying facticity” of the penis, we should, Marcus suggests, turn our attention to the cultural scripts that write women’s bodies as penetrable or violable and challenge those instead (387). Toward this end Marcus calls for “new cultural productions and reinscriptions of our bodies and our geographies [that] can help us begin to revise the grammar of violence and to represent ourselves in militant new ways” (400).

I share Marcus’s faith in “a politics of fantasy and representation” to resist rape as well as other forms of gendered violence (1992, 400). To me, the moments of willful nakedness examined in this article do represent

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among feminists, especially on the count that they have prioritized a “civil rights first” approach rather than incorporating women’s rights into the struggle for civil rights in Manipur (Thokchom 2004). More recently, these activists, known as the Meira Paibi (Torch Bearers), have been criticized for remaining silent about the rape of twenty-one women and girls by insurgent groups of the hill tribes in 2006. Ethnic divisions between the valley-based Meitei and the tribes of the surrounding hills in Manipur present something of a challenge to solidarity in women’s organizing in the Northeast.

a “militant new way” of creatively rescripting the gendered grammar of violence (400). However, even as we acknowledge the potentially subversive effects of such a resignification, it would be wise to consider its potential limits as well. In an assessment of the changing career of the term “queer” and its appropriation in queer activism from hateful slur to affirming self-description, Butler raises a series of questions that I believe will have relevance here as well: “If the term is now subject to a reappropriation, what are the conditions and limits of that significant reversal? . . . How and where does discourse reiterate injury such that the various efforts to recontextualize and resignify a given term meet their limit in this other, more brutal and relentless form of repetition?” (Butler 1993, 223).

Butler’s note of caution is particularly pertinent in light of the exceptional attention received by naked protest, especially when compared with other forms of embodied protest by women. To be sure, these protests were probably intended in their very conception as media spectacles—the shaming impulse of the protesters would not amount to much without the media’s amplification of the gesture. Yet the singular efficacy of nakedness as a means of transmitting women’s grievances to a larger public should alert us to the caution that Butler articulates. To what extent are the willfully naked bodies of Mahasweta’s or Sabitri’s tribal Draupadi, the Meitei women, or Chauhan unshackled through such protest from the heavily overdetermined scripts that have historically made women’s bodies—especially those of Dalit women—intelligible as violable, penetrable, sexually available? To ask these questions is not to take away from the radical potential of the protests examined here but to recognize how resistance is all too frequently shaped by the parameters of power itself and to seek ever-new ways of reconceptualizing resistance.

My attempt in this article has been to examine some of the cultural specificities within which nakedness becomes intelligible as a feminist mode of protest against the violence of the Indian state, while also examining the epistemic stakes of nakedness as a gendered mode of protest by women. Acknowledging its potential to generate a cognitive dissonance and thereby reconfigure the gendered scripts shaping violence against women, I have also sought to highlight some of the risks that threaten to undermine the subversive potential of naked protest by women. Across the literary, dramatic, and political representations of naked protest examined here, nakedness has served as a powerful tool to spotlight and destabilize the nexus of caste patriarchy with the Indian state. Yet particular ways of framing naked protest often tread the dangerous ground of appeals to good masculinity and protectionism. My discussion of Chauhan’s pro-

test illustrates, I hope, what is at risk in framing naked protest as a jibe at failed masculinity, which serves to reinforce a notion of idealized gender norms. Undeniably, selectively invoking and reappropriating ideals of masculinity may serve the strategic purpose of resisting these violent normative scripts. However, an exhortation to idealized manliness cannot in the long run serve the purpose of destabilizing state patriarchy. For women's public nakedness to embody a truly counterhegemonic, antiviolence politics, what is crucial is an ongoing interrogation of the binaristic male-female distinction underwriting gendered violence in any context.

*Women and Gender Studies Program*  
*University of Colorado, Boulder*

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