

# Beyond Partition

*Gender, Violence,  
and Representation  
in Postcolonial India*

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## 4 “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, “Draupadi”

So speaks the raped tribal revolutionary Draupadi in the eponymous story by Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi. 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 Spivak, a “terrifying superobject” (Spivak 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.

In July 2004 a group of Meitei<sup>1</sup> women staged a naked protest in the state of Manipur in Northeast India, a region that has seen a long history of separatist movement against the Indian state. The women were protesting the torture, rape, and murder of thirty-two-year-old Thangjam Manorama while she was in the custody of the Indian army's Assam Rifles battalion, which had been holding her on the charge of militancy. According to press reports, an Assam Rifles officer walked up to the group with hands joined in supplication, pleading with them to put on their clothes, and it was only after much pleading that the group walked away.

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 mentally harassing, physically abusing, and even threatening to kill her for failing to procure a dowry as well as a male child.

In this chapter 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 imagination 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 Pooja Chauhan, but there has been relatively little analysis of why nakedness served as a particularly apposite form of protest to 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 a heroic “sacrifice” of modesty, then they must be examined in terms of the meanings and stakes of nakedness in each of these specific contexts. 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 all of the above protests emerge into meaning, and 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 in a feminist perspective.

## Apprehending Draupadi

The Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi’s 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 Devi 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.

“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 them 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; after a long search, Draupadi is also finally “apprehended”—the word 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.” He utters a single command to his men: “Make her. *Do the needful*” (188, 195). What follows this abstruse command is of course the brutal sexual torture of Draupadi—a violence clearly deemed unspeakable even by Senanayak himself, who will not say the words for the act he has sanctioned.

In “Draupadi” Mahasweta Devi 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 Devi writes that “Arjan Singh’s power also explodes out of the *male organ* of a gun”; later in the story, Draupadi’s rape is figured as the rise and fall of “[a]ctive *pistons* of flesh” over her body (188, 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 Devi 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 garments, 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. (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. This resistance to disciplinary power through the body is also found elsewhere in Mahasweta Devi’s work. In “Shishu,” the Agaria tribals who have been forced into hiding in the forest for ages suddenly emerge to confront Singh, the Block Development Officer who has been pursuing them for stealing government relief. Pushing at him with their diminutive, child-sized, undernourished bodies, “They rubbed their organs against him and told him that they were adult citizens of India” (250). It is significant that the Agarias’ sexual organs are their chosen instruments of resistance. The withered, impotent reproductive organs on their child-like bodies represent the impending extinction of their numbers, the denial of any kind of entry into the nation-state, and their programmatic infantilization and diminution by the state. As the Agarias suddenly and unexpectedly render themselves visible: “The only recourse left to Singh was to go stark, raving mad, tearing the expanse apart with a howl like that of a mad dog. But why wasn’t his brain ordering his vocal chords to scream and scream and scream? Only tears ran down his cheeks” (Mahasweta Devi, “Shishu” 251).

Indeed, Mahasweta Devi’s stories often conclude with such a moment of utter terror for the representative of upper-caste, middle-class patriarchy. In “Arjun,” the Shabars of Purulia routinely go to jail for felling the Forest Department’s trees under the employ of the timber merchant Ram Halidar. When the landlord and political aspirant Bishal Mahatao orders the felling of the arjun tree at the intersection of the government road, the Shabars, who consider the tree a sacred vestige of their earlier forest-dwelling lifestyle, find an ingenious way to prevent the felling of the tree. Under the shrewd guise of paying obeisance to Bishal Mahatao’s instructions given in a dream, the tribals seal the base of the tree in concrete. People from the Santhal, Khedia, Shohish, and Bhumij tribes now arrive there to place their offerings. Realizing that he has been duped, Bishal Mahatao is struck by fear:

This tree, these people—he knew them all. He knew them very well. And yet, today they seemed like strangers.

Fear. An uncomprehending fear gripped him. (Mahasweta Devi, “Arjun” 130)

Terror and incomprehension, or the incomprehension of terror: in both of the above stories, as in “Draupadi,” it is a sudden loss of comprehension that generates the terror experienced by the male government officials and upper-caste landlords.

In “Draupadi,” it is the sudden falling away of established ways of knowing the tribals that stymies this man of the state, Senanayak, whose name means literally “army chief.” The moment at which the raped 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 longstanding and commonplace practice in India, of “stripping and parading” of Dalit (“untouchable”) and *adivasi* (tribal) women. Naked parades of Dalit women are a stock form of humiliation used against Dalits to “show them their place.”<sup>6</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 Scott 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 Devi’s Senanayak may be similarly understood as the eager agent of the state’s panoptical 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 (189). Senanayak’s strategies for overcoming the tribal rebellion therefore involve an anthropological will to know: to measure, catalog, document, to render legible—and finally to apprehend—the Other. At the same time he tells himself it’s for their own good, he’s on their side: “He is Prospero as well,” Mahasweta Devi writes (189). His 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 Senanayak’s efforts to physically capture the revolutionaries and to know and understand their modes of organization. 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 rebels' inability to transcend book learning and incorporate practical knowledge into their method of reading and writing. As Spivak points out, "Senanayak's project is interpretive: he looks to decipher Draupadi's song" (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 Hoffman-Jeffers and Golden-Palmer dictionaries used by the government's "tribal specialist types" prove to be useless compared with the local knowledge of Chamru the water carrier. 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, "[t]he army officer is shown as unable to ask the authoritative ontological question, What is this?" (Spivak 184; Mahasweta Devi 1988, 196).

Senanayak's disabling incomprehension arises from two competing modes of embodiment in Draupadi's shameless challenge: how the 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" (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 installing of her injured body as evidence of her total apprehension.

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: the raped Draupadi's body is made allegorically representative of the rebel community but

also (and particularly) of female rebels who are particularly susceptible to this specific form of disciplinary violence. Draupadi, however, intercepts both of these communiqués at once: as a rebel she refuses discipline (“I will not wear my cloth”), as a woman she refuses shame (“There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed”)—and, fusing the two in a single act of resistance, she sutures “rebel” and “woman” (196). It is the state that 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 of 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 it 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 Devi’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 became a national media event that set the context for Pooja Chauhan’s protest three years later. Equally, however, these subsequent protests inscribe Mahasweta Devi’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 Pooja Chauhan represent “intentional” citations of Mahasweta Devi’s story and its subsequent translations, we might see how the three nevertheless resonate against each other within various regional and national contexts of reception that shape their meaning.

## 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 and performance.<sup>7</sup> In the epic, Draupadi is the polyandrous wife of the five Pandavas, who stake and lose her in a game of dice with their enemy cousins, the Kauravas. Summoned to the Kauravas’ court after being thus won by them, 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 Devi adapts or “translates” to the political context of Naxalism and counterinsurgency state violence in West Bengal in the 1970s. In the foreword to her translation, Spivak highlights the terms of Mahasweta Devi’s rewriting: unlike the mythological Draupadi, who is saved by Krishna, the tribal Draupadi (or Dopdi, the tribal version of her name) neither hopes for nor aspires 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” (184).

If Mahasweta Devi’s story represented 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” to a performed play in the Manipuri language. As mentioned above, the canonical status of Mahasweta Devi’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—as such 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 India’s Northeast<sup>8</sup> have grown, as has the presence of the Indian military personnel in these areas, where the latter 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 Manipur, where today more than 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 on stage, 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 Heisnam 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 ex-

pansive rage compressed in the few words she utters. In the segment of the performed play included in Amar Kanwar’s documentary *Roushan Bayaan* (*Lightning Testimonies*), 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 out her cloth all at once with a bloodcurdling scream—“Confront my body!”—swirling the cloth around to cover the soldier almost completely, while she herself stands naked over him—the cloth functioning aptly as the material signifier of the shame that Draupadi turns back on the soldier.

This performance and the public reviews of it prompted in Manipur (which I will turn to shortly) is beyond doubt a flashpoint in the cultural consciousness that precipitated the Manipuri women’s protest in 2004.<sup>12</sup> Before I turn to that discussion, however, I wish to pause briefly over some of Sabitri’s other performances, which are also relevant, if less obviously so, to the discursive milieu in which the Manipur women’s protest took place. Interestingly, around this time 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 Kanhaiyalal’s actors has sometimes been critiqued,<sup>13</sup> it also renders their performances mobile across regional and linguistic boundaries, possibly explaining Sabitri’s selection for projects seeking to explore specifically the construction of meaning around women’s bodies. In 2000 Sabitri appeared in Madhushree Dutta’s *Scribbles on Akka*, a documentary that explored 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 her memory has endured for more than 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 theatre 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 productions about women or gender, to pay “tribute to the spirit and power of Indian womanhood”—all in honor of Akka, whose poetry was also

performed at the festival (see Mehu). I mark these intersections to observe how the circulation of Sabitri's naked performances in these varied sites (the Manipuri stage, Kanwar's documentary, 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 counterinsurgency 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," is of course a crowning irony.

The Manipuri response to Sabitri's "Draupadi" performance is more directly relevant to the Meitei women's protest. Perhaps predictably, this performance met with some controversy in the Manipuri press. In Kanwar's *Lightning Testimonies*, Sabitri reflects on the negative reception to her performance, urging her critics to look past the mere fact of her nakedness and to discern 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.

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, specifically the fact that such sexual violence is frequently staged by the Indian army for the captive "audience" 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 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 personnel. The Assam Rifles were acting under the powers granted to them by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which gives the army extraordinary powers to "maintain order" in the Northeast.<sup>17</sup> Manorama's arrest

warrant had 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, the 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!” 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” (Thockchom 2004). They also reiterated the longstanding demand for the withdrawal of the AFSPA.

Occurring 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. Writing 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” (25).<sup>18</sup> Kanhailal himself recounts in Kanwar’s documentary that no 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. The newspapers are calling you a prophet, and the people as well.” And of course *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 itself stitches together a new site of meaning for remembering both enactments in a continuous frame where each may be considered 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 Pooja Chauhan, which otherwise seem to have appeared “out of nowhere.” Knowingly or not, the latter nevertheless draw authority from the circulation of these earlier and contemporaneous representations of resistant 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 in question will demonstrate the contestatory potential of naked protest as well as the undercutting risks implicit in some framings of naked protest.

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## Unmanning Violence

Perhaps the most immediate question that hyperbolic, theatrical modes of protest inevitably raise among those who view them is the question of whether they 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 local, regional, national, or even international notice they garner; 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 chapter, that thing 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 us 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 such demonstrations to have even been taken seriously, 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, although closer examination shows even more clearly how the state rushed to "cover up" following the naked protests. In the immediate aftermath of the Meitei women's protest, the Indian government set up a committee to review the AFSPA; they recommended repealing it, but the government has not yet done so, apparently because of protests from the armed forces, whose extrajudicial violence was at issue in the first place. The act remains in place today.<sup>19</sup> In Pooja Chauhan's case, a previous attempt by her to immolate herself at the office of the police commissioner drew no action from the police (who managed to thwart that attempt). In contrast, the police acted 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 both instances, 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 action taken reveals that the gesture really was a cover-up 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 issues following the protests was also markedly greater than it had been previously. Tellingly, the naked protest in Manipur

achieved the kind of national and international notice that the (arguably) equally dramatic fast undertaken by activist Irom Sharmila—also against the AFSPA, and then in its *fourth year*—had not yet elicited.<sup>20</sup> In Pooja Chauhan’s case, her previous 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 reinforce it by making female bodies once more available to the commodifying gaze of the media—notwithstanding the protesters’ intentions or even those of many sympathetic people in media? Especially given the wide circulation of objectified, exposed women’s bodies in the mass media at large (including the formidably influential vehicle of Hindi cinema, or “Bollywood”), might women’s naked protest necessarily run the risk of reinscribing the commoditization of women’s bodies?

At one level, both protests may certainly 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 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 on circulation in the mass media.<sup>21</sup> In the Meitei protest, the women’s age, combined with their affective register of rage and 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 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 also 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 paradoxically the pervasive regulatory culturalist discourses about Indian women’s modesty—encoded firmly in the Indian Penal Code<sup>22</sup>—that may have shielded the protesters from the charge of frivolity or the dangers of open objectification. 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

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been the sentiment underlying the sympathetic response of many commentators 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 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 had walked in semi-undress through the streets of Rajkot to protest dowry harassment from her husband and in-laws, along with the apathy of the police toward 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 in the other, which she threw over her shoulder. 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>23</sup> Ensnared within this paraphernalia, her own 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 the Naxalite Draupadi's, 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 on her, as it was an insult to womanhood. Such men, she said, should be made to wear bangles ("*chudi pehnani 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 clear appeal to a "logic of masculinist protection" (Young).<sup>24</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 used by men as well as women to goad other men into violent action.<sup>25</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 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 cast as violable 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 on the contrary frequently suffer the violence of protection codes.<sup>26</sup> Angela Davis sums up the dilemma of appeals to state protectionism: “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?” (Davis). In a similar vein, Young observes that “central to the logic of masculinist protection is the subordinate relation of those in the protected position” (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 bad masculinity in fact provides the most effective foil for the goodness of good masculinity 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 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 commonplace conflation between gender identities and gendered modes of power, in taking on gender as reference point for protest. As Wendy 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” (166; emphasis in original). 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 *not* as functions of the relative attributes of men and women, upper- and lower-caste, but as mechanisms of domination, through which women as well as men may be subjected to

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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 in "Draupadi") modes of power converged in the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. While their 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. It possibly also represented a claim to respectability that may have provided the women with a strategic legitimacy.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, the Meitei women's protest also retains the viability of the protestors 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 on the violent triumph of masculinity in its dominative aspect. As in "Draupadi," the *wilful* 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 performance into one of agency. Their protest thus foregoes the gender binaries 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?" The question provides an opportunity to reflect on 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 (196). The statement implies that if there *were* a man, 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 unmaning 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. The naked protest tauntingly punctures the triumphalist structure of rape-as-power—by recod-

ing 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 an effective counter to masculinist state dominance, 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 effect of 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 representing the best possible method of protest on the landscape of women's organizing in India. A closer analysis of the Meitei women's activism in general reveals some dissatisfaction 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). More recently, the Meitei women's organization that staged the naked protest, Meira Paibi, has been critiqued 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 have often presented a roadblock to building solidarity in women's organizing in the Northeast. The issue of Meitei women's selective organizing around upper-caste Meitei women's issues recently resurfaced after the 2013 Delhi anti-rape protests. Even as they joined calls for a national recognition of militarized sexual violence in the Northeast, Manipuri and Assamese researchers also warned of the dangers of producing the Indian state as the only patriarchy in the region. Reproaching the Meitei activists for their selective concern about upper-caste Manipuri women's dignity, Sengangly Thamei asked why they had been silent following the recent gang rape of a tribal woman in Vishnupur district: "Is this tribal woman's dignity included in the collective dignity of Manipuri women (which 'also' includes non-Meiteis)? Or are they silent because the violence was meted out by our own 'valley brothers' (Meiteis) towards a 'hill woman' (Manipuri euphemism for 'tribal') and not a case of rascals from Assam Rifles raping a Meitei woman?" Similarly, Mayur Chetia and Bonojit Hussain reminded us of the violation of the Adivasi woman protester, Laxmi Orang, discussed in the previous chapter. As Chetia and Hussain wrote: "Laxmi's case is symptomatic of the strange predicament that the gender question faces in north-east India, a militarized region, endlessly balkanized by ethno-nationalist politics. Being an adivasi woman it is not

surprising that Laxmi's case did not get any attention that the gravity of the case demanded. The reason for the apathy was that she was not even an 'Assamese' woman. Or to put it in another way, she was not Assamese enough." Chetia and Hussain point to a "strategic silence" similar to that identified by Kimberle Crenshaw in her examination of antiracist discourse around rape and domestic violence within communities of color in the United States. In the case of Assam, Chetia and Hussain note, such silence obscures instances of sexual violence *not* perpetrated by the military in the region but within Assamese civil society itself: "The silence around Laxmi and many women like her was the fact that she was not assaulted and brutalised by the army or security forces, but by civilians; some city dwelling Assamese men." The point here is most certainly not that Manipuri and Assamese society should turn their attention centrally to examining local patriarchy instead of pinning their critiques of patriarchy on the state, but rather that we recognize how the state's oppressive presence in these states strengthens local patriarchies, as has been seen again and again in militarized societies.

In chapter 2 I attempted to disaggregate the category "woman" in my reading of Krishna Mehta's memoir *Kashmir 1947*, drawing out the Hindu affiliations of the author. In the context of Manipur, however, with its racialized populace, the category "Hindu women" is constituted very differently. It does not preserve Meitei women from the racialized and regionalized taint of antinationalism, despite their upper-caste Hindu affiliations; indeed, it is doubtful whether these populations are seen as Hindu from mainland India. And yet that does not mean their upper-caste affiliations are stripped entirely of their power within the region. An intersectional analysis must necessarily acknowledge how their Hinduness intersects with racialized constructions of "Northeasterners" to situate them simultaneously as a minority and majority population.

While categories such as "Manipuri women," "Assamese women" and "Kashmiri women" fracture the overarching category "Indian women" circulating in the aftermath of the Delhi rape protests and point to the inevitable intersection of gender with regional identity and location in militarized territories, Thaimai, along with Chetia and Hussain, prompt us to acknowledge that even these regionalized minority identity categories may obscure other intersections still, and they can work in a hegemonic way if they are deployed without accounting for their internal diversity. "Majority" and "minority" are shifting categories, depending on the frame of reference: whereas Meitei women are part of a racialized minority in India, within Manipur they are very much a "majority." While accounting for these complexities, we can nevertheless, I hope, make productive analytical use of the ability of the Meitei women's protest to destabilize masculinism without reifying manliness, and

to situate patriarchal state violence within gender- and caste-based modes of power rather than individual gender and caste identities.

## 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 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 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, Marcus suggests that we should turn our attention to the cultural scripts that "write" women's bodies as penetrable or violable, and challenge those instead. 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. To me, the moments of willful nakedness examined in this chapter do represent a "militant new way" of creatively rescripting the gendered grammar of violence. However, even as we acknowledge the potentially subversive effects of such a resignification, it would be wise to consider also its potential limits. 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?" (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 mediating women’s grievances to a larger public should alert us to the caution that Butler articulates. To what extent are the wilfully naked bodies of the tribal Draupadi, the Meitei women, or Pooja Chauhan unshackled through such protest from the heavily overdetermined scripts that have made women’s bodies—especially those of Dalit and Adivasi women—historically 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 rather to recognize how resistance is all too frequently shaped by the parameters of power itself and to seek ever-new ways of reconceptualizing resistance.

## Conclusion

My attempt in this chapter has been to examine some of the cultural specificities within which nakedness becomes intelligible as a “feminist” mode of protest to 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. Pooja Chauhan’s protest illustrates 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, selective invocations and reappropriations of 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 absolutely crucial is an ongoing interrogation of the binaristic male/female distinction underwriting gendered violence in any context.