An introduction to "epistemic violence"

Lived experiences of online access from the standpoint of the marginalised in India

Abhay Xaxa

Written with inputs from Shobha S V and Tanveer Hasan

Edited and reviewed by: Rohini Lakshané

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Preferred attribution: Abhay Xaxa, Community Toolkit for Greater Diversity (2019).

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Glossary

Adivasi: Literally means "original inhabitant". The term refers to the population originally inhabiting mainland India, comprising nearly 700 big and small communities, making up 8.6% of India's total population (Census 2011).

Ambedkarism: It is an ideology/ philosophy inspired by the works of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar based on the broader ideas of social justice and equality in society.

Bahujan: Literally means "the majority of the people" in many Indic languages. In the Indian socio-political context, it may be understood as a political ideology denoting "unity of the oppressed masses", that is, of Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Castes (OBC) and persons belonging to minority communities.

Dalit: Literally means "broken people" in several Indic languages. Dalits are people who have historically experienced caste-based violence and discrimination due to their inferior position in the caste hierarchy.

Introduction

epistemic (adjective): Relating to knowledge or to the degree of its validation
-- Oxford English Dictionary

In general, "epistemic violence" refers to forms of knowledge that inflict harm on their subject. This learning module helps the reader understand the phenomenon of epistemic violence and how it is related to the representation of marginalised groups on the Internet from the point of view of those who are directly affected by epistemic violence.

"In the animal kingdom, the rule is, eat or be eaten; in the human kingdom, define or be defined."

Thomas Szasz¹

As a result of massive Internet penetration in India in the past two decades, online spaces are playing a critical role in the production and circulation of knowledge about the various dimensions of the life of different sections of the society. The privilege of having access to information and the ability to define or change narratives based on that information were the hallmark of dominance. Dominant sections of the society maintained and perpetuated inequality based on caste, class, gender, religion and ethnicity by controlling all systems of information, ranging from the media to academia. Groups and communities historically regarded as undeserving and underclass were systemically excluded

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¹ Thomas Szasz: 1973. *The Second Sin*, Anchor Press. Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York. p. 20.

from gaining access to knowledge and information. On the other hand, a process of relegating the same groups to the position of mere subjects of research and enquiry dehumanised and stigmatised them through dominant or patronising narratives.

With the advent of the Internet, these processes transformed drastically. The online space democratised social relations to an unprecedented extent. People who had been historically denied access to information because of their gender or social or cultural backgrounds were able to become actively involved in the processes of the production and dissemination of knowledge and information. Affordable access to the Internet removed some barriers to the inclusion of marginalised communities, especially Dalits, Adivasis, ethnic and religious minorities, and women. This presented an opportunity for marginalised communities to own and produce counter-narratives, which are gradually chipping away at the dominance of privileged sections of the society.

The proliferation of the Internet in different parts of the country also enabled the birth of several social, cultural and political movements of historically marginalised groups. These groups are increasingly becoming aware of their loci and the issues that critically matter to them in terms of governance, social issues and inequalities and their basic human rights. In addition, people from marginalised sections are able to identify similar issues that other groups experience, which has been leading to horizontal solidarity among diverse sections of the society.

However, the Internet is also used by privileged groups to perpetuate their dominant discourses over those of the marginalised sections of the society and further dehumanise them. The initial phase of digital divide between the privileged and the underprivileged has gradually grown into "digital social inequality", where one section of the society is able to transfer their social dominance to online spaces. These digital citizens are able to maintain and improve their social and cultural capital via ways in which social hierarchies on the ground are mirrored onto spaces on the Internet. As a result, the historically marginalised communities such as Dalits, Adivasis and religious minorities often find themselves excluded from online spaces.

How is epistemic violence defined?

Maria Liegghio (2013) has defined "epistemic violence" as the "very denial of the person's legitimacy as a knower, their knowledge and their ways of knowing, which renders that person out of existence, unable to be heard and to have their interest count".

In other words, epistemic violence is what happens when dominant groups control the processes of production, circulation and distribution of knowledge and use them against certain sections of the society as tools to gain control over social and economic resources. Epistemic violence thus results in a denial of legitimacy, dignity or self respect to the groups it is targeted at. In the context of online spaces, the narratives of marginalised communities are misrepresented in ways that make them feel disempowered and unsafe. As a result, they have no control over the ways in which they want to be represented, seen or heard, denying them basic agency in their everyday lives.

Wilson and Mafeje (1963) state, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is ruling the material force of Society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of production at its disposal has control, at the same time, over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it".²

Similarly, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1944) analysed the phenomenon of epistemic violence stating, "The stench of the old name will stick to the new and you will be forced to change your name continually."

Lived experience of online spaces

The nature of lived experiences of using the Internet as documented by people who belong to historically marginalised backgrounds is mixed. On one hand, the Internet has clearly provided them the opportunity to create and share their narratives from their personal points of view and as representatives of their own communities. A very visible online community of various marginalised groups is voicing a counter-hegemonic discourse, step by step, providing the much-needed diversity of voices. Some prominent examples of such online avenues in the context of the Adiyasi and Dalit communities:

- Adivasi Resurgence (http://www.adivasiresurgence.com) makes available a platform for members of Adivasi communities to vocalise their views on the issues that concern their communities.
- Round Table India (http://roundtableindia.co.in) is a website where Bahujan persons write about caste, Ambedkarism and social exclusion, thus enriching the discourse on inequalities in India.
- CGNet Swara (http://cgnetswara.org)
 [Editor's note: CGNet Swara is an award-winning project and a platform to discuss issues related to the Central Gondwana region of India. It operates in the state of Chattisgarh. The Gonds are an indigenous group and widespread ethnic minority living in this remote

² Wilson & Mafeje: 1963. *Langa: A study of social groups in an African township. p. 47-9.*

region that faces poverty, high illiteracy, armed insurgency and lack of economic development. CGNet Swara, which was set up in 2010, has since "chalked up a number of victories, large and small, for the Gondi-speaking villagers".³]

- Adivasi Hunkar (http://adivasihunkar.blogpost.com)
- Dalit Dastak (http://dalitdastak.com)
- Forward Press (www.forwardpress.in)

Experiences of epistemic violence online

Nevertheless, marginalised groups face several challenges that are defeating the democratising purposes of the Internet. There is a very visible process of ghettoising the marginalised communities into selective online spaces, which is reflective of "othering" traditionally done by dominant sections of the society. By sticking stigmatised and dehumanising labels to marginalised groups online, the discriminatory practices based on caste, class and gender have continued. One such avenue is the collaborative question-and-answer website Quora where its users, intentionally or otherwise, publish unverified, derogatory and vilifying statements and opinions about India's marginalised communities. Sample these questions about Adivasis posted on this popular website by its users:

- Why do regular Tamils look like Adivasis elsewhere in India?
- Have you ever been looted by Adivasis while travelling in distant areas?
- Why do Adivasis live in the jungle and not in human society?
- What clothes do Adivasis wear?

Let us examine how these online posts are harmful to the people they refer to, in this case, Adivasis:

- Why do regular Tamils look like Adivasis elsewhere in India? This is a factually incorrect and loaded question that equates dark-skinned Tamil-speaking people with dark-skinned Adivasis. It implies that only Adivasis are supposed to be extremely dark-skinned. Thus, it is racist towards both Adivasis and Tamils.
- Have you ever been looted by Adivasis while travelling in distant areas? [Editor's note: This question, fallacious and loaded, perpetuates the negative stereotype that Adivasis who live in remote, far-flung places are robbers who attack travellers. It tries to indicate that Adivasis are, in a sense, sub-human. Another implication is that Adivasis are criminals.

³ "... for the Gondi-speaking villagers who had been ignored until now—from unpaid wages to broken wells to publicizing a police attack on three tribal villages that left two dead, homes burned, and a woman raped. That particular story was picked up by the mainstream media, and as a result the UN Human Rights Council got involved and issued a formal report, and the Indian Supreme Court ordered an investigation." Roff Smith: 2014. Shubhranshu Choudhary: Giving a Voice to a Ravaged, Neglected Region. Last accessed on 20 February 2019.

⁴ Othering: The process of perceiving or portraying someone or something as fundamentally different or alien. https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/othering Last accessed on 20 February 2019. See also: Othering and Belonging https://www.otheringandbelonging.org Last accessed on 20 February 2019.

The Phasé Pardhi people of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, for example, were marked as a "criminal tribe" by a colonial British law in the early 1870s. While the law no longer stands in India, the Phasé Pardhis face stigma and social ostracism to this day as a result of such criminal-branding.]

- Why do Adivasis live in the jungle and not in human society? [Editor's note: This question stems from another stereotype that all Adivasis live deep inside the forests, cut off from all "human civilisation", and they necessarily do so out of choice. Their choice indicates that they are uncultured and wild, or as the term goes, "jungli". The fact is that very few indigenous populations have remained completely untouched by outside influence, some of which has been very damaging to them⁶⁷ and to the natural resources they have been tending to for generations⁸.]
- What clothes do Adivasi wear? The question by itself may be an innocuous request for information. However, such questions tend to draw answers that further reinforce negative stereotypes about indigenous people. The right to self-identification is considered a basic human right. Labelling anyone by their physical appearance or traditional attire robs them of human dignity.

[Editor's note: Quora is not considered a "reliable source" [WP:RS] on English Wikipedia, except in a few, limited and defined contexts¹⁰. However, the discussion about content on Quora is relevant for some reasons. Like Wikipedia, Quora is a free, crowdsourced and collaborative source of information. Like Wikipedia, Quora has a gender gap. Wikipedia has been among the five most visited websites in the world for more than a decade; Quora gets a few hundred

⁵ "jungli" https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/jungli Last accessed on 20 February 2019.

⁶ Cosmic Yoruba: 2017. "We don't need your world": The Jarawa people's fight for self-determination https://thisisafrica.me/dont-need-world-jarawa-peoples-fight-self-determination Last accessed on 20 February 2019.

⁷ Snehlata Shrivastav: 2015. *Strokes are major cause of death in Gadchiroli tribals* https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/Strokes-are-major-cause-of-death-in-Gadchiroli-tribals/articleshow/48090816.cms Last accessed on 20 February 2019.

⁸ Jo Woodman: 2014. *India's rejection of Vedanta's bauxite mine is a victory for tribal rights* https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/jan/14/india-rejection-vedanta-mine-victory-tribal-rights Last accessed on 20 February 2019.

⁹ See also: The campaign entitled "Our culture is not a costume". Anis Heydari: 2018. *Halloween costumes depicting their culture 'demeaning,' say Calgary Indigenous people* https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/indigenous-halloween-costumes-calgary-1.4837220 Last accessed 20 February 2019.

¹⁰ Wikipedia: Reliable sources -- Perennial sources https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reliable sources/Perennial sources#Quora Last accessed on 20 February 2019.

million visits every month¹¹. India is the second-largest user base of Quora in English¹².

Despite Quora's content moderation policies, the examples cited above are unlikely to be removed or rectified. In some cases, the community standards and content policies do not recognise the posts listed above as problematic. In some others, the moderators themselves belong to far-removed demographics, as a result of which they may not recognise the issues with such posts, even when the posts are reported. These are well-documented issues with user-generated content (UGC) on the Internet.

Wikipedia articles are arguably the most viewed UGC online, at times causing "citogenesis" when incorrect information travels too far for too long. Observing the examples above helps us understand how popular/dominant discourse about marginalised peoples attains visibility, discoverability and acceptability on popular avenues and thus perpetuates itself online, while minority/marginalised voices do not have access to such "network effects" to put forth their side of the story.]

Serious attempts to silence the "underclass" on online platforms via harassment, bullying, trolling and abuse, are reflective of oppressive social relations in the society today. The online spaces are not safe, especially for women who are openly threatened and abused on an everyday basis. The members of marginalised communities are either forced into self-exclusion owing to the fear of online threats and abuse or they are adversely incorporated into discourses that misrepresent them.

Examples of words used in stigmatised representations of marginalised groups in India

- Primitive
- Barbarians
- Backward
- Uncivilised
- Untouchables
- Low caste
- Savages
- Rent-seekers

¹¹ Reach 300 million monthly unique visitors on Quora

https://business.quora.com/Reach-300-million-monthly-unique-visitors-on-Quora Last accessed on 20 February 2019.

¹² Quora.com Traffic, Demographics and Competitors - Alexa.

https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/quora.com Last accessed on 20 February 2019.

¹³ Wikipedia: List of citogenesis incidents

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List of citogenesis incidents Last accessed on 20 February 2019.

- Impure
- Broken people
- Fourth world
- Backward Hindus
- Slaves
- Tribals
- Harijans

On 24 March, 2017, the Supreme Court of India ruled that the term "*Harijan*" is clearly a word of casteist insult and is abusive to the Dalit community. 14

The terms "primitive" and "tribal" are often equated to the terms "savage" or "uncivilised" in western imperialist literature and are used for demeaning other cultures. Even though a majority of the countries have officially replaced the terminology of "tribe" to define <u>autochthonous</u> people, India continues to use this derogatory term for identifying the original inhabitants. ¹⁵ [**Editor's note:** Unfortunately, the Indian government uses the word "tribal" and its variations for all official purposes. There is a Ministry of Tribal Affairs (https://tribal.nic.in) and several Tribal Research Institutes "in the country.]

Case study: Representation of Bonda women on Wikipedia

Bonda¹⁷ is an Adivasi community living in Odisha. They are known for their distinctive cultural practices. The beautiful images of Bonda women are very popular on the Internet because of their customary practice of keeping their heads shaved and decorating it with colourful beads. However, the Wikipedia article on the Bonda people links these cultural practices to the Bonda women being cursed in an incident from Hindu mythology. The article states, "The Bonda attire is explained in a legend relating to the Ramayana. According to it, some Bonda women chanced upon Sita who was bathing at a pond in the Bonda hills and, seeing her naked, they sniggered. Enraged, Sita cursed them to a life where they would be condemned to remaining naked and having their heads shaven. When the Bonda women pleaded forgiveness, Sita gave them a piece of cloth she tore off her sari. This explains, according to the legend, why Bonda women have shorn heads and wear only a ringa, a length of cloth that covers the waist." There is no mention of such an incident with reference to the Bonda people in the Hindu scriptures. Hence, such statements published on the default

 $^{^{14}}$ For a detailed explanation, see Ramanathan S: 2017. Stop calling Dalits 'Harijan': SC calls the term abusive, as we remain ignorant and insensitive

https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/stop-calling-dalits-harijan-sc-calls-term-abusive-we-remain-ignorant-and-insensitive-59315 Last accessed on 20 February 2019.

¹⁵ For a detailed explanation, see Pratap Digal: 2016. *De-Constructing the term "Tribe/Tribal" in India: A Post-Colonial Reading* http://ndpublisher.in/admin/issues/IJSSAv1n1e.pdf [PDF] Last accessed on 20 February 2019.

¹⁶ Press Information Bureau: 2018. *25 Tribal Research Institutes are currently functional in States/UTs* http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=181755 Last accessed on 20 February 2019.

¹⁷ Bonda People https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonda_people Last accessed 20 February 2019.

encyclopaedia of the Internet, which creates what is considered "common knowledge", put immense stigma on the Bonda people and have a dehumanising effect on them. [Editor's note: The incident from the Ramayana is not supported by any citations in the Wikipedia article as of 20 February 2019; See Diff.]

Attire [edit]

The Bonda are generally semi-clothed, the women wear thick silver neck bands. The Bonda attire is explained in a legend relating to the Ramayana. According to it, some Bonda women chanced upon Sita who was bathing at a pond in the Bonda hills and, seeing her naked, they sniggered. Enraged, Sita cursed them to a life where they would be condemned to remaining naked and having their heads shaven. When the Bonda women pleaded forgiveness, Sita gave them a piece of cloth she tore off her sari. This explains, according to the legend, why Bonda women have shorn heads and wear only a *ringa*, a length of cloth that covers the waist. Their torsos are covered in strings of colourful beads. Bonda women also wear metal rings that cover their necks and bangles on their arms. Since Bonda women hunt and forage for food in the forest it is thought that these ornaments have a function of protecting them from injuries and attacks by wild animals. [8]

Bonda women have their heads shaved and adorned with two types of headbands, called *turuba* and *lobeda*. The *turuba* is made of grass and the *lobeda* made of beads. Worn together the *turuba* secures the *lobeda* by preventing the beaded headband from slipping off the woman's head. Bonda women wear metal bands adorning their necks, which are called *khagla* and are made from aluminum. Including the bands around their neck, necklaces made of beads are also

Image: Screenshot of the section entitled "<u>Attire</u>" from the Wikipedia page on Bonda people, as of 20 February 2019.

How can we identify epistemic violence in online spaces?

Identifying epistemic violence against marginalised communities in online spaces is a complex exercise, as epistemic violence may not openly manifest itself. The processes that enable it function in the undercurrents. Since the dehumanising language directed at marginalised groups is mostly borrowed from colonial writers and those of dominant castes, there is a tendency to subconsciously and unquestioningly accept the prevailing nomenclature and myths. While unpacking these narratives, we will find that most of the dominant discourses are rooted in prejudicial assumptions about communities that have historically been marginalised through the subjective writings of the privileged sections of the society.

Checklist

This short checklist for identifying visible and invisible epistemic violence against certain sections of the society may be helpful in our critical understanding of the phenomenon:

1. What is the author's background? How is the author related to the community he/she is writing for?

[**Editor's note:** The questions in this checklist refer to content in the text form, which has been published online or in print or both. However, the questions may also be applied to content in other forms and formats, such as videos.]

2. What sources does the author quote or cite in constructing the narrative of their writing?

- 3. What kind of experience does the author possess in dealing with the subject of the writing? Are there several other bodies of work or is it a new contribution?
- 4. Where do you locate the author's work in the local, national and international politics on the subject? Is the author advocating on the side of the dominant culture or the subordinate one?
- 5. How does the author represent or depict women from marginalised communities?
- 6. Is the narrative presented by the author a dignified and honest representation of marginalised communities?
- 7. Did the author seek the consent of the members of relevant marginalised communities before making the writing public? Did the author gain the members' confidence? Do the members approve of the narrative presented by the author?

[**Editor's note:** If any mention of these processes of seeking informed consent and gaining the trust of the community is conspicuous by its absence from the published work, then it is an indication that the author has not carried out these processes.]

- 8. Was the published work sufficiently reviewed by peers, that is, other authors who have the experience of working on the specific subject of the work?
- 9. Does the published work or document cautiously make efforts to disassociate itself from patriarchal narratives and does it incorporate voices from all genders and classes of the marginalised community?
- 10. Is the narrative of marginalised communities paternalistic in approach and does it try to infantilize its subjects?

[Editor's note: The above questions give the reader a pointer to the author's own experience, or the lack of it, of life as a part of a marginalised existence. This is important because **the narrative changes with the narrator.** If the author does not belong to the community they write about, then have they made an attempt to be fair, ethical and objective in their representation of the people, and to be balanced and proportional in the importance they give to different narratives? When the author is far removed from the subject of writing, the outcome is rarely unbiased or just.]

Exercise for learners:

- Identify some Wikipedia articles about marginalised communities. These could be articles on the topic of the community itself, their traditional knowledge, practices, customs, insignia, notable people from the community, specific events reported in the news, laws meant to protect them or their property, and so on.
- Take a look at the references.
 - Try to determine if the references are <u>reliable sources [WP: RS]</u> according to Wikipedia's policies.

- o Is there a balance among the number and kind of references originating from primary, secondary and tertiary sources? See Wikipedia's policy on <u>neutral point of view [WP:NPOV]</u> for the definition of "balance" in this context. <u>Primary, secondary and tertiary sources</u> are defined in the policy for <u>no original research</u> [WP: NOR].
- Is the content that these references support in the article proportionate and balanced? See WP:NPOV for the definition of "proportionate" and "balanced" in this context.
- If you search for references that are authored or peer-reviewed by members of the community or the people/ organisations they are associated with, what do you find?
- Who are the experts cited/ quoted in these references? Do they have on-ground experience, that is, field experience of working with these communities?
- What content or references may be included in the article in keeping with WP: NOR and policies against tendentious editing [WP: TE]?

How do we remedy epistemic violence?

Once we understand the nature and impact of epistemic violence against marginalised groups, we need remedial measures that are humane and bear a long-term vision of justice. These are **recommendations** that provide a basic framework to resolve this crisis:

- 1. Online spaces need to acknowledge, understand and accept their role in the phenomena of "othering" and silencing marginalised communities. This usually happens via the process of knowledge production and a body of knowledge that stigmatises and dehumanises people who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy.
- 2. Once the online community is aware of epistemic violence in digital spaces, the key is to **integrate marginalised voices** as much as possible so that nobody is left behind in the digital universe.
- 3. **Create safe spaces** for the members of marginalised sections, wherein their historical, political, social, economic and cultural narratives are not dismissed, distorted or misrepresented.
- 4. Identify the specific discourses of silencing and othering marginalised communities, and make concentrated efforts of curbing and reversing those trends.
- 5. Many times, the attempts to include conventional voices for the sake of objectivity masks the ongoing violence and perpetuates it further. Therefore, the key should be to include the voices that are truly representative of the marginalised sections.
- 6. Make efforts for the inclusion of people with lived experiences, who can contribute diverse perspectives to the online discourses.

- 7. Members of marginalised communities must not be viewed as mere subjects of knowledge consumption in online spaces but also as the producers and owners of knowledge.
- 8. There is an urgent need to incorporate the remedies for epistemic violence against marginalised communities in the **community standards** of various online platforms. It must be understood and recognized that stigmatised representations of marginalised communities are as unacceptable as online abuse and harassment.
- 9. Women and gender-diverse people from the marginalised sections of the society experience greater epistemic violence, because attempts for the assertion of power rely on the **display of masculinity and patriarchy**. **Create safe spaces** for them to ensure their representation.
- 10. As with all social groups, the marginalised communities are also mostly divided on the basis of class, gender and religion. A singular narrative or voice cannot claim to be truly representative of the entire community. Make efforts to bring to the table different narratives within the community in order to make the online spaces inclusive for all.

In conclusion

In recent times, there has been a lot of debate about the steps necessary to curb the violent and harassing behaviour of some users online. It is a welcome development. Considering the lived experiences of marginalised groups, the Internet is still a very unsafe space. Apart from direct attacks and abuse, a fundamental issue that makes the online space exclusionary for them is "epistemic violence", which has been historically constructed to support the interests of ruling classes. Epistemic violence is a widely debated topic in academia. It is necessary to understand how the misrepresentation and stereotyping of marginalised sections has become a tool for privileged sections to oppress marginalised communities and to create and perpetuate psychological violence in their minds.

Recommended reading

- Juned Shaikh: 2012. Who needs identity? Dalit studies and the politics of recognition
 - https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14736489.2012.705636?src=recsys&journalCode=find20
- Chinnaiah Jangam: 2018. *How not to write a Dalit memoir* https://thewire.in/caste/how-not-to-write-a-dalit-memoir
- Venkatesh Vaditya: 2018. Social domination and epistemic marginalisation: Towards methodology of the oppressed https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02691728.2018.1444111

- Prasheel Anand Banpur: 2016. *Indian university and epistemic violence* https://indiaresists.com/indian-university-and-epistemic-violence
- Mukesh Kumar Bairwa: 2018. *Caste discourse and epistemic violence* https://www.forwardpress.in/2018/12/caste-discourse-and-epistemic-violence
- Dr. Smita M. Patil: 2017. *Debrahmanizing online spaces caste gender* https://feminisminindia.com/2017/09/22/debrahmanizing-online-spaces-caste-gender
- Raghu Karnad and Arko Datta: 2018. The diverging paths of two young women foretell the fate of a tribe in India
 https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/the-diverging-paths-of-two-young-women-foretell-the-fate-of-a-tribe-in-india