Priya and the Lost Girls

Story by DIPTI MEHTA
Art by SYD FINI

Story Idea and AR by RAM DEVIVENI
Color by NEDA KAZEMIFAR

“Gender Equality Champion” — UN WOMEN
www.priyashakti.com

Pages in the comic book also contains bonus augmented reality content viewable with ARTIVIVE

Download the free APP at artivive.com and scan the comic book’s pages to view animation, real-life stories, films, and other interactive elements that take you beyond the story. #standwithpriya

“Priya’s Shakthi is the first Indian comic book of its kind – not only confronting teenagers with the sensitive issue of sexual violence, but also engaging young people through its innovative use of augmented reality technology.” — REUTERS

“There is a new weapon in the battle to prevent violence against women in India — a comic book.” — THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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CREDITS: DIPTI MEHTA, Co-Writer; RAM DEVIVENI, Producer and Co-Writer; SYD FINI & NEDA KAZEMIFAR, Artists; RUCHIRA GUPTA & LINA SRIVASTAVA, Advisors; SHUBHRA PRAKASH, DAVID ROJAS-LEON & MARGARITA KOROL, Co-Producers; JOAN HILTY & CATHERINE FLETCHER, Copy Editors; KARINE BENDER, Portuguese Translation; MILA FAHREN, Italian Translation. NATALIA CONTRERAS DE LA LLAVE, Spanish Translation. Developed at Crossover Labs. Printed by Communications Solutions in India. Special thanks to Kellyn Mahan, Naomi Ranz-Schleifer, and Vanessa Rodriguez. The comic book is dedicated to poet, friend, and teacher Meena Alexander, who was the inspiration for series.

Priya and the Lost Girls is based on the life of Ruchira Gupta and her journey from making the documentary The Selling of Innocents to building Apne Aap Women Worldwide, an NGO that works to end sex trafficking, while simultaneously working with the United Nations to devise better policies for the poor and young often neglected by society. The story highlights crucial moments in the lives of Apne Aap women and children; trafficking survivors that freed themselves from a system of inter-generational prostitution in India. Through the lens of both Ruchiras and the survivors’ experiences, Apne Aap has designed a campaign called The Last Girl to draw worldwide attention to the plights of the 13-year olds in brothels and the 15-year olds standing on street corners. View videos about Apne Aap through the augmented reality app Artive. Learn more and support the campaign at www.apneaap.org/donate

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New York State Council on the Arts
Look, Sahas, we are home!

As Priya and Sahas walk through the village, she notices there are no girls, only older women and men.

Priya touches her parents' feet to receive their blessings.

I didn't see any girls in the village. Where is Lakshmi?

Your sister went to work, but we have not heard from her since.

We should have never sent her. I hope she is okay.

Shut up! Dumb woman.

Father, stop talking like that to Maa. Don't worry. I'll find her.
Your father sent Lakshmi north to Ranu with the other girls from the village. I hear it is a bad place.

Nonsense! She is there to cook and clean for a family.

Take this with you. It will give you Padma’s strength and wisdom.

Priya remembers the starry night when her loving grandma was on her deathbed and gifted Priya the precious bangle that was passed down by their ancestors.

Use it when you need our ancestors to protect you.
Something is wrong, Sainas. The village is empty of girls and nobody will say why!

I want the bangle!

No, Lakshmi! Padee gave it to me.

Lakshmi, don't fight with your sister.

Priya remembers how much Lakshmi loved Padee's bangle.

No! It's mine.

That night Priya keeps thinking about Lakshmi and worries that she might be in trouble.
One day you will be even better than me!

I hate that you always win.

You stayed up to watch me all night.

One night, Lakshmi came down with a deadly fever.

I will always watch out for you, Lakshmi.
You said you would watch over me. Where are you now?

It's your fault! I am paying the price for your sins.
Lakshmi! She is in trouble, Sahas.

Let's find Rahu!

As they travel north, the harsh smell of sulphur begins to fill the air.

Oh Sahas, the smell is so strong. Your poor tiger nose!

Below, they see a woman turning into stone. Her life is being squeezed out of her.

Water...

...Water, please.
Who are you? And what happened to you?

I am Ambika. I was thrown out of Rahu because I am too old. I will die like others before me.

Ambika takes her last breath as her arms and hands start turning to stone.

I can't feel my legs. I am dying.

Sahas's magical tears slowly turn Ambika back into flesh.

There are many girls like me downstairs. Please, help them.

Thank you for saving me.
They are in Rahy, a place ruled by Fire.
Welcome! Rahu will love you for your service.

What service? Who are you?

I am Rahu, the king of this city, where women serve men.

I have never heard of you before.

I was there when you sinned. Had you given yourself happily to those men, you wouldn’t have suffered!

You are disgusting. I will fight anyone who harms a woman.

Next time it will be your face. I will burn you alive if you don’t follow my rules.
Rahul turns into smoke and vanishes.

You will burn the other hand too if you touch that wound, Priya!

How do you know my name?

I know many things!

Wrap it with these and your wound will heal.

Don’t listen to this half-snake. She was about to put the blue poison on your hand.

Manidhali is about to put the blue leaves on Priya’s hand when Amrit suddenly appears.

Manidhali flees the flaming torch and slithers away into the woods.
That snake was looking for food. It is not safe for you to be alone. Come with me.

I don't understand. I just want to find my sister.

Priya decides to go with Amrit.

You can't bring that tiger with you. The girls will get scared.

But he is my friend.

Your furry toy and you can stay right here then.

As Amrit walks away, Priya thinks of a plan.

Quick, Sahas! Jump into my heart before she notices.

Priya's tiger heart is always within her even when Sahas is not with her in person.
Priya notices volcano channels flowing through the streets and...  

...little shops that sell drugs, tobacco, alcohol, and things for women.

She seems strange, but maybe she can help me find Lakshmi.

The gong rings when it's time to work.

I am Amrit. I was the first girl to come to Rani. Now I show Rahu's ways to new girls.

Clang of a big gong is heard. It rings 7 times.
More lava seeps out of the volcano and into the streets, illuminating the whole city in an orange glow.

Lots of women come outside. Men start looking at them, choose the ones they like, and take them to private rooms.

My girls don’t follow the gong. If you work for me, you only have to see 5 or 6 men a night, not 20.
Are you a pimp?

Shele! We are worshippers of Rahu. Our worship is pleasing men.

Now you rest. It is time for me to work.

Priya tears her scarf and wraps it around her wound.

Later that night, Priya asks Sahas to emerge from her heart.

Shhhhh. We must find out what is going on here. Where do we start?

Sahas nudges Priya towards the curtain.
Five days since you worked. Do you want to be cast out of Rahu and turn you to stone?

I was right about Amrit Sahas, we need to be very careful. I must think of a plan.

I have an idea. Mother used to say, “Feed salt, get loyalty.” Maa’s pun bhagyi are the best. Let’s find the kitchen.

Once Sahas has leapt back inside her heart, Priya finds the kitchen and starts cooking.
Smello delicious.

Have some.

Lakshmi!

My name is Laila.

Why is Lakshmi refusing to recognize me? This doesn't seem right!

Laila, this poor girl is looking for her sister Lakshmi. You must look like her.

I am not your sister. Don't bother me.

Priya is shocked but also notices that there is something different about Lakshmi. She keeps cooking.
The outside world is dangerous. I was raped in my village by 4 men.

You made a good choice by coming here. Rahu will keep you safe.

Truth is, you must let men protect you. Rahu protects us.

That was your own fault! If you go out alone in night clothes, what will happen?

Lakshmi tries to control herself, but Maa's food reminds her of her childhood. She wipes away a tear.

I have come to take you home.
I don't feel well. I am going to rest.

I know she is Lakshmi! But why is she behaving this way?

A little later, Priya sneaks into Lakshmi's room and hugs her tight.

Lakshmi!
What have they done to you?
You need to leave. Why have you come?

I'm here because of you.

To find you?

Me?
Let’s discuss this later. Let’s leave before someone sees us.

I am not going anywhere.

Lakshmi! This is a very bad place.

I saw what happened to you when you came home after you were abused. Here no one thinks badly of me.

I see! Laila, you know this little bird after all. What a pretty sister you have.

She is not my sister! She keeps saying that, so I wanted to set her straight.
So you found Lakshmi? You thought you would make a fool of me?

What have you done to her?

She chooses to be here. And now you will serve Rahu as well.

I will never do---

You will as soon as you drink this.

Amrit opens a small vial, and orange fumes start to come out. Priya coughs a little and starts to feel dizzy.

Your sister sang the same song of not wanting to do this --

but look at her now. My top girl.
Sahas twists and turns inside Priya’s heart. He growls, making Priya sit up straight and vomit up the elixir.

I saved her especially for you. Be gentle. She is new.
Sahas, run! We will come back for Lakshmi!

Priya is still dizzy and weak from the elixir. She grabs hold of Sahas as he carries her away.

Priya and Sahas escape into the dark forest.

It looks like she poisoned you, and your wound has not healed yet.

Manishhari notices the bandage on Priya's hand and her dizzy state.
These will help in healing Rahu's wound.

Why are you helping me?

Manidhari wraps the blue leaves around Priya's hand. The wound starts to heal instantaneously.

I need your help getting my kingdom back from Rahu.

Your Kingdom?

Eons ago, I was the rightful queen of this land.

It was a beautiful land where Nagas, half-snake, half-human creatures lived.

My husband Daatal and I were the rightful rulers of this place. We loved our people and ruled our kingdom without any conflicts.
He is in pain. Our Pharma says to help him.

One day, a stranger called Rahu came to our court. Paatal was hesitant to help, but I insisted.

Paatal, you are a mighty king. I don’t understand why you let a weak woman run your kingdom.

A kingdom can only be a man’s.

It is her kingdom.

Rahu was a monster. He possessed an elixir which could take control of creatures and turn them into his disciples.

Take control of your woman and your kingdom.

He took control of Paatal’s mind and turned him against me and all Female Naadgas.
Soon all my female council members were removed, and only male Naagas remained.

He then locked me in my room and passed a law that male Naagas would own female Naagas.

And then he brutally killed Paatali with his lava.
Rahu betrayed everyone and spewed his volcanic poison over my council members and my kingdom, changing it to what it is now.
I ran away to save my life. You are the one who can defeat Rahu.

I'll burn alive if I even come close to him.

Rahu is the evil energy of greed, jealousy, and lust. That can only be defeated with the pure energy of courage, kindness, and love.

But how?

He keeps his elixir in the center of the volcano. You will have to freeze it with your divine blood.

Priya takes a deep breath and climbs on Sahas. He leaps towards the volcano.

I must do this for Lakshmi.

She takes a knife in her hand and presses the bangle to her heart.
Priya cuts her hand. Blood starts to trickle. She presses the bangle tight to her heart and jumps inside without fear.

Suddenly, a strong force field emitting from the bangle surrounds her and stops the lava from incinerating her. Priya's blood drips into Rahu's elixir.
Priya’s blood turns Rahu’s lava into stone.
She neutralizes his elixir and the fire around her ceases.
In the city, lava stops flowing and turns into rock.

Priya, at the brink of death, is brought by Sanas to the center of the city.

Oh, Priya. I lost you once. Please don't leave me again!

Rahu no longer has power over Lakshmi. She holds Priya tightly and cries.

We are together again and that is what matters.

I am sorry, Priya. I don't know what came over me.
World will not accept you. There is no hope for you out there.

You can't control them anymore.

Manidhari commands her female Naagas to banish Amrit to the dungeon.

I am scared, Priya.

I am here now. You will be okay.
Priya, Lakshmi, and the other women climb up the stairs which lead to the outside world.

Remember you are Shakti. You are powerful.

We are going with you.

You should go home to your families.

It's true. They will burn us alive.

It will be hard, but they will take you back.

I will go with you to your villages to keep you safe. Let's go.

You speak of fairy tales.

They won't accept us!
Priya leads the women through their villages. Instead of being greeted with open arms, they are treated like lepers.

Some people even curse at them and shame them.
One mother hugs her daughter. Maybe there is some hope.

Your rather said you are not welcome here. I am sorry.

You shameful lot, go back to the brothels! Or better, just die!

You go to those brothels too. You are the ones who are shameful!

But I speak the truth. I have seen you in Kahu.

How dare you say such things about my husband.

You, characterless girl! Your tongue should be cut off!
Go back! Shameless Women! Dirty Women! Go out!

Shameless women, leave!

Ouch!

Stop!

Aagh! No!

Lakshmi tries to stop the women from running away.

Running is not the answer! We need to stand together and fight this.

Priya is starting to get angry!
RRRGGGGGARRR
Priya’s roar makes everyone freeze!

Slowly each woman who escaped from Rahu jumps into Priya’s heart. She gets bigger and stronger.
Enough! You throw us in harm’s way and say it is our fault.

Will you let your daughter die?

You protect your own daughter but don’t feel another mother’s pain?! You are blind to your husband’s flaws.

What hope do we have when our own mothers don’t stand with us?

But they sinned. A woman must know her boundaries.

Our sins? We must die because they took our honor? No! It is not our honor but their honor that is gone.

You gave him life. You give him power. You need to teach him how to respect women.

Instead you stand there and throw stones at us!
Please give me my sister back. I love her.

I know but she needs respect, honor, and equality.

But she is a girl.

Yes, she is!

Boys go to school. Girls stay home to cook. Boys protect girls.

Rahu was in business because the whole world raises boys and girls unequally.

You think we are responsible for girls choosing to work in Rahu?

Most of them thought they were going to clean dishes and mop floors for rich people. The rest were abducted by traffickers.
What is a trafficker, Ma?

Someone who takes kids away to a bad place.

That is why we keep our girls in purdah and restrict them, to keep them safe.

So you suffocate them!

But how can we change that?

Of course not!

Are you the enemy of women?

Don't you curse at your son for not being able to control his wife?

Don't you ask your son to be a man? To beat her so she knows her place?

Go tell a girl that you see her! You hear her! You honor her! Teach your sons to do it too.

Can I live in your heart too? My maa and baaba curse at me and call me a burden. They worry about my dowry.
Live without us now!

When you have found respect for women and what we do, we will return.

Instead of keeping girls safe from the world, create a world that is safe for them! We will wait for that world.