

## The Development of the Subject: Conjoined Twins and Development Discourse in the National Geographic Channel's *The Girl with Eight Limbs*

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In 2008 Lakshmi Tatma, a conjoined twin who was worshipped as a Hindu goddess in the Indian village of Bihar, was featured in a medical documentary for the National Geographic Channel's *Extraordinary Humans* series that broadcast footage from her separation surgery transnationally.<sup>1</sup> The successful separation surgery performed on Tatma in Bangalore, India served as the occasion for the transnational media circulation of graphic images of Tatma's medicalised body. A number of commentators in the fields of disability studies and media studies have suggested that the televised separation documentary genre constitutes a contemporary reconfiguration of the nineteenth-century freak show.<sup>2</sup> As Jose Van Dijck highlights, the contemporary separation documentary constitutes a 'hybrid spectacle' that combines popular entertainment, medicalization and public relations yet its strategies of representing conjoined bodies have a clear precedent in the live exhibitions of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> This article will support work by Dijck, and others in the field of freak studies in suggesting that medical documentaries which feature anomalously embodied 'Third World' subjects are embedded in a longstanding Western cultural tradition of exhibiting 'exotic' or 'ethnographic' freaks.<sup>4</sup> However, in contrast to previous work on the genre, identifying continuations and shifts in historical strategies of what David Hevey might term the 'enfreakment'<sup>5</sup> of conjoined twins will not my primary focus in the article. Instead, the article will bring together insights from the field of critical disability studies and globalization theory to interrogate how the global circulation of media images of the

<sup>1</sup> 'The Girl with Eight Limbs', *Extraordinary Humans*, The National Geographic Channel, 2008, 22 June 2008, 21.00

<sup>2</sup> See Jose Van Dijck, 'The Operation Film as Mediated Freak Show', in *The Transparent Body: A Cultural Analysis of Medical Imaging* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), pp. 20-40 and David Clark and Catherine Myser, 'Being Humaned: Medical Documentaries and the Hyperrealization of Conjoined Twins', in *Freakery*, ed. by Rosmarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 338-355.

<sup>3</sup> Dijck, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Previous discussions of the genre by David Clark and Catherine Myser and Jose Van Dijck have suggested these programmes recalibrate the representational practises of the nineteenth century freak show in aligning 'pathology' with 'othered' cultural and racial groups (Clark and Myser, p. 342). Yet, while existing scholarship has suggested that the 'therapeutic' normalisation of non-western subjects in these programmes functions to highlight the supposed cultural superiority of the West (Clark and Myser, p. 342), previous commentators have focused exclusively on programmes in which the surgical separation of non-Western conjoined twins is performed in the Global South. As such, previous commentators have failed to address how global power dynamics intersect with discourses and practises of medicalization in documentaries in which the separation surgery is performed in 'Third World' nations.

<sup>5</sup> David Hevey, *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 53.

conjoined bodies such as Tatma's participates in the imaginative construction of individual, national and geopolitical bodies.

Drawing on Nan Allima Boyd's insights concerning the 'relationship between subject and state, body and nation', this article will suggest that the global media narrative regarding Tatma's anomalous body serves complex national and geopolitical agendas.<sup>6</sup> The media representations of Tatma's anomalous body attests to how social constructions of bodies, national identities and geopolitical spaces intersect. Taking the *National Geographic* documentary 'The Girl with Eight Limbs' and the media reports which circulated in the wake of the documentary as a case study, this article will highlight how Tatma's anomalous body was deployed to imagine the condition of peripheral populations and communities within the Indian nation state. In the documentary and various media reports regarding the surgery, Tatma's anomalous body is engaged as an image of underdevelopment at the global periphery. Yet, the documentary also inserts the subsequent medicalisation, and surgical separation, of Tatma's anomalous body into a national and global development narrative. Building on Aimi Hamraie's observation that the act of diagnosing bodies can overlap with the pathologization of geopolitical bodies such as economies and nation states, the article will highlight how the diagnosis of Tatma's conjoined body intersects with the diagnosis of underdevelopment at the global periphery.<sup>7</sup> As such, the article will examine how the documentary engages in the construction of bodily imaginary which is embedded in the neoliberal political economy.

### **Hinduism and Biomedical Development**

When a team of medical specialists from Sparsh Hospital in Bangalore, India performed the surgery which separated Lakshmi Tatma from her parasitic conjoined twin, news of the successful surgery was circulated in the global media. In the Global North, mainstream media reports regarding the surgery constructed Tatma as a tragic Third World victim of an extreme medical condition who had been cured of her suffering through charitable biomedical intervention from India's industrialised centre. An article which appeared in the *Daily Mail* labelled Tatma 'the Indian toddler whose plight touched the world', attesting to how the Western media justified the intense transnational coverage surrounding the surgery

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<sup>6</sup> Nan Boyd, 'Bodies in Motion: Lesbian and Transsexual Histories', in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.420 -433 (p. 439).

<sup>7</sup> Aimi Hamraie 'Proximate and Peripheral: Ableist Discourses of Space and Vulnerability Surrounding the UNCRPD,' in *The Politics of Space and Place*, ed. by Chiara Certomà, Nicola Clewer and Doug Eley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 145-171 (p. 152).

by constructing Tatma as an object of global sympathy and concern.<sup>8</sup> However, the widespread circulation of the story, as well as the National Geographic medical documentary which transmitted graphic scenes of the surgery to millions of viewers, reveal that the surgical separation procedure was a global media event in which more than affective concern for Tatma's health and material wellbeing was at stake.<sup>9</sup> Dijck has highlighted how televised 'operation documentaries' mobilise a 'human interest' angle to obscure media voyeurism and disguise the commercial interests of the media production companies and medical institutions involved in the making of these programmes.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, this paper will suggest that the media reports and medical documentary, which praised Tatma's surgery as a form of humanitarian intervention, obscured how both the biomedical procedure and its parallel 'mediation' were embedded in wider social, political and economic power structures.<sup>11</sup>

It is not the intention of this paper to critique the technical success of the surgery but, rather, to highlight how the successful biomedical procedure was mobilised in the interest of reifying various national and transnational political agendas. Indeed, while the Western media may have problematically situated Tatma's surgery within what Lilie Chouliaraki has termed a 'regime of pity,' Tatma does seem to have benefitted from the various medical procedures which normalised her embodiment.<sup>12</sup> The surgical removal of Tatma's parasitic twin appears to have improved her functional ability post-operatively, since, according to a statement Dr. Sharan Patil, an orthopaedic surgeon involved in the procedure, gave to *ABC News*, Tatma gained the ability to walk shortly following the surgery.<sup>13</sup> However, while acknowledging the benefits the surgery brought to Tatma, this paper will foreground how claims made about the therapeutic 'success' of the procedure in the popular media functioned to reiterate neoliberal discourses and promote trends towards cultural homogenization. The construction of the surgery as a global event, of interest to a wider 'global community' implicitly functioned to confirm the global reach of biomedicine and reiterate its apparently 'universal' authority as a knowledge practise. Indeed, the transnational appeal of the media narrative regarding Tatma rested in part on the way it

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<sup>8</sup> 'Pictured: The Little Girl Who Had Eight Limbs and Was Worshipped as a Deity Starts School', *Mail Online* <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1246431/Lakshmi-Tatma-The-little-girl-limbs-worshipped-deity-starts-school.html>> [accessed 8 February 2014].

<sup>9</sup> My argument here builds on Dijck's observation that surgical separation documentaries 'unashamedly invites millions of viewers to gaze at human deformity disguised as medical information and human interest'. p. 370.

<sup>10</sup> Dijck, 'Operation Film as Mediated Freak Show', p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Dijck has described the surgical separation documentary as a 'mediated freakshow'. p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (Pine Forge Press, 2006), p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> '8-Limbed Girl Recovers, Takes First Steps', *ABC News*, 2009 <<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/story?id=4305864&page=1>> [accessed 21 December 2015].

framed biomedical procedure as sign of what Doug Porter has termed ‘the local being integrated within a globally universal rationality of development.’<sup>14</sup>

An *Evening Standard* article, headlined ‘Toddler with Eight Limbs Branded “Reincarnation of Hindu God” to Undergo Life-Saving operation’ attests to how the mainstream media in the Global North inserted Tatma’s surgery into a development imaginary which replicated existing structural inequalities.<sup>15</sup> In a bid to sensationalise the fact that Tatma was considered a reincarnation of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi in her village community prior to medical intervention, the article claimed, inaccurately, that ‘the extraordinary eight-limbed baby was born in a poverty-stricken region of Bihar, India on the day devoted to the celebration of the four-armed deity Vishnu.’<sup>16</sup> As such, the article equated the village community’s ethno-religious beliefs surrounding Tatma with a lack of social and material development structures. Moreover, by strategically mobilising a somatic metaphor in reference to the poverty in Bihar, the article implicitly positioned the religious beliefs surrounding Tatma as symptomatic of a wider social disorder in the state.

A *Daily Mail* article which circulated news of the successful surgery similarly positioned the region of Tatma’s birth as a site of economic ‘underdevelopment’ and socio-political instability.<sup>17</sup> Emphasising that Tatma was ‘born to impoverished parents in the frequently lawless state of Bihar, in India’s volatile northeast’ and consequently ‘faced an uncertain future until a wealthy doctor heard of her plight and offered to operate on her for free’, the article suggested that Tatma’s rural village was situated within an unregulated and corrupt region of the nation state. While the article notes that Tatma’s conjoined embodiment resulted in health complications which Dr. Patil felt made her continued survival past adolescence unlikely without medical intervention, it does not simply construct Tatma’s conjoinment as a material threat to her future. Rather, the article functions to suggest that, for Tatma, to remain conjoined in the context of her village community, represented an unviable future. On one level, Tatma’s village community is positioned as lacking in necessary social, economic and material infrastructure to maintain her health and material welfare. However, on another, more insidious level, members of Tatma’s village community are positioned as direct threats to her material welfare and future life prospects. As in a *Telegraph* article which claims that Tatma’s parents ‘rejected the opportunity to exhibit her to

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<sup>14</sup> Doug Porter, ‘Scenes from childhood: The homesickness of development discourses’, in *Power of Development*, ed. by Jonathan Crush (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), pp 63 -86 (p. 65).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Toddler with Eight Limbs Branded “Reincarnation of Hindu God” to Undergo Life-Saving Operation’, *Evening Standard*, <<http://www.standard.co.uk/news/toddler-with-eight-limbs-branded-reincarnation-of-hindu-god-to-undergo-life-saving-operation-7261460.html>> [accessed 20 December 2015].

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> ‘Pictured’.

pilgrims as a lucky charm and instead sought treatment',<sup>18</sup> the *Daily Mail* article positioned Tatma as vulnerable to religious exploitation within her wider community. By establishing an alignment between the poverty and supposed deviance of Bihar's rural population and the geographic instability of the region, the article engaged in the production of what Graham Huggan has termed a 'dominant western geopolitical imaginary'<sup>19</sup> of India.

Through the representation of Tatma's rural village community in Bihar, the *Daily Mail* article constructed India as a semi-peripheral nation state or global space. According to the Eurocentric logic of the article, the presence of undeveloped rural areas within the Indian nation supposedly established India as a nation in need of development. In the article, Tatma's rural village of Rampur Kodar Katti is positioned as a peripheral national zone, in spatial, cultural and social terms. The article stresses the 'remoteness' of Tatma's village community in Rampur Kodar Katti<sup>20</sup> as well as its lack of medical facilities, claiming that 'orthopaedic surgeon Dr. Sharan Patil, owner of the Sparsh Hospital in Bangalore 2,000 miles south, travelled to Lakshmi's remote village [...] to meet the child and offer her parents the chance of a lifetime.'<sup>21</sup> The construction of Tatma's village community as far-distant from the more urbanized and materially affluent Bangalore is telling. As Aimi Hamraie has noted, colonialist discourse imagined geographic 'distance as difference' and routinely mobilised metaphors of spatial distance to mark colonised populations as 'other.'<sup>22</sup> The spatial trajectory the *Daily Mail* article establishes, then, is highly significant. By claiming that the 'wealthy' physician, Dr. Patil, travelled thousands of miles to a 'remote' national site<sup>23</sup> to diagnose an anomalously embodied lower class subject, the article suggests that Dr. Patil travels away from a central social location towards a more marginal one. Described in the article as being a 'tiny', 'dusty farming village in India's poorest state',<sup>24</sup> the Rampur Kodar Katti village community is not only constructed as lacking in the basic sanitation necessary to maintain Tatma's health; moreover, the village is constructed as a spatially limited and thus nationally insignificant site. Indeed, Rampur Kodar Katti is constructed as culturally as well

<sup>18</sup> Megan Levy, 'Eight-Limbed Girl "Will Always Be a Goddess"', 18 February 2008, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1579072/Eight-limbed-girl-will-always-be-a-Goddess.html>> [accessed 10 December 2015].

<sup>19</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies* (Oxford; OUP Oxford, 2013). p. 175.

<sup>20</sup> A *Telegraph* article titled 'Twin girl with eight limbs to have surgery' claimed that Tamta's village community was situated in Rampur Kodar Katti, n.p. Sam Relph and Peter Foster, 'Twin Girl with Eight Limbs to Have Surgery', *Telegraph.co.uk*, 5 November 2007 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1568406/Twin-girl-with-eight-limbs-to-have-surgery.html>> [accessed 19 April 2014].

<sup>21</sup> 'Pictured'.

<sup>22</sup> Hamraie, p. 152.

<sup>23</sup> 'Pictured'.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

as spatially marginal to the more urbanized Bangalore, which is imagined as dominant modernized centre within the nation.

The National Geographic medical documentary titled 'The Girl with Eight Limbs' represents the journey undertaken by Dr. Patil from the Sparsh Hospital in Bangalore to Tatma's village community in a similarly strategic vein. While the documentary draws on historical imperialist constructions of so called peripheral nations as sites of otherness, it also works to make Eurocentric notions of otherness palatable for neoliberal audiences. Rather than simply reiterating essentialist colonial constructions of India as a location of pathological difference, the documentary attributes the apparent pathological difference of anomalously embodied subjects located at India's rural periphery to national underdevelopment. As we, as viewers, witness scenes of the agricultural landscape in Bihar, the voice over claims 'in this remote part of India, healthcare is hard to come by; disabled infants are often left in the field to die';<sup>25</sup> as such, the voiceover implicitly constructs Tatma's anomalous embodiment as an undesirable consequence of India's supposedly undeveloped rural infrastructure and cultural formations. Moreover, a statement made by Dr. Patil on the Sparsh Hospital website functions to suggest that Tatma's birth is a direct result of a lack of appropriate medical facilities and equipment within rural regions in the nation state. Dr. Patil states that 'Poonam gave birth to Lakshmi in her mother's home village without any form of medical supervision, and neither did she receive any antenatal care during her pregnancy'<sup>26</sup> implicitly suggesting that Tama's birth would have been prevented through prenatal screening procedures in more developed regions of the nation.<sup>27</sup> As such, the documentary attests to how biomedical discourses are mobilised in the service of what John Caldwell has called a 'technological/developmental imaginary of nationalism'.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed 'The Girl with Eight Limbs' implicitly suggests that Tatma's medical diagnosis and subsequent surgery necessitates delegitimising locally situated beliefs about embodiment and religious identity in the interest of affirming global(ized) biomedical norms. The representation of Tatma's medical diagnosis in the documentary invokes a series of binary oppositions—between science and myth, progress and primitivism—that reiterate the epistemic violence of the colonial regime. The documentary features snippets of interviews conducted with various members of the Rampur Kodar Katti village community supposedly

<sup>25</sup> 'The Girl with Eight Limbs'.

<sup>26</sup> 'The Story of Sparsh', web page, *sparshhospital.com*, <<http://www.sparshhospital.com/the-story-of-sparsh/>> [accessed 1 Nov 2015].

<sup>27</sup> Dijck makes a similar point in reference to the 1990 medical documentary entitled 'Siamese Twins'; Dijck claims that the documentary suggests that 'anomalies like conjoined twins are practically nonexistent in the contemporary Western world on account of its advanced technology; early detection and medical imaging techniques and diagnostic tests virtually prevents these creatures from being born'. Dijck, 'Operation Film as Mediated Freak Show'. p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, *Theories of the New Media: A Historical Perspective* (London: Athlone, 2000), p. 286.

in the interest of representing the community's religious beliefs regarding Tatma's embodiment. However, 'The Girl with Eight Limbs' deploys an ethnographic gaze in relation to Tatma and the Bihar villagers; indeed, the documentary implicitly represents the villager's religious practises regarding Tatma as a source of exotic spectacle. Prior to the diagnostic scene, the documentary features an interview with Poonam Tatma, Lakshmi's mother, in which the former explains her belief that Tatma is a reincarnation of the goddess Lakshmi, stating that 'before she [Lakshmi] was born I had a dream that I had to make a temple to Lakshmi'.<sup>29</sup> The inclusion of a brief dream sequence at this point in the documentary not only functions to mystify the villager's religious beliefs regarding Tatma and heighten the notion of Tatma's exotic otherness; it also implicitly constructs the local understanding of the body as irrational, even fantastic. Moreover, following Dr. Patil's diagnostic examination of Tatma, the voice over narration actively aligns with the pathological model of Tatma's embodiment.<sup>30</sup>

The 'Girl with Eight Limbs' attests to how biomedical discourse and discursive practises function to discipline the social body. The documentary suggests that the biomedical intervention into Tatma's anomalous body constitutes a social and cultural intervention into the wider community in Bihar. While the documentary gives voice to the community's Hindu beliefs regarding Tatma's body, it simultaneously constructs the subaltern villager's understanding of Tatma's body as, to use Niraja Jayal's phrasing, 'too local, limited, and contextual to be considered a valid knowledge'.<sup>31</sup> Insofar as the Rampur Kodar Katti village community are seen to resist the pathological definition of Tatma's embodiment in favour of the religious model, the villagers are charged with obstructing the course of medicalisation in the documentary, as becomes apparent when Dr. Patil claims 'I can foresee some pressure on us, if they conceive we are operating on a goddess'.<sup>32</sup> Yet, Dr. Patil suggests the biomedical procedure constitutes an opportunity to educate the Rampur Kodar Katti community in the principles of scientific rationality. When Tatma's parents opt for biomedical intervention for their daughter in accordance with Dr. Patil's recommendations, Dr. Patil approvingly states that 'the faith of science has reached right to the remote parts of the villages'. Dr. Patil's comments not only construct Tatma as a beneficiary of biomedical development but function to suggest that the surgical procedure has the effect of disseminating biomedical rationality to subjects in undeveloped, peripheral populations within the nation state.

A *BBC* article, headlined 'Many Limbed India Girl in Surgery', attests to how the global media inserted Tatma's surgery into a development narrative which replicated colonial

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<sup>29</sup> 'The Girl with Eight Limbs'.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Niraja Gopal Jayal, *Democracy in India* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 281.

<sup>32</sup> 'The Girl with Eight Limbs'.

strategies by constructing Hindu ideology as an obstacle to Indian national progress. The article strategically quoted orthopaedic surgeon Dr. Patil's observation that 'the villagers [...] were not so keen about going ahead with the surgery but the parents are looking to the future and [...] motivated to have medical intervention'.<sup>33</sup> As such, the article reiterated a 'teleology of scientific progress' that Peter Gottschalk notes undergirded much of imperialist discourse.<sup>34</sup> Indeed the construction of the surgery as a symbol of the emergence of Indian nation into global modernity in the Western media replicates the power dynamics of colonial discourse. As Prakash has claimed the 'existence of India is inseparable from the authority of science [...] standing as a metaphor for the triumph of universal reason over enchanting myths, science appears pivotal in the imagination and institution of India'.<sup>35</sup> Significantly, then, in the article under consideration, the decision to proceed with surgery is praised insofar as it seems to represent the triumph of an acultural or universal knowledge of the body over a partial and limited cultural perspective. Yet, insofar as the biomedical procedure was presented as a global progress narrative, the media narrative regarding Tatma exposes how biomedical discourse is mobilised in the service of cultural and political agendas.

Building on the work of John Fiske, Pam Wilson suggests that the body is constructed as 'a site of cultural and political struggle, since it is "where politics can best disguise itself as human nature"'.<sup>36</sup> In the National Geographic medical documentary, Tama's anomalous body is constructed as a site on which competing national and political ideologies can be struggled over. The numerous somatic metaphors deployed in the documentary reveal how Tatma's anomalous body was called upon to make claims about so called peripheral Indian populations. The voiceover narrator's comments regarding Tama's 'parasitic twin' not only function to construct the subaltern community's religious beliefs regarding Tatma's as harmful and exploitative but, moreover, as pathological. The voiceover narrator claims that while Tatma's parents could opt for their child to 'remain as goddess Lakshmi with eight limbs', the 'extra limbs belong to a parasitic conjoined twin and the doctors do not see this life threatening medical anomaly as a blessing',<sup>37</sup> implicitly suggesting the Rampur Kodar Katti village community have been worshipping a pathology. What is more, the slippage between religious and medical terms for Tatma's embodiment has the effect of suggesting that the community's religious beliefs regarding Tatma are themselves anomalous. The documentary explicitly aligns the separation surgery with the

<sup>33</sup> 'Many-Limbed India Girl in Surgery', *BBC*, 6 November 2007, section South Asia, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/7080326.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7080326.stm)> [accessed 21 April 2014].

<sup>34</sup> Peter Gottschalk, *Religion, Science, and Empire: Classifying Hinduism and Islam in British India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 41.

<sup>35</sup> Prakash, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Pam Wilson. 'Reading Fiske and Understanding the Popular', in *Understanding Popular Culture*, ed. by John Fiske (Routledge, 2010), pp.xxxix-lv (p. I).

<sup>37</sup> 'The Girl with Eight Limbs'.



undermining of local Hindu identities, constructing the surgical sacrifice of the apparent parasitic limbs and the religious sacrifice of Tatma and her family's Hindu identity as one and the same. In the lead up to the surgery, the voice over claims that Tatma's parents must make a decision to either 'uproot their lives, sacrifice their religious beliefs' or 'have their daughter remain as the revered girl with eight limbs'.<sup>38</sup> To the extent that Tatma's extra limbs are aligned metaphorically with her village community's religious identity in the documentary, Hinduism itself is constructed as a pathological appendage.

### **The Anomalous Body and the Body Politic**

Bernard Herzogenrath notes that, historically in Western discourse, the human body has functioned as a metaphorical 'analogue for the state, for a political system'.<sup>39</sup> To the extent that the nation or state has been imagined as a body, individual bodies have also been made to bear national and political meanings.<sup>40</sup> In the National Geographic medical documentary and various media reports which circulated regarding the surgery, Tatma's anomalous body is absorbed into wider debates about the Indian nation state and political economy. To this extent, the documentary may be seen to draw on a historical tradition of engaging the bodies of colonised subjects to make assertions about what Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick have termed the 'colonial body politic'.<sup>41</sup> Price and Shildrick have noted, that in colonial constructions of India, 'the morphology of the body and the morphology of the state meet in an exercise of symbiotic mapping'.<sup>42</sup> The National Geographic medical documentary replicates this structure to the extent that bodily and geographic discourses intersect in the documentary. Indeed, in both the documentary and various media articles which circulated regarding Tatma, there is a discursive correspondence between Tatma's 'undeveloped' parasitic twin and India's apparently 'undeveloped' periphery, attesting to how Tatma's anomalous body was engaged to represent the Indian nation state.

Aram Ziai has claimed that 'development discourse divides the world into developed and underdeveloped units'.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in various media which circulated regarding Tatma's surgery, Tatma's conjoined body was divided into developed and undeveloped zones. In a number of articles which circulated regarding the surgery, Tatma's body is demarcated into

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Bernd Herzogenrath, *An American Body-Politic: A Deleuzian Approach* (UPNE, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Corinna Wagner, *Pathological Bodies: Medicine and Political Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, 'Mapping the Colonial Body: Sexual Economies and the State in Colonial India', in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (Cambridge: Edinburgh UP, 1999), pp. 388-898 (p.389).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Aram Ziai, *Development Discourse and Global History: From Colonialism to the Sustainable Development Goals* (Hoboken, United States: Routledge, 2015), p. 45.

the discrete sites of 'parasite' and autosite, with the 'undeveloped' parasite coming to metaphorically represent India's rural periphery and the autosite its modernised centre. A *Telegraph* article titled 'Twin girl with eight limbs to have surgery' exemplified this structure; the article claimed that while Tatma was 'believed to have been "sent from God" when she was born to a poor rural family in the Indian state of Bihar', she was in fact suffering from a 'headless, undeveloped "twin"' and would soon undergo surgery in Bangalore to have it removed.<sup>44</sup> In the article, Tatma's 'undeveloped' twin is not simply aligned with the Bihar region due its connection with the villager's religious ideology; moreover, within the representational economy of the article, Tatma's 'undeveloped twin' functions as a metonym for the alleged underdevelopment of the region as a whole.

The association between the 'remote' Bihar region and 'undeveloped' parasitism is similarly apparent in a 2010 *Telegraph* article that reported on the successful surgery of Deepak Paswan, a conjoined subject who, like Tatma, was revered as a reincarnation of a Hindu god. The article not only explicitly aligned Paswan's situation with Tatma's but, insofar as it claimed that 'Deepak's story mirrors that of Lakshmi Tatma', functioned to suggest the two conjoined subjects were in fact duplicates of one another. Moreover, the article inserted Paswan's body into the discursive framework of development, commenting that Paswan was 'born in one of the least *developed* parts of India with a parasitic twin conjoined to his abdomen [emphasis mine]'.<sup>45</sup> Yet the article also mobilised a rhetoric of development in reference to the 'autosite' twin as it sought to explain the biomedical model of 'parasitic conjoinment', noting that the anomalous physiology of both subjects occurred when a 'semi-formed twin adjoined to the body of the developed twin' in utero.<sup>46</sup>

There is a longstanding tradition of mobilising the conjoined Indian body to represent the colonial body politic. Of particular relevance to my discussion is Marlene Tromp's analysis of the British representation of nineteenth century freak show act 'Laloo the Double-Bodied Hindoo Boy', an Indian performer who had a conjoined 'parasitic twin'.<sup>47</sup> Tromp suggests that Laloo's freak show representation positioned 'Laloo's "autosite" and "parasite" as metaphors for England and India'.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Tromp suggests that Laloo's freak show representation reiterated the colonial mandate insofar as it positioned Laloo's 'parasitic twin' as a colony dependent on the autosite's, Laloo's, superior material and intellectual

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<sup>44</sup> 'Twin Girl with Eight Limbs.'

<sup>45</sup> 'Indian "God with Eight Limbs" Operated on', *The Telegraph*, 10 Jun 2010 <[telegraph.co.uk](http://telegraph.co.uk)> [accessed 22 April 2014].

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Marlene Tromp, 'Empire and The Indian Freak: The "Minature Man" from Cawnpore and the "Marvellous Indian Boy" on Tour in England', in *Victorian Freaks: The Social Context of Freakery in Britain*, ed. by Marlene Tromp (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2008), pp. 157-79 (pp. 169-70).

<sup>48</sup> Tromp, p. 169.

resources.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the discursive construction of Tatma as a representative of the Indian body politic reflects neo-colonial power dynamics to the extent that it configures India's rural regions as spatially, culturally and economically peripheral to its modernised centre.

Akhil Gupta has noted that, within development discourse 'the life stages of personal growth serve as a metonym for the growth of the nation'.<sup>50</sup> Tellingly then, in numerous media articles which circulated regarding Tatma's surgery, the body of Tatma's twin was temporally marked as being in an early phase of growth. Exemplifying this tendency, a *CNN.com* article claimed 'Lakshmi's extra limbs were part of a conjoined twin which stopped developing in the womb'.<sup>51</sup> 'The Girl with Eight Limbs' deployed a similar strategy insofar as the voiceover claimed 'parasitic twins depend on their fully formed siblings for nourishment'<sup>52</sup>; the documentary thus implicitly suggested that Tama's twin was stunted or arrested in early stage of bodily development. Moreover, insofar as the voiceover mobilised a rhetoric of maternal nurturing to describe the relationship between Tatma and her twin, the documentary positioned the twin as dependent on Tatma, much like an infant or embryo on its mother. The construction of Tatma's twin as a stunted child, dependent on a fully formed subject for sustenance, is politically resonant. As Gupta has claimed, development discourse functions to 'anthropomorphize' so called developing nations as 'less-than-fully-formed subjects, whose growth and maturity has to be supervised and monitored by those who have reached adulthood—that is, by the West'.<sup>53</sup> Tellingly, then, in 'The Girl with Eight Limbs', and various media articles which circulated the story, the Bihar region is not only aligned with a static temporality; but a lack of material and cultural growth. The documentary not only claims that the Bihar villager's lives are 'untouched by the twenty-first century' but asserts that the villagers 'believed that, with eight limbs, the baby was the embodiment of a goddess';<sup>54</sup> it thus implicitly constructs Tatma's rural Indian community's as culturally infantile.

In 'The Girl with Eight Limbs' the relationship between the fully 'developed' twin and the 'undeveloped' parasitic twin is figured as metonym for the unequal economic exchange that supposedly exists between India's urban centre and rural periphery. The documentary's use of bodily metaphors for geographic territories connects Tatma's body to the nation-state, positioning Bihar, by way of its association with Tatma's 'undeveloped' twin, as a national parasite sustained by economic and biomedical resources from India's modernised centre.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 156-7.

<sup>50</sup> Akhil Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 41.

<sup>51</sup> Post-op 8-limbed girl 'doing well', *CNN*, Nov 13 2007  
<<http://edition.cnn.com/2007/HEALTH/11/13/india.girl/index.html>> [accessed 12 November 2014].

<sup>52</sup> 'The Girl with Eight Limbs'.

<sup>53</sup> Gupta, p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> 'The Girl with Eight Limbs'.

The apparent 'dependence' of the parasite on the 'developed' twin's heart for nourishment takes on a particular political significance when the voice over announces that, in order to undertake the separation surgery, Tatma's family will need to 'leave their home behind for the heart of modern India'. By constructing the site of Lakshmi's operation, Bangalore, one of 'India's largest most technologically advanced cities', as the heart that supplies resources to the 'remote' Bihar, the documentary maps the imagined relationship between Lakshmi and her parasitic twin onto the national body. The thinly veiled value judgement inherent in the biomedical construction of Lakshmi's twin as a parasite 'kept alive solely by Lakshmi's blood supply' is also implicated in the imagined relations between Bihar and Bangalore insofar as the documentary conceives of a one way exchange of resources existing between the two regions. While the documentary positions the privately-run Sparsh hospital's provision of free biomedical care to Lakshmi within a charity discourse, the phrase 'free medical care' is reiterated several times, carrying with it the implication of 'free-loading' or unethical dependency.

Indeed, the various media discourses that circulated around the case also constructed global capitalism as a source of ethical good. A *Telegraph* article noted that the Tatma family were 'turned away by a government hospital when they asked for help to increase Lakshmi's chances of survival', indirectly emphasising the advantages of a free market economy in which economic and biomedical interests intersect supposedly for the benefit of all parties.<sup>55</sup> In this sense, the discursive construction of Bangalore as the 'heart of modern India'<sup>56</sup> not only situates the region as central to the nation in spatial and economic terms but, insofar as the 'heart' symbolises ethical good in popular discourse, its ethical centre as well.

It is by situating the surgery within a charity discourse that the documentary obscures the hospital's own economic interest in taking on Tatma's case. As Dijck observes, televised separation documentaries frequently constitute exercises in 'public relations'; indeed these programmes provide surgeons with an excellent platform 'to "sell" their expertise'.<sup>57</sup> In 'The Girl with Eight Limbs', Dr. Patil highlights that the surgery represents 'a big feather in the cap of Sparsh hospital',<sup>58</sup> yet, the economic motivations of the hospital in taking on Tatma's 'case' are generally downplayed in the interest of emphasising the perceived benefits of the procedure to the wider scientific community and India's transnational status. Immediately following Dr. Patil's observations in the documentary, anaesthesiologist Dr. Yohannan John claims, in reference to the surgery, that it is 'it is probably the first time that such a major

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<sup>55</sup> 'Twin Girl with Eight Limbs to Have Surgery'

<sup>56</sup> 'The Girl with Eight Limbs'.

<sup>57</sup> Dijck, 'Operation Film as Mediated Freak Show', p. 36.

<sup>58</sup> 'The Girl with Eight Limbs'.

undertaking has been done in this county', implicitly positioning the biomedical procedure within a national progress narrative.

In 'The Girl with Eight Limbs', India is constructed as a rapidly developing nation to the extent that its industrialised regions have the capacity to implement high-tech biomedical procedures that work to normalise its anomalous subjects. The surgery performed on Tatma's anomalous body functions as a symbol for state transformation in the documentary. As the voiceover claims 'the operation enters the second stage', the documentary shifts from a time lapse shot of the Bangalore cityscape to a shot of the operating theatre. By alternating between images of the urban landscape in Bangalore and shots of the operating room, with its 'advanced medical equipment' the documentary aligns the separation surgery with processes of urban development and economic industrialisation within the nation. Indeed, insofar as the voice over claims that Sparsh hospital, a 'state of the art facility, with some of the world's most advanced' medical technology will 'cover all expenses' for the costly surgery, the programme emphasises that the charitable separation procedure is in fact made possible by capitalist structures within the state. As such, the documentary attests to Fiona Dykes's observation that 'techno-medicine is hegemonically connected with industrialisation, the super-valuation of technology and capitalism'.<sup>59</sup> The documentary not only suggests that the industrialised Bangalore has the capacity to reform the 'undeveloped' sites of Tatma's anomalous body; moreover, it implicitly constructs Tatma's technologized, medicalised body as a representative of globalized Indian modernity.

Dykes has noted that 'by claiming a scientific basis for its practises, techno-medicine is part of the machinery by which capitalism is legitimated, in that capitalism is also aligned ideologically to scientific and technological progress'.<sup>60</sup> Significantly, then, in 'The Girl with Eight Limbs' the representation of the high-tech separation surgery in fact functions to reiterate the ideology of neoliberal capitalism on a number of levels. While the documentary de-politicizes the biomedical claims made about Tatma's anomalous body, the representation of the surgery implicitly works to naturalise neoliberal constructions of individual subjectivity. As we, as viewers, are shown a highly discomfiting close-up of the surgically separated body of Tatma's twin, the voiceover comments that 'for an instant in death the twin achieves an individual identity it never had in life.'<sup>61</sup> Insofar as the voiceover suggests that, for Tatma's twin, life as a failed individual was unviable, the documentary

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<sup>59</sup> Fiona Dykes, *Breastfeeding in Hospital Mothers, Midwives and the Production Line* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 14.

<sup>60</sup> Dykes, *Breastfeeding in Hospital Mothers*, p. 14.

<sup>61</sup> 'The Girl with Eight Limbs'.

exposes an unstated ideological motivation underlying the separation surgery.<sup>62</sup> As Margit Shildrick has claimed, separation surgeries performed on conjoined twins routinely reiterate the notion of individual, autonomous selfhood ‘as the only proper way of being in the world’.<sup>63</sup>

Magrit Shildrick has suggested that conjoined twins undermine taken for granted distinctions between self and other, mind and body, and as such, place the very notion of singular autonomous subjectivity under strain.<sup>64</sup> Individual autonomy is not a natural condition of the human subject; rather it is naturalised under the neoliberal social order. As Shildrick, who draws on the work of Judith Butler, has claimed, notions of autonomy are sustained in relation to ‘morphological boundaries’<sup>65</sup> that, while being ‘in a sense imaginary’<sup>66</sup>, function ground the security of the subject. Indeed, as Judith Butler has noted ‘symbolic structures of anatomy’ that are naturalised in discourse and through iterative discursive practises reproduce power relations.<sup>67</sup> Tatma’s ‘conjoined’ body in fact undermines what Butler has termed ‘the very boundaries that determine what it is to be a body’;<sup>68</sup> consequently, prior to surgery, Tatma was rendered ‘unintelligible’ as a human subject. The voiceover narrator’s claim that ‘Lakshmi Tatma was born with four arms and four legs, but also carries a rare parasitic conjoined twin that could kill her’, attests to a degree of uncertainty regarding whether Tatma’s ‘additional’ limbs might properly be regarded as belonging to Tatma herself or whether they represent the residual elements of a separate being. There is, in fact, a discernible tension in the documentary between the Hindu religious understanding of Tatma as a single subject who possesses eight limbs and the biomedical understanding of Tatma’s body as incorporating two distinct subjects (with Tatma representing the ‘complete’ subject and the parasitic twin the failed subject, respectively).

David Clark and Catherine Myser have suggested that televised separation surgeries constitute ‘performances of subjection insofar as they stage, theatricalize, and cite the assujettissement—that is, the simultaneous creation and constraint—of the “human” as singularly embodied’.<sup>69</sup> In ‘The Girl with Eight Limbs’, the surgical procedure works to affirm a notion of the individual subject embedded in neoliberal political economy. As Jessica

<sup>62</sup> In her discussion of the highly publicised court case regarding the proposed surgical separation of conjoined twins Jodie and Mary Attard, Ford claims that the judges’ observations suggested ‘it would be better to be separate and dead than alive and conjoined’, p. 47.

<sup>63</sup> Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE, 2002), p. 63.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.47.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.68.

<sup>67</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 143.

<sup>68</sup> Butler, p. 181

<sup>69</sup> Clark and Myser, ‘Being Humaned’, p. 351.

Cadwallader has claimed, whereas 'pathology is conceptualised as non-political, as a truth which pre-exists the social and political order', the act of diagnosing perceived 'pathologies' is in fact deeply implicated in regulating the body politic.<sup>70</sup> In the documentary, Tatma's conjoined body is discursively constructed as two discrete bodily sites owned by 'Lakshmi' (as the 'autosite'), and the 'parasite' respectively. Indeed, insofar as the voiceover claims that 'Lakshmi has two arms and two legs that function normally [...] but below them, in mirror image, are two more sets of arms and legs that belong to her parasitic twin'<sup>71</sup> the voice over attempts to discursively reinstate the boundaries of the singular, autonomous subject in the face of Tatma's embodied challenge to them.

If the surgery constitutes a process of reconstructing Tatma as an individual, it also necessarily involves providing the physical conditions that will enable her future economic self-sufficiency insofar as economic self-sufficiency is bound up with the capitalist notion of what it is to be an individual, autonomous subject. A number of articles covertly emphasised this point by highlighting the apparent gain in Tatma's functional independence post-surgery; a *CNN.com* article noted that 'Lakshmi must now learn to walk on her own two legs',<sup>72</sup> reworking a common phrase associated with economic independence in reference to Tatma's surgical normalisation. The various media articles which reported the surgery thus engaged in the production of a neoliberal 'imaginary of the body'<sup>73</sup>. Indeed, the various media articles which circulated regarding the separation surgery engaged in the discursive production of a body which might function as an analogue for the neoliberal state.

The media representation of Tama's anomalous body attest to Nan Boyd's observation that the 'body remains a highly politicized, unstable, and symbolic structure, intimately connected to the state'.<sup>74</sup> While Tatma's 'parasite' is associated with the loss of resources, both on a personal and national level, insofar as Tatma's anomalous embodiment is the focus of the *National Geographic* documentary, her 'parasite' functions as a source of material gain for both the medical institutions and broadcasting companies involved in its production. Indeed, the connection that is established between Tatma's body and the body politic highlights the instability and interdependence of 'parasite' and 'autosite'; the insecurity of the economic, ideological and geographic boundaries that are established between the

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<sup>70</sup> Jessica Cadwallader, 'Diseased States: The Role of Pathology in the (Re)Production of the Body Politic' in *Somatechnics: Queering the Technologisation of Bodies*, ed. by Samantha Murray and Nikki Sullivan (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2012), pp.13-28. (p. 29).

<sup>71</sup> 'The Girl with Eight Limbs'.

<sup>72</sup> Amy Burkholder, '8-Limbed "Goddess" Baby Becoming Normal Little Girl', *CNN.com*, 20 Jun 2008 [accessed 1 May 2014].

<sup>73</sup> My insight here builds on Cadwallader's observations that a 'specific imaginary of "the body" is taken to represent the ideal citizen in legal' and socio-political discourse, p. 18.

<sup>74</sup> Nan Boyd 'Bodies in Motion Lesbian and Transsexual Histories' in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.420 -433 (p. 421).

'centre' and 'the periphery'. The process of constructing Bihar as an image of Third World underdevelopment is in fact instrumental in the production of revenue both for the Western broadcasting company and the privately-owned hospital situated in India's most industrialised region. The revenue generated by the supposed bodily and geographic 'parasites' undermines the autosite/parasite hierarchy established by the documentary.<sup>75</sup> In the documentary under consideration, it is not simply Western power structures that seek to gain from the representation of India's rural periphery as a pathological appendage; rather, capitalist power structures located within the Indian nation-state work in concert with the Western media to generate a mutually beneficial flow of capital.

In 'The Girl with Eight Limbs' the representation of Tatma's conjoined embodiment and the display of her surgical normalisation functions to regulate both the individual body and social body<sup>76</sup> in a way which is mutually reinforcing. At the level of the 'individual' body, the biomedical construction of Tatma's twin as a pathological appendage serves to reiterate singular autonomous identity as natural. Yet on a wider political and social level, the construction of Tatma's conjoined embodiment as a symbol for the Indian body politic, in which the 'parasite' comes to represent India's rural 'periphery' and the 'autosite' its industrialised 'centre', serves to legitimate and reproduce existing structural inequalities within the nation state. Insofar as Tatma's 'undeveloped' twin becomes a metaphor for India's 'undeveloped' periphery, the documentary positions the Bihar residents, by implication, as 'undeveloped' subjects. The surgical transformation at the level of the anomalous body thus apparently functions as both a metaphor for and enactment of wider processes of social and cultural transformation within the Indian nation state. Yet the conditions that produce Tatma's normative embodiment reveals this globalized conception of normativity as a construct. The 'Girl with Eight Limbs' and the various media discourses that circulate around Tatma reveal the economic and institutional power structures that subtend the production of the modern body and the modern individual.

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<sup>75</sup> Brennan, Timothy, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 101, p. 112.

<sup>76</sup> I am indebted to Nikolas Rose's work here: *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 52.



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