



# Memory and Identity: Revisiting the techniques of subversion in *Bhimayana*

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**Abstract**— The graphic novel *Bhimayana* illustrates the life of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and his lifelong fight against the system of untouchability and the prevailing caste system in India. The text distinguishes itself by the uniqueness of the graphic illustrations notably the absence of panels and boxes. The text is divided into four sections, each of which covers an important aspect related to the life of the Dalit community. The final section focuses on the art of *Bhimayana* and the efforts of the artists involved in creating the book. History and biography mingle in the ethnic spaces of Pradhan Gondh art to create a unique style which captures the struggles in the lives of the Dalit community. Gond art is the paintings of Pardhan Gonds, the indigenous people living near Madhya Pradesh in Central India. The patterns used in the illustrations add multiple layers of meaning to the dialogues. The mutuality between the humans and the animals, uniquely drawn creatures, the variety of colour combinations, the beauty of patterned designs make the text a distinguished work of art. The text works on the 'memory' of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, his struggles and achievements in life. The text is unique in that it uses a tribal art form to depict the life of a Dalit. Ambedkar's experiences in life is synonymous with the drudgery and bitter experiences faced by millions of Dalits all over India.



**Keywords**— Graphic fiction, *Bhimayana*, memory, identity, dalit, gond art.

## Graphic Fiction- Evolution

Graphic novel has emerged as a unique form of storytelling in recent years. The merging of the image with the text to create a unique form of storytelling is not new in the literary field. Comics has engaged the literary world since the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The roots of the comic book industry can be traced back to the late 1800s, but it wasn't until the post-Depression era that newspaper cartoons gained widespread popularity, propelling comics into a significant commercial enterprise.

The Golden Age of comic books, while its exact timeframe is debated, is generally considered to have begun with Superman's debut in 1938. Superman, the brainchild of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, remains one of the most iconic figures in comic book history. His popularity paved the way for a new genre featuring characters with extraordinary abilities, hidden identities, and vibrant costumes - the superhero.

In the wake of Superman's success, a wave of superhero characters emerged, including Batman and Robin, Wonder Woman, Plastic Man, Green Lantern, and the Flash. Among these, Captain Marvel stood out as a particularly successful creation, with his comics often surpassing Superman's sales figures throughout the 1940s. This era marked a significant shift in the comic book industry, establishing superheroes as a dominant force in popular culture and setting the stage for decades of storytelling to come.

During the Second World War, the sale of comic book sales saw a significant rise. These affordable and easily transportable publications offered uplifting, nationalistic narratives where virtue prevailed over villainy. The storylines mirrored the era's occurrences and ideals. Characters embodying American values gained widespread appeal, with Captain America standing out as a prime example—a superhero specifically designed to bolster the nation's wartime morale and efforts.

The teen genre also gained interest in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A comic strip featuring a red-head named Archibald 'Archie' Andrews debuted in 1941, becoming so popular the company that created it changed its name to Archie Comics in 1946. Animal and jungle themed comics were led by Walt Disney, featuring Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Tarzan and were popular among the children.

The Golden Age marked a pivotal moment in comic history, solidifying the medium's place as a legitimate art form within mainstream culture. During this era, comics developed their unique visual and narrative language, establishing distinctive creative norms that would shape the industry for decades to come.

Graphic fiction uses the techniques of comics to impart liveliness to the text. In the simplest terms, graphic novels are longer comic stories that average more than the usual twenty-two pages of single issues. In the late 1970s those children who had embraced the comics boom of the 1960s were now older and sought more realistic and mature comics. The major American comic publishers responded with more violent material and, sometimes, more intelligent comics—many of them in the form of books and albums, mimicking the marketing of comics in Europe. These were the immediate precursors of what would come to be known as graphic novels.

The first American graphic novel, *Blackmark*, was created by Gil Kane in 1971 but Eisner's *A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories* (1978) is considered as the first graphic novel by common consent. The popularity of 'The Death of Captain Marvel' by Jim Starlin in 1982 put graphic novels on the map. The boom in adult comics in the 1980s was centred around three works: Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986–87), and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* (1980–86) by Art Spiegelman.

Art Spiegelman characterized a graphic novel as a comic book lengthy enough to require a bookmark, using his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* as an example. Eddie Campbell, co-creator with Alan Moore of the equally substantial *From Hell*, takes a different approach, rejecting narrow definitions based on size or format. In his 2006 manifesto, Campbell reimagines the graphic novel as an international creative movement dedicated to broadening the narrative techniques and thematic possibilities of the medium.

In India, graphic fiction has evolved from the fertile ground of Amar Chitra Katha comics centered around the culturally rich tales of Mahabharata and Ramayana. Prior to its publication, readership of comics was underrated and considered as 'low' and 'cheap'. *Chacha Chaudhary*, *Diamond Comics*, *Indrajit Comics* containing stories of

international comics like *Phantom*, *Flash Gordon*, *Mandrake* and *Tinkle* were popular among Indian audience but it was primarily considered as meant for kids.

In 1994 Indie comic book creator Orijit Sen published *River of Stories*, what many refer to as India's first Graphic Novel. Loosely based on the politically charged Narmada River Valley Projects, he was the first of so many 'comics with a conscience', using the seemingly child-like medium to tell a deeper story. Today graphic novels have detailed plotlines and emphasizes on the depth of storytelling. It has matured into a new literary genre in itself. Sarnath Banerjee, Vishwajyoti Ghosh, Parismita Singh, Malik Sajad and Amruta Patil are some of the important writers related to graphic fiction.

### ***Bhimayana* and the art of subversion:**

*Bhimayana* is a text based on the life Dr. B.R Ambedkar. The graphic novel *Bhimayana* illustrates the life of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and his lifelong fight against the system of untouchability and the prevailing caste system in India. The text distinguishes itself by the uniqueness of the graphic illustrations notably the absence of panels and boxes. The text is divided into four sections, each of which covers an important aspect related to the life of the Dalit community. The final section focuses on the art of *Bhimayana* and the efforts of the artists involved in creating the book.

History and biography mingle in the ethnic spaces of Pradhan Gondh art to create a unique style which captures the struggles in the lives of the Dalit community. Gond art is the paintings of Pardhan Gonds, the indigenous people living near Madhya Pradesh in Central India. The patterns used in the illustrations add multiple layers of meaning to the dialogues. The mutuality between the humans and the animals, uniquely drawn creatures, the variety of colour combinations, the beauty of patterned designs make the text a distinguished work of art. The text works on the 'memory' of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, his struggles and achievements in life. The text is unique in that it uses a tribal art form to depict the life of a Dalit.

The most distinguishing feature of the text is the unique way of using dialogue boxes. The innovative method of merging animal imagery to the speech bubbles add depth to the dialogue. The method is to merge the emotion with the words encircled as texts. The other is the absence of the regular text boxes and borders which is a major feature of graphic texts. The text in *Bhimayana* is free flowing and is aligned to the relaxed movement of the human eye. *Bhimayana*, "doesn't conform to the template of a conventional graphic novel, making it a creative first in its own right. The so-called mainstream graphic novels usually follow a set pattern with features like panels, gutters, easily

discernible graphics, and so on. *Bhimayana*, on the other hand, has its own unique style.”(Chowdhury)

The book pens with a discussion on caste and whether ‘caste is fair’. The next page is a dedicated space to the news articles on atrocities committed on Dalits by the upper castes. “The juxtaposition of the literary with the prosaic reality of the news snippets, creates a critical literacy about casteism, based on fusing of two different linguistic registers, producing a grammar of visual design to unpack social meanings of signs structured through social usages.” (Chakraborty 4). The illustrators masterfully capture the dynamics of caste hierarchy, with Dalit characters relegated to the page's periphery while Savarna characters command the center, compelling us to question and confront societal norms. This deliberate spatial arrangement not only highlights the entrenched marginalization of Dalits but also underscores the privilege and dominance afforded to the Savarna community, urging viewers to reevaluate ingrained biases.

The book briefly gives a glimpse of the drudgery of the life of Dr. Ambedkar. The unique flavour of the text results from the beautiful intermingling of Gondh art, a tribal art form to depict the life of Ambedkar who belonged to the scheduled tribe and lived on the outer margins of the society. The gondh art acts creates a network of semiotic system within the text.

The Gondhs are part of the tribal society. Among the tribal populations of India, the Gonds stand out by their numbers, the vast expanse of their habitat, and their historical importance. The majority of Gonds are found today in the state of Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Their main concentrations are the Satpura Plateau, where the western type of Gondi is spoken, and the district of Mandla, where the Gonds have adopted the local dialect of Hindi. The former princely state of Bastar, now included in Madhya Pradesh, is the home of three important Gond groups, namely, the Muria, the Hill Marias, and the so-called Bisonhorn Marias.

The lives of the Gondhs are deeply rooted in nature. The presence of nature is depicted in their culture where the walls of their houses are adorned with patterns from nature and life. “Traditionally, Gond paintings were created on the mud walls of their homes. These paintings are known for their intricate and vibrant designs, drawing inspiration from the local environment and tribal culture. Common themes in Gond art include depictions of the region's rich flora and fauna, with animals such as peacocks, birds, crabs, and various mythical creatures playing a prominent role. The Mahua tree, considered the ‘Tree of Life,’ features prominently in Gond paintings, with its flowers, fruits, seeds, and leaves symbolizing vitality. They often feature fine lines, dots, and vibrant colors to depict nature, wildlife,

and tribal folklore. Gond art is deeply rooted in a reverence for nature, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human life and the environment.” (Thamanna 572)

In the text *Bhimayana* the folk art takes the centre stage that delve into the richness of the tribal life at the same time linking themselves to the ‘marginal’ status of Ambedkar who had to estrange himself from Hinduism because of the bitterness of the varna system. In the system clearly delineated within Hindu sacred texts, there can be only four varnas – that is, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra – since the varnas collectively represent discrete parts of the first being, Purusha.

The Brahmins are the priests and teachers and were born from the head of Purusha; the Kshatriyas, the warriors and rulers, were born from the shoulders; the Vaisyas, or traders and merchants, were born from the thighs; and the Sudras, labourers and craftspeople, were born from the feet. The first three varnas were considered twice-born and hence purer than the fourth category, the Sudras, who were once-born. An unofficial fifth category, avarnas, existed outside the varna categories and were historically referred to by many names, including ‘achhoots’, ‘Harijans’, or ‘untouchables’. Individuals from this lowest stratum of castes were considered to be impure and polluting since their inherited occupations often involved tasks considered to be physically and ritually polluting, such as working with dead bodies and animals or removing human waste. “Dalit, meaning ‘broken’ or ‘scattered,’ is the term commonly used now to refer to this lowest of castes; the Indian government uses the term Scheduled Castes to refer to this group. The Adivasis, the Indigenous peoples, also known as Scheduled Tribes, also existed outside the four varnas and, like the Dalits, are the focus of affirmative action in India.” (Goghari 2023)

The richness of the Gondh art and its flexibility in using symbols and imageries is used in the text. “Gond art, which finds its roots in the Pardhan Gond community within the broader Gond tribal culture in central India, serves as a testament to their rich heritage. Traditionally, Gond art has been a means of preserving their community's cultural legacy, encompassing genealogies, legends, and oral histories. The pioneering Indian artist Jangarh Singh Shyam was instrumental in bringing Gond art to the mainstream, ultimately paving the way for prominent artists like the Vyams.” (Mondal 601)

The first chapter of the text is titled ‘Water’. The chapter traces a particular incident related to the life of little Ambedkar where he was not allowed to drink water from the common pump as it would pollute the entire water. The untouchable mahar could not even have a haircut as even the barber would not touch them.

“They have brushes for the Buffalo and shears for the goat

They won't trim a mahar's hair-They'd rather cut his throat  
Boys at the well, even beasts at the trough,  
May Drink till They Burst  
But the village turns a desert  
When I try to quench my thirst"

(Vyam 23)

The text graphically etches out the lives of the dalits who were considered as untouchables. The effect of the colonial Raj on the Hindu varna system is evident in the words of the village headmaster who criticizes the British government for not heeding the religious conventions of the Hindus: "Damn and blast the stupid British government for letting untouchables study in the same schools as well-born boys. White folks haven't a clue about our beliefs." (Vyam 21)

Even the sweeper of the school considers himself 'above' the mahars. He would not clean the premises of the school if Bhim's school bag is left in the compound. Water is thus personified as a generous and healing woman in the image of the handpump whose flow has been stalled by the rigid walls of caste.

Bhim's family enjoyed a better financial status among the mahars because of Bhim's grandfather who was a soldier in the British army and his father was a Subedar. As Bhim's grandmother says: "Or we'd still be taking out rubbish from the village". (Vyam 25) The travel to Goregaon turns into a nightmare for the children. The station master tries to help the children as they look smart and well-dressed but his words turn to abuses when he gets to know they are mahars. The image of the station master merges into the image of a barking dog. Even the cartman who takes double the fare for taking them to Goregaon would not sit with them as he would be 'polluted'.

The boys are thirsty from the long ride into the night. Even the toll collector on way refuses them water and the children remain thirsty and hungry till the next morning when they reach their father's house. The incident which happened because his father's peon misplaced the letter proved to be an eye-opener for young Ambedkar who understood the deep rootedness of the caste system in the Indian mind. The text contrasts the benign looking non-human objects like train to the sharp and cruel images of casteist humans represented as ferocious animals. "The text offers an extraordinary contrast between cruel upper caste humans and humane non-humans. Figures in pages forty-eight and forty nine, show Ambedkar's words as droplets of water, showering forth, reviving the waste land of castist India with the freshness of a dream of equality." (Chakraborty 7)

The book also talks about the recent day similar events in Satara district related to water disputes among the mahars

and caste Hindus. The Unit ends with the struggles of Ambedkar for A dalit identity related to water. The first and the second Mahad Satyagraha were long drawn struggles that went a long way in stepping up the identity of the Dalits. Bhim's question to the fishes has an answer in itself when he says: "If they say their religion is our religion, then their rights and ours must be equal. But is that the case? If not, on what grounds do they say we must remain in the Hindu fold in spite of Kicks and rebuffs?" (Vyam 51)

The section concludes with a news report on a pond in Chakwara village in Jaipur where the Brahminical Hindus decide to pollute the pond by open defecation and direction sewer water into it ever since the court ruled that the mahars could also use it. Lower castes continue to lose their dignity everyday even in the so-called modern century.

The basic right of a decent shelter too was denied to Ambedkar as the events in the second Unit reveal. Ambedkar who is now an educated young man returns to serve the Maharaja of Baroda who had sponsored his education. But no hotel or inn would put him up. He manages to get a room in a Parsi hotel by paying extra rent and a false name but the Parsis warn to kill him if he doesn't leave. Ambedkar had experienced social equality for the first time during the course of his education in Columbia university under the tutorship of great professors but on his return to India he realizes the fact that neither a well-paid job or education would earn him a status nor acceptance in society.

The third unit captures the difficulties of travelling for an untouchable through the eyes of a mahar. Ambedkar's sight-seeing trip with fellow mahars to a fort in Aurangabad almost ends in violence when the group is confronted by the muslims near the fort for having used the water in the public water tank. Ambedkar had to intervene and use his status to put the situation under control. His experiences taught him that an untouchable remained 'polluted' for every community and even for other religions. And the only way that he found out was to 'Educate, Organize and Agitate.' But Ambedkar's vision for a separate electorate for untouchables to reclaim the dignity of the community remained unsuccessful much to the intervention of Gandhi. The book very interestingly details a drawing of Gandhi, A symbol of non-violence with an axe in his hand-the axe representing the dual concept of violence and also its sharpness at cutting things. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism when he realized the fact the bitter truths related to Hinduism. He was determined not to die a Hindu.

The last unit contains the art of Bhimayana and the lives the artists where they discuss the different type of colours used in the text and from where they source the mud that it is used in the Gondh paintings done in every household. The artists quote incidents similar to the ostracization faced by



Ambedkar. *Bhimayana* not only chronicles the struggles Dr. B.R. Ambedkar endured as an untouchable in Indian society but also sheds light on the challenges faced by Gond and Adivasi artists in contemporary times. In the afterword, one of the artists, Durgabai, recounts a painful experience when she and her husband arrived at Navayana's office in New Delhi. The building's landlady refused them entry, dismissively labeling the couple as "yokels" (Vyam 99) and refusing to believe they were artists. Durgabai narrates, both visually and textually, how this incident was deeply hurtful and reminded them of the discrimination Ambedkar faced. Through its unique storytelling and visual artistry, the text interrogates contemporary Indian history, highlighting the persistent inequalities while celebrating the creative expressions of the Pardhan Gonds, who, like Ambedkar, have endured systemic discrimination and prejudice.

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