

Ambedkar out of the frame

This is a graphic book based on Ambedkar's autobiographical notes, culled from the section titled "Waiting for a Visa". The Foreword by John Berger describes the book in terms of "a conference of corporeal experiences across generations, full of pain and empathy, and nurtured by a complicity and endurance that can outlive the market". It also talks about the lack of rectangular framing and unilinear time as heroic modes. S. Anand's Epilogue at the end details how he carried volumes of graphic novels by avant-garde artists Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, Will Eisner, Osama Tezuka, Marjani Satrapi and Shaun Tan for his first session with the Vyams, the Pardhan Gond artists chosen to visually interpret Ambedkar's life. While the publishers shy away from calling it a graphic novel, and stick to the more universal category 'graphic book', the overarching frame in which it is slotted, marketed, and reviewed is that of the graphic novel. The blurb, for instance, says: "Defying conventional grammar, they infuse fresh energy into the graphic idiom."

It is necessary here to identify the need to reference the graphic novel and also the need to turn against it. Graphic novels, a fairly recent niche category of the publishing industry, can be said to cater to the combined power of urban youth and pop art culture as opposed to the more degraded comic. The integration between art and pop art effected under late capitalism/postmodernism revels in what Jameson identifies as the pastiche or kitsch mode, a layering which is premised on the logic of a circular self-referentiality, where the sign can only point inwards, and externality, history or the outside reality is shorn of any significant meaning. Given this orientation to capital's larger (un)truth, the political or oppositional content of most graphic novels becomes increasingly suspect. In what ways does the comic *Bhimayana* plugged as an anti-genre retain its oppositionality? How is the folk idiom of the Pardhan Gonds here not just another commodified appropriation of tribal art, pervasive under the sign of an ethnic Indo-chic?

The artwork is extremely beautiful. Its beauty stems not from an ornamental excess or prettiness, but from being comfortable in one's own artistic skin and oeuvre. The Vyams refused to be influenced by the suffocating boxed art of the graphic novels that Anand had brought along. They needed their characters to breathe in *kbula* open space and so they devised undulating *digna* patterns for marking panels. Train journeys and conversations on the road take on the serpentine pattern, moving in coiled loops, the in-between spaces interspersed with trees, grass, animals grazing, birds flying, but all of them interpolated as listeners to the narrative. Some of the animals are shown really twisting around as if straining to hear the fading conversation. It's like a *katha*, a story telling session. The multiple eyes shining like stars seem to suggest a watching-over, or a silent witness. The skies are not just empty space, but shaped like animals, containing the other species in their fold. This



**Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability
Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar**
Art by Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam; Story by Srividya
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kind of animistic excess and fluidity of morphing forms tells us something about the nature of imagination in Gondi artwork, in contrast to the void-fixated imagination-defying Vedic cosmos.

But despite the fluidity and the interconnectedness, this is not merely a mytho-epic universe where the ugly and the beautiful, violence and civility seamlessly flow into an epic sublime. On the contrary, violence takes on forms that make it hard for us to preserve an aesthetic wholeness. After the Mahad satyagraha, the upper caste villagers are graphically shown defecating into the tank in order to make it toxic. A supine and fattish Gandhi is shown resting with a saw, a metaphor for his insidious sabotage of the separate electorate for the depressed classes. The venomous speech of the upper caste characters is depicted through speech bubbles shaped as scorpion stings and the various upper caste characters are shown to grow tails between their legs. The casteist station master has a limp penis painted on his trouser front. The Parsi mob which comes to attack Ambedkar has sticks for bodies. The vocabulary of counter-abuse is both sophisticated and effective.

More pertinent is the general ambience of dismemberment—people are randomly represented by a scatter of legs, feet, arms, hands, and heads. The profusion of hands, feet and fingers is mostly an invocation of incessant labour and toil. But the fingers are also accusatory. The Dalit characters are often encased within imaginary vehicles even when they are walking, and these vehicles are in the form of different animals. Could this be meant as a protective gesture—that even when the odds against them are so severe, nature is looking out for them? This importation of a tribal ecology of subsistence and communal life blending into a Dalit psychosphere might provide a healing touch, since the tribal is (theoretically at least) totally removed from the Hindu anxiety of pollution and purity. In fact, the popular stereotype of the tribal as a denizen of hills and forests is a person with martial dignity and independence. The Dalit on the contrary ekes out a bare living in the grubby shadow and gutters of Brahminical society. But while the transplantation works aesthetically, is it not doing violence to the specific historicity of each category, especially considering that Ambedkar had categorically rejected the Dravidian origin theory of the Untouchable, preferring instead a political explanation of untouchability to the racial one? According to him, Untouchables are those Buddhists who refused to abandon their religion after the Brahmins took over.

What has necessitated this bringing together of the very distinct life worlds of the tribal and the Dalit? While Dalits might consider themselves superior to the tribal on the basis of their ambivalent status in the caste hierarchy (casting the tribal as a mere savage), the tribal is able to flaunt an alternate holistic structure. In this book at least, what we have is the overarching superiority of the Gondi frame, stretching above and beyond the modernist Ambedkarite one steeped in a blueprint for social democracy! How does the tribal ecology facilitate Ambedkar's



constitutional and developmental vision of social democracy?

In fact, in a weird twisted logic, the tribal democratic communal ethos provides a more habitable space for imagining the annihilation of caste than the realist modernist ethic, in which political struggle is articulated in the language of colonial masters. For instance, Ambedkar had warned his followers against making a personality cult out of his name and was deeply contemptuous of the subservient political culture rife among Congress Party workers, especially vis-à-vis the cult of Gandhi. The irreverent style of Pardhan Gondi art helps facilitate this de-iconising, by drawing Ambedkar's individuality as inseparable from the collective destiny of his caste people. He is always shown to be with his brothers or colleagues. In contrast, the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic on Ambedkar drawn by Mahar artist Dilip Kadam is about his iconic individual stature. In *Bhimayana*, his humanity prevents him from being cited as the great man. He is shown to feel bad, react and challenge people's abusive behaviour. He is not modest. He flaunts his credentials as a highly educated person who has studied abroad; he lies whenever it is expedient to save himself insult. He feels angry, and never succumbs to charitable thoughts about his oppressors.

Two contrary storytelling styles vie for space within the comic, one the mythic Gondi style which enacts the stories, the other the reportage which tells it, through facts exchanged between urban educated upper caste/class citizens and newspaper reports. The Gondi style makes it possible to live out the horror and therefore does not need to furnish proof of it. This mythic

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world naturally rejects the realism of different physiognomies, or the need to differentiate between Brahmin and Dalit on the basis of skin colour, skull size, relative flatness of the nose, and so on. The Gondi interpretation of Ambedkar's autobiographical notes restores perspective by enacting an embodied horror through such things as scattered body parts, a telling comment on a Hindu moral economy that is hierarchised on the basis of anatomical splitting—head, shoulders, hands, torso and feet. By drawing an equivalence between disparate body parts, which are shown to be swimming in a non-symmetrical frame, the hierarchy is smashed. Indeed, these strategies are far more effective than a score keeping of the innumerable acts of violence inflicted second by second on Dalits in India today. The indigenous frame and medium is able to inscribe the totality in ways that do not compromise the Dalits' dignity, since they are not rendered through the tools of the ruling caste/class. The same brush paints the upper caste as well as the Dalits, putting them on par with each other, unlike a scenario in which the little people are painted through the tools and techniques

of the dominant art, demonising, reducing and exoticising them.

The second style—marked by an empirical conception of the world based on proof—is rendered through a multiplication of horror narratives, a horror that is endemic to knowledge about caste violence that stares out of the pages of our morning newspapers. This horror-induced politics generally has its origins in bourgeois self-consciousness. Why did the comic feel the need to retain this kind of linear political consciousness? Did the urgency of the question of caste violence, the need to rescue Ambedkar from being appropriated by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, from the neglect of history, and from divisive tendencies within the Dalit movement necessitate a direct spelling out of truth and hence the mobilisation along utilitarian lines? Of course, the portraits and blue statues of Ambedkar in the realist mode are far from located in a bourgeois culture. In fact, in them we find a subaltern appropriation of a bourgeois mode.

The graphic novel as it stands today is at its most political, experimental, non-linear, and richly textured, and yet it needs to transcend its location in

capital, to "outlive the market". That is why residual cultural forms (which derive their oppositional value from being part of a different economy, but are fully active and dynamic in the present, rather than mere survivals) are being mined to imagine and produce a truly political content. The Gond Pardhans are modern subjects facing the onslaught of capital and responding to it as much as the Dalits. But their performative art uses forms and techniques that cannot be made sense of in terms of bourgeois values alone. There is no subservience here, no paying homage to the comic masters.

While it is encouraging that the work of Durgabai and Subhash is being adapted to political use, one must be alert to the fact that reification and incorporation work also through acknowledgement and appreciation, ways to reconcile marginal and marginalised communities to the status quo. Too much emphasis on the formal aspects of their art—texture, textuality, and the symbolic—at the expense of the political uses to which they put this art, might leave it open to commodification and vice versa. Perhaps it is a lack of political faith in the textured narrative's capacity to do little more than tell a story which compels the return to the unilinear discourse, the spelling out of the Ambedkarite desideratum. This is not to say that a genuine criticism can never emerge from within capital, and that the Ambedkarite location in a modernist aesthetics is totally co-opted, but that losing the dialectic between form and content could be lethal for any real critique. But by and large, the aesthetic and political power of the book resonates together! ■