



Indian Graphic Novels and the Dismantling Caste Boundaries

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Abstract

The practice of untouchability against the lower castes, such as the shudras and the atishudras by the upper caste factions of the Indian society have for long been the hard truth, owing to the undeniable influence of the caste system. Apart from struggling against the British Raj, the Dalits had to engage in pitched battles for some of the most basic rights, with their own upper caste countrymen. The ensuing power politics further contributed towards making the lives of these marginalized communities miserable, by forcing them to question their very position within the social strata. Based on Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* (1873), Srividya Natarajan's and Aparajita Ninan's graphic novel *A Gardner in the Wasteland*, serves adequately in ripping off the mask of Brahmanical oppression, by exposing the historical and mythological manipulations that had been imposed upon the society. Likewise, Srividya Natarajan and S Anand's graphical narrative *Bhimayana*; created in close association with the artwork of such reputed Gond artists, Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, also interweave historical incidents with contemporary events and bring out the incidents in the life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar.

Graphic novels are the ideal way to present an argument because, in addition to words, the symbolic usage of portraits and images grab readers' gaze and make a lasting impression on their hearts. In both of these graphic novels, however, symbolism and metaphorical pictures are continually used to expose the bane of the four-level Hindu caste hierarchy, whereby Brahmins are believed to occupy the top tier of the society, while the lower castes who are considered untouchables are condemned to the very bottom of it. As a result, almost 10 years after their publication, these two works are still useful for learning about the untouchables' humiliating past and examining the contemporary societal conditions. As a result, my primary concern in this paper will be to determine the relevance of these two ground-breaking works in today's society, the significance of graphic novels in presenting such important socio-political issues, and thereby also determine the significance of these two graphic novels from a global perspective, in order to understand how far Jyotirao Phule, Savitri Phule, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar struggled to bring about equality and dignity for the depressed classes of the society, commonly referred to as Dalits.

Keywords: Graphic novel, Anti-Caste movement, mythology, power politics, marginalized, identity-crisis, Dalit literature



The prohibition of caste discrimination in the year 1948 and its enshrinement in the Indian constitution, as a code of law, was aimed at creating an even-handed consortium for all. However, the reality of the matter turned out to be starkly different from what was dreamt of. The deep-rooted prejudice kept on expanding its roots in the mind of the people, and they continued to demarcate their community on the basis of caste, stigmatising a particular group of people as untouchables for ages. Omprakash Valmiki in his ground-breaking work, *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life*¹ had therefore rightly remarked, “Caste is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, caste determines his or her destiny...”².

After India gained independence, the ascension to political power enabled the upper castes or the savarnas, to further assert their dominance by muzzling the misery of the Dalits. Since, lower caste groups, known as 'asavarnas,' had limited access to such privileges, like education or economic affluence, the higher caste groups, known as 'savarnas,' had the necessary economic and political advantage to consolidate power for themselves. The caste system had therefore directly assisted in securing distinct remunerative strengths for different castes. Upper caste groups used financial solvency to convert economic hegemony into political power. As Arundhati Roy³ points out,

The gist of it was the caste (privileged) Hindus wanted the power to close the door on untouchables, but on no account could untouchables be given the power to close the door on themselves. The Masters knew that Choice was Power⁴.

Hence, bringing about any remarkable changes within the very framework of casteist politics is truly difficult, as it would involve bringing about substantive changes in the society as well as the collective mindset of the people of India. However, there remains a glimmer of hope since, caste dynamics had lately shifted as a result of changes in the Indian economy, and as such it could be successful in ending the monopoly of the caste prejudice in modern India. In addition to these changes in the Indian economy, expansion of education to all castes, also largely contributed to the democratization of the Indian political system. However, educational liberalization is frequently found to be futile in the face of deeply rooted prejudices in people's thinking. Rape, suicide, genocide, and other criminal acts of



social ostracization continue to be recorded on a daily basis, necessitating the development of creative educational approaches to address these heinous crimes.

Graphic novels are a modern manifestation of visual art that paints an authored representation of the world and allows readers to travel through it. Appeared for the first time in 1970, the term "graphic" refers to the usage of cartoon drawings, whereas "novel" refers to the portrayal of fictional and non-fictional stories. While reading a graphic novel, readers engage in a complicated cognitive process to build their visual literacy because graphic narratives offer a complex interaction of written text and visual illustration, speech and thinking bubbles, perspective shifts, panel configurations, word balloons, different choice of fonts, colour, and shading. As Scott McCloud points out, "when you look at a photo of a realistic drawing of a face - you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon - you see your-self"⁵.

Although, in the eyes of the "cruel social arbiters of Indian society", Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was looked down upon to be "...simply a Mahar, and they could not care less if his scholarship was as vast as the sky."⁶; while Savitribai Phuley was dubbed to be a "shameless sudra slut", who instead of educating little children must "go back to the kitchen where she belongs". Yet both of these social reformers had stood by their demands of equality like a strong pillar so as to secure social justice for the Dalits. Whereas politicians used defenceless people for their own selfish ends, Jyotirao Phuley, his wife Savitribai Phuley, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar battled tirelessly for them to free them from the cultural stigma they were subjected to. They toiled tirelessly to provide them with a respected platform for living in society. The graphic novel, *Gardener in the Wasteland* is closely based on Jyotirao Phule's well-known work, *Gulamgiri* (1873). Srividya Natarajan had contributed to the framing of the narrative, while Aparajita Ninan's work helped in the development of the graphic elucidation of the issues dealt with in the work *A Gardner in the Wasteland*. To state in a nutshell, Jyotirao and Savitri Phule carried the anti-caste movement's flag, Srividya Natarajan and Aparajita Ninan is careful enough to graphically situate their contribution against the backdrop of contemporary society. Likewise, in case of the graphic novel *Bhimayana*, Pardhan Gond artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam got together to interweave historical incidents with contemporary events and delineate before us the struggles faced by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar as a Dalit in pre-independent India. These two graphic novels make an indelible impression on the reader's



mind, causing them to reflect further on the social apartheid of isolating people based on caste, and minutely captures people's pain and frustration, the subsequent manipulation at the hands of power, and their eventual battle to push the boundaries of caste, before choking themselves. The following paper will examine both of these graphic novels in order to argue how the graphic medium of representation could serve as the most effective means to mobilize and educate the masses against caste-based violence and oppression in contemporary India. The paper primarily poses the idea that since the graphic medium of delineation has the ability to go beyond the boundaries of language, it could really serve as a powerful medium of protest against any boundaries that try to delimit the ethos of humanity by imposing over it the parochial casteism.

Portrayal of Bhim's through Gond art

Durgabai Vyam and Subhas Vyam celebrated their search for 'khulla' (openness) in *Bhimayana* by exhibiting Madhya Pradesh's famous Pardhan Gond Art in their book, and this search purposely represents Ambedkar's yearning for Dalit people's independence. They employed 'dignas'⁷ (ancient auspicious decoration on home walls) instead of panels, rejecting the monotonous photorealism and cinematic establishment shots of sequential visual art. They created a scene without a horizon with free-falling animals, birds, and trees. The symbolic speech-bubbles fashioned like a bird symbolize a soft-spoken Dalit's voice, bubbles having eyes within represent a thinking bubble, and bubbles holding words of hatred appears with strings to represent the harsh words of domination. Likewise, the personification of non-living objects helps to create a bridge for the audience to connect with the characters. For instance, water is indicated by the representation of a fish. Similarly, images of happiness are drawn using dancing peacocks; while images of hardship are portrayed as oxen harnessing oil press. Every page brings new meaning and fresh understanding to the reader.

Bhimrao's life, a life of every Dalit

At the very outset it should be mentioned that the very title of the graphic novel, *Bhimayana* is derived from the name of the Indian Sanskrit epic, *Ramayana*. However, the naming has a

special significance, as the present graphic novel does not follow an impudent, exaggerated replica of the Indian Sanskrit epic, in which a high-cast mythological god prince received the punishment of exile into the wilderness from royal luxury. Instead, the present graphic novel offers a critique of untouchability practiced against the Dalits, and in turn satirizes the banishment of Dalits, like Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, from everyday civic dignities such as water, shelter, and travel. In addition. The graphic novel also proposes an alternative definition of a true Hero, which questions the ancient depiction of heroism. The novel's title rejects the heroism shown in Hindu mythology, claiming that Hindu mythology is nothing more than a manipulation of happenings by people in power, to explain the plight of Hindu upper-class society members. Omprakash Valmiki is therefore right to question, that, “Why didn't an epic poet ever write a word about our lives?”⁸, implying that there is no space for Dalit heroes in mythology and literature.

This story is rich in natural themes, and the Gond art style, influenced by Jangarh Singh Shyam, not only commemorated Ambedkar's crusade, but also resuscitated an Indian tribal art form. The “foreword”⁹ by John Berger outlines the novel's core aim of retelling that history which has thrived primarily on suppressing the shudras and the atishudras, since history had been continually molded in the hands of capitalists in the pursuit of monetary profit. In addition to this, the graphic novel also attempts to provide a prophetic answer to all the unanswered questions raised by some members of the Dalit community. The graphic novel therefore begins with a casual conversation which soon turns into a dispute between two unidentified characters about the quota system and the condition of unemployment of the depressed castes. One of the speakers points out that the reservation of jobs and the existence of quotas is necessary as it somewhat helps in levelling the fields for the depressed castes, since caste-based violence are still a sad reality of contemporary India. The speaker is quick to point out that the horrible occurrence at Kahirlanji bears testimony to her arguments. The speaker narrates that in Khairlanji, four members of a Bhotmangi family were hacked to death in the full presence of the inhabitants of the village, prompting readers to recall current episodes of injustice occurring across India in the recent past. This is immediately followed by a remark about Ambedkar's tireless efforts to secure equality and justice for the members of the depressed castes. The accompanying illustration is also significant, as it portrays Ambedkar's magnificent encompassing painting (enclosed within a triangle resembling a victory stage) hovering above the paintings of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, so as

to proclaim that with respect to the issue of social reforms and the upliftment of the depressed classes, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar occupies the first position, while Gandhi and Nehru come in second and third place, respectively. This initial illustration is significant enough to set the tempo of this graphic novel, as it becomes apparent that the present graphic novel *Bhimayana* is dedicated towards emphasizing the overwhelming state of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's influence and his role in Indian social and political life.

The graphic representation of Dr. Ambedkar's life begins with the description that Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was a Mahar — one of Western India's untouchable communities — and similar to every other untouchable, Ambedkar too was exposed to the harsh realities of casteism at a very tender age. Ambedkar's childhood as a Dalit is graphically illustrated as a bird who sometimes gave joy to his master by carrying a letter for him; while sometimes it served itself as food. He is also depicted as living on the outskirts of the village, cleaning the filth of the village to earn a few pennies, and collecting daily ration from the outside of a Hindu shop. The first chapter entitled, “Water” presents the images of a school in Satara, where a boy asks another to join them, but the other boy (Bhim) replies, “but I'm not supposed to”¹⁰. These innocent words of ten years old Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar are poignant enough to remind us about the ill-treatment Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had received in school, for merely requesting to drink water. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's only offence was that being a Mahar, a member of the untouchable caste, he had requested for water from the same tap that other pupils of his school used to drink from; and for this he was made to learn an ‘unforgettable lesson’ of his life, which was

how caste could force a human being to deny his body's needs and feelings, even so elemental a feeling as thirst¹¹.

Likewise, this graphic novel also depicts Dr. Ambedkar's experience of casteist biases in Baroda. After completing his degree from the Columbia University in the United States of America, Dr. Ambedkar had come back to Baroda, to join as a “probationer in the Accountant General's Office”¹² in the employ of “Sayaji Rao, the Maharaja of Baroda”¹³. However, the young Bhimrao was repeatedly denied any place to state in Baroda owing to his Mahar identity, until he found a Parsi inn to stay. The graphic narrative states that his brief stay in the Parsi hotel had not only alerted Bhimrao of his false presumption that Parsis do not discriminate against people on the basis of castes; but had also burst his bubble of optimism, that gaining an education and “being abroad has practically cleansed his

untouchability”¹⁴ when a group of Parsis armed with sticks had threatened Bhimrao, that if he stayed any longer in that hotel, he would be killed. This experience of oppression based on casteism had helped foment Bhimrao’s resolve to abolish casteism. Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was thus turned into one of the most brilliant Dalit leaders of his time, and is rightly credited for conducting the Mahad Satyagraha, burning copies of the *Manusmriti*, and harshly condemning Gandhi's doublespeak character. Dr. Ambedkar had therefore sounded the clarion call for protesting against casteism by eking out “educate, organise, and agitate”¹⁵ before eventually turning to Buddhism.

The novel's multimodal analysis reveals a unique feature of visuals expressing symbolical and metaphorical meaning, demonstrating how meaning is produced through layers. In the following chapter of this graphic novel, entitled “Travel”, we observe Ambedkar and his friends making a trip to Daulatabad, where once again they are met with parochial casteist biases. In the very incipient part of the chapter we observe, every atom in the universe playing a part in expressing Ambedkar's quest and his subsequent happiness in making this trip, for he and his friends are very excited to see the Buddhist caves at Verul¹⁶. Numerous images such as that of a walking tree, snake-like roadways, cloudless air, and chirping birds, all combine to heighten Ambedkar’s enjoyment of taking a train travel for the first time. Similarly, during the Mahad Satyagraha, Ambedkar’s reclaiming of the Chavadar tank as public property and advocating that it should be given equal access to all, Ambedkar’s declaration is celebrated as a shower of water for all Dalits. However, the scene dramatically changes when images of a Dalit being killed for digging his well, or being burned alive over a water dispute surfaces; for in these cases the earth-moving machine and cows are depicted as crying. Furthermore, the recurring images of pointed fingers function as a symbol of oppression that promotes caste prejudice, drawing attention to the fact that Dalits are denied the right to live a normal life. In the history of modern graphic art, this depiction of incidents through ‘dignas’, is one of the most innovative and original use of space. It would not be absurd to point out herein, that the panel depicting a homeless Ambedkar ruminating on his fate in Kamathi Garden, the garden bears close likeness to a vast park; while the fruitless circle marches of oxen remind one of Estragon's despair in *Waiting for Godot*,¹⁷: “Nothing happens. Nobody comes, nobody goes. It's awful”. The conflict between the Dalits and their oppressors is further accentuated in the pages of this graphic novel, as Dalits are depicted as docile animals, while in stark contrast, their oppressors are depicted as ferocious creatures.



‘Gardners’ in the Wasteland

If the world portrayed in *Bhimayana* is to be considered as a wasteland, and it is literally as bleak as Eliot's “Wasteland”, then Jyotirao Phule and Savitri Phule serve as the voice of Bramha, encouraging the untouchable castes on this planet to struggle against oppression. While *Bhimayana* is concerned with Indian society, Jyotirao Phule's campaign was global in scope since he advocated for all oppressed groups, as elucidated by the subtitle of this graphic novel: “Jyotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty”¹⁸. The subtitle is specifically chosen, as not only does it help to draw attention to the fact, that the struggle of the untouchables and the depressed classes against Brahmanical hegemony is very much similar to the oppression of coloured people in the United States and in Africa. Thus, in his struggle to secure equal rights, and end the oppression of the untouchables, Jyotirao Phule had indeed paved the path for the liberation of all the society's oppressed classes, including Africans, Afro-Americans, and Dalits. The most startling aspect of this graphic novel, however, is that it dared to question our ancient Hindu beliefs, enshrined in our Puranas — the very source of all Brahmanical domination. Jyotiba admonished Europeans and Americans for treating the coloured people as beasts of burden, and vituperatively preached the ideals of “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity” influenced by Thomas Paine's *Rights Of Man*¹⁹. Jyotiba Phule seemingly appears as the saviour, when he says:

God gave freedom to all people, including the sudras and Atisudras, to enjoy all the things he created in this world. The Brahmans confiscated the rights of all others and become all powerful²⁰.

In addition to Jyotiba Phule, this graphic novel *A Gardener in the Wasteland* also delineates the life and activities of Jyotiba Phule's child-bride, Savitri Phule. Savitri Phule's portrayal in the story paints her as the calm, serene, and steady-minded gardener who nourishes the nearly dead trees while patiently waiting for the flowers to bloom. She never flinched in her support for her husband in that worthy cause, despite the snide remarks directed at her. She captivated the audience with her well-thought-out graphical presentation as well as her unwavering commitment to teaching everyone, especially Dalits, despite encountering numerous challenges. Talking about Savitri Phule's character painting, Srividya Natarajan says:

The writings of Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) filled me with admiration, but if truth be told, it was Savitribai (1831-1897) who lured me in: Phule's child- bride, enigmatic in the scanty accounts of their life, carrying her defiance like a quiet but steady flame²¹.

Fight for liberty (for All)

The visuals in *A Gardner in the Wasteland* are profoundly significant. The cover picture is a splash panel appearing on the first page of the work, showing an image of a chain zipping off the mouths of a few people, among whom one could recognise Dhondiba, Jyotiba, and Savitri Phule. The image implies how power tries to put a stop to any voice of protest. By filling up the entire page with one panel, illustrators quickly catch the reader's attention and make it apparent how they plan to speak up for the voices that have gone unheard. The first chapter, "Wasteland of Caste", depicts how pointless Hindu rituals are; and how their oppression is contaminating the entire community. Moreover, the first chapter also shows why people are longing for superheroes that will end all caste-based discriminations. This current state transports readers to the year 1840, depicting the cruel, unsympathetic attitude of upper-class Brahmins; who grudgingly eat all day, yawn, spit up here and there, and opine that "caste is the mere division of labour" as a "Dvaivarnik system"²². Likewise, the panel depicting the image of a scale with a cruel-faced Brahmin on one side and piles of lower-class people on the other emphasizes the discrepancy in class. Such images of clash within the society, such as someone napping all day and returning with a large bag of money, while others toiling nonstop all day and receiving nothing in return, establish two poles of extreme inequality.

Close-ups and symbolic images depict the misery of the untouchables, as well as Savitri and Jyotiba Phule's steadfast commitment to end discrimination and bring education to all. The graphic narrative also presents a gritty picture of the Government officers, who are seen to be a bunch of "pen-wielding butchers"²³ slashing the throats of the impoverished. This image is a blatant critique of the attitude of the Government officers and how their upper caste privileges had allowed them to not only secure administrative power, but also bring forth the most terrible deed of manipulating the poor by taking advantage of their condition, as:

He writes up the mortgage deeds with terrible conditions, impossible too meet. While the deeds are read aloud to the Sudra, the conditions are not.²⁴

Nelson Mandela²⁵ had once remarked about the importance of education in the fight against cruelty and injustice, that education is the most potent weapon with which you can change the world. Savitribai Phuley is also depicted to have the same thoughts in this graphic novel. In



this graphic narrative, the reader comes across a very tender situation, when it is graphically represented that they were compelled to flee Poona because no Brahmin head honchos wanted Savitribai's "low caste charges" to receive an education. Wearing ripped cloth, holding books in her hand, thinking about her students in her mind, she overlooked everyone who was condemning her by throwing stones on her. Similarly, Savitribai's image, which shows her punching the banned sign imposed on her photo, is a clear mark of her adamant defiance against injustices in all forms.

Criticism of Hindu Mythology:

Avijit Pathak²⁶ says:

Yajnavalkya's conversation with Maitreyi in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad helps me conceive the depths of spirituality, the quest for the Eternal, and also helps me see the ugliness in a doctrine that reduces religion into mere identity politics, or a weapon for intensifying the narcissistic ego of the 'Hindu nation'²⁷.

Jyotiba Phule also dared to speak out against the Hindu myths which legalises casteist oppression of the hapless poor. He saw these myths as a skewed account of events to benefit the privileged. The picture elicitation method highlights the bias of Hindu tales.

Savitribai and Jyotiba Phule appeared as fierce gardeners in the chapter "The Weed-bed of Myth", as they are seen digging up the weeds (manipulated legendary myths) before building a garden. The tale of Brahma's creation of four Hindu varnas from distinct body parts is ridiculed as Brahma having four genitals and four sets of feminine body parts in his body, satirically mocking the narrative's foundation:

Since Brahma had vaginas in four places ...each of them must have menstruated for at least four days each, and he must have sat in seclusion, as an unclean person, for sixteen days each month. Then who did the chores?²⁸

Jyotiba is also seen to provide counter arguments, coupled with ridicule, when he is interpreting the true meaning of the ten avatars of Vishnu. According to him the origins of Hindus, descendants of Aryans, had actually encroached on the locals' area and dismissed them as "daityas or rakshasas." Jyotiba studied the myths of Matsya- Shankasur, Varaha,

Narsimha, and Prahlad-Hiranyakashyapu through a rational lens in a lighthearted conversation with Dhondiba to reveal the other side of the narrative:

The Brahmans used their myths like false letters of introduction to impose on the credulity of the other castes. The Brahmans...cunningly showed them the books and told them they were written by God himself²⁹.

The chapter “Roots of Tyranny” of this graphic novel is very significant, as it uses perspective shifts graphics in order to point out how the Hindu mythologies had been continually used as a tool of oppression against the lower castes. The inhuman aspect of those fabled heroes is highlighted extensively, which can be comprehended by a semiotic interpretation of those images. The close-up of Jyotiba and the Brahmin priest looking at each other symbolizes a conflict between oppression and freedom. The sight of four castes being presented in an artificial hierarchical order to justify their horrible behaviours is upsetting. We have silently accepted the injustice we have done to our society’s so-called lower caste people because we have long embraced these mythologies in our thoughts. The use of visuals to portray these social truths highlights the legendary stories’ unsubstantial nature and exposes the folly of the caste system as it is currently applied in India.

Social impact of political graphic novel:

The unofficial and invisible limits of casteism had long marginalized a group of people, by socially excluding them from all spheres of life. The symbolic depiction of those individuals, their history, and their pain and suffering drew the quick attention of readers, and had a long-lasting impact on them. It reveals how, in the guise of religion and politics, Brahmans and politicians exploited the entire nation and pushed them into this terrible quagmire. The non-verbal expressions employed in these writings were integrated to portray Dalit frustration. The distinction between good and evil is drawn in the sand, and one seems to overlap one another. So, who gave the upper classes the authority to rule over the lower classes? There is no one who knows the answer.

The study these two graphic novels conjointly bring forth a global perspective of anti-caste movement. They exposed the inhumane face of the power politics with their brilliant brush strokes. The difference between Gandhi and Ambedkar is depicted in the following manner³⁰:



This was a different experience from that of the nationalist elite. Gandhi may have travelled third class on trains out of conviction, but Ambedkar did so out of necessity. Nehru and his companions may have been able to give up their government jobs or connections with government institutions such as courts because they had the assurance that wealthy, often landlord families could continue to support the rest of their relatives.

The use of a full page of current news-clippings depicting the cruelty and injustices heaped upon the Dalits — the beneficiaries of Quota system — raise the evident question of how much safety we do provide to the people who have been victimized, endured the social apartheid from the beginning of history. These noted incidents open up a new perspective of the world, where the double-standard mindset of Hindu upper-class people allows themselves to protest against the reservation for SC, ST, OBC and other minorities, but does not allow them to accept an inter-caste marriage. These incidents of social apartheid take us back to the lines of hopelessness portrayed in Langston Hughes' "Harlem":

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?³¹

While the graphic novel *A Gardner in the Wasteland* satirically paints Rishi Manu's ordinance for four elemental Varnas of Hindu caste, the graphic novel *Bhimayana* depicts how Dr. BR Ambedkar was a staunch supporter of equal rights, and had accordingly opposed the text of *Manusmriti* vigorously. While some have criticized him for his decision of burning down *Manusmriti*, many others have considered it as a beginning of the ending of Hindu Caste System:



Let's destroy the authority of ancient Hindu scriptures that are borne in inequality. Religion and slavery are not compatible ... I condemn the doctrines of Manusmriti. It is a symbol not of religion but inequality, cruelty and injustice.

While discussing about upper caste's act of polishing shoes or sweeping roads as a form of protest for quota system, Dilip Mandal³² discusses about Ambedkar's point of "division of labour" and "division of labourers" and how caste hierarchy does not approve certain occupations in our country. While pointing out a solution he explains Louis Dumont's thesis:

French anthropologist Louis Dumont, whose work *Homo Hierarchicus* is considered to be the last systematic attempt by any Western scholar to understand and deconstruct caste, suggests: "The impurity of the untouchable is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahman. They must have been established together or in any case must have reinforced each other. We must get used to see them together. In particular, untouchability will not truly disappear until the purity of the Brahman is itself radically devalued.

Words cannot always describe the horrors of humanity, or the complexity of the world in which we live. By presenting written text and visual illustration, symbolic speech and thought bubbles, panel arrangements, significant use of colour and shading in their pages, graphic novels propose an authorised representation of the world which compelled readers to ponder over the most overlooked topics of our civilization. We can't expect the world to change in a day or two, but we can hope that one day, with the help of this tiny effort, we will be able to bring about a paradigm shift in our society's attitude, eradicating all forms of dominance, discrimination, and social injustice.

We all wish for a future where inter-caste marriages are warmly celebrated, where workers are not subjected to social contra-distinction in any sector, and where politics does not manipulate the electorate to boost its vote bank. The success of a graphic novel will be acknowledged when a reader's heart breaks, thinking about how much suffering we have inflicted to our country's destitute untouchables. We're all yearning for a new dawn to arrive, one that will enlighten our entire nation and put an end to this communal bigotry and malpractices.



Notes

¹ Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan*, trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Published in 1950, Jhoothan means 'left-over food', and the main theme of the novel. It marks as a first Dalit autobiography in Hindi literature and later translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003.

² Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan*, trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) p. 153

³ Noted for her novel, *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize for fiction in 1997. However, she gained much greater renown as a political activist involved in human rights and environmental causes.

⁴ Arundhati Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint", *Annihilation of Caste* by B.R. Ambedkar: Annotated Edition, edited by S. Anand, (New Delhi: Verso Books, 2015) p. 6

⁵ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1994). p. 36

⁶ Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan*, trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) p. 123

⁷ A revival of Madhya Pradesh's tribal art.

⁸ Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan*, trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) p. 23

⁹ Srividya Natarajan et.al, *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, (New Delhi: Navayana, 2011) p. 9

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 18

¹¹ Ibid, p. 45

¹² Ibid, p. 62

¹³ Ibid, p. 61

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 61

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 89

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 77

¹⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, edited by Rohit Majumdar, (Kolkata: BooksWay, 2016). This 1953 play by Samuel Beckett revolves around the characters Valdimir and Estragon, who are absurdly waiting for the arrival of a person named Godot.

¹⁸ Srividya Natarajan et.al, *A Gardener in the Wasteland: Jyotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty*, (New Delhi: Navayana, 2011)

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 14-15

²⁰ Ibid, p. 22

²¹ Ibid, p. 125

²² Ibid, p. 10

²³ Ibid, p. 114

²⁴ Ibid, p. 115



²⁵ Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was a South-African anti-apartheid revolutionary and political leader who served as the first president of South Africa from 1994 to 1999.

²⁶ Avijit Pathak is professor of Sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

²⁷ Avijit Pathak, "A Hindu Critique of Hindutva", *The Hindu*, September, 22nd, 2019.

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/a-hindu-critique-of-hindutva/article30374493.ece>

²⁸ Srividya Natarajan et.al, *A Gardener in the Wasteland: Jyotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty*, (New Delhi: Navayana, 2011) p.32

²⁹ Ibid, p. 75

³⁰ From Gail Omvedt's *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India*(2004), which contextualizes Ambedkar's argument with elite nationalists, particularly Gandhi.

³¹ This poem is used in Lorraine Hansberry's drama *A Raisin in the Sun*, (1959), presenting the effects of racial prejudice and the fulfilment an African-American dreams, dreamt by the Younger family.

³² Dilip Mandal, the former managing director of India Today Hindi Magazine, has authored books on media and sociology.

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