

Bhimayana: Caste, Ambedkar, Art, and Pedagogy

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Bhimayana is a graphic novel that narrates Dr B.R. Ambedkar's experiences of being discriminated against. Using a graphic form inspired by Pardhan Gond art, *Bhimayana* breaks popular conventions of graphic narratives published in the West. The narrative of *Bhimayana* is interlaced with contemporary events and brings to life Ambedkar's story in a compelling way while retaining its subtleties. In this interview, S. Anand reveals that although the book was not planned for children, it has potential as a pedagogical tool for exploring questions about caste-based discrimination. Anand talks about the book, its relevance in contemporary times, Dr Ambedkar and his journey in engaging with the issue of caste-based discrimination.

Vivek Vellanki (VV): *You have coauthored the book **Bhimayana**, a graphic biography of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Can you take us through the idea of the book and tell us how it came about?*

S. Anand (SA): The book is an attempt to conscientise people about Ambedkar, his personal experience and how this still rings true for a lot of Dalits. The first time I encountered these fragments of Ambedkar's autobiographical writings was in one of the volumes which I had not paid attention

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to. It was sandwiched in about 18 to 20 pages, and was called *Waiting for a Visa*. It was not clear what visa he was referring to. He seemed to have jotted down these fragments over a period of about 20 to 25 years. So the earliest incident is about his school, and then he talks about riding a cart with his brothers and other siblings and being denied transport and all kinds of hassles that he faces. Then he moves on to describe the incident where he returns from Columbia and tries to find a boarding place in Baroda where he had to serve the maharaja who had sponsored his education.

All this was news to me, and it was Ravi Kumar, my friend and partner at Navayana, who drew my attention to that. And in 2003, when we set out to launch Navayana, we did four small booklets. One of our first books was called *Ambedkar: Autobiographical Notes*. It was around 40 pages. And since then, it occurred to me that one should do some kind of illustrated version of it. Back then, I was not even familiar with the term ‘graphic novel’. All I knew about was comic books like Amar Chitra Katha, Tintin, Asterix and such. So the idea was to render this (our material on Ambedkar) into some kind of an artistic and illustrated book, which was meant not just for children.

As a child, I was denied the exposure to all this, and there are a lot of adults in India who have no idea about this. The first image that occurred to me was that, here we are, we all know about Gandhi going to South Africa, being thrown off the train at Pietermaritzburg, but we are never made to think about why he was travelling first class in the first place. And we are talking about 1893, just two years after Ambedkar was born. So Gandhi could afford a first-class ticket, and he was asked to get off and to share another compartment. And if you read Gandhi there, he talks about being thrown [out] along with the *kaffirs*, which is the equivalent of using the word ‘nigger’; back then everybody used it. He is revolted by the idea that he could be parcelled with the common people, and then he is thrown out of the train.

Gandhi had to travel all the way to South Africa to experience discrimination. However, if you are a Dalit, you may face acute discrimination right at your school, or in your immediate surroundings. One might not even be allowed to go to school and, if one does go, might be asked to sit separately. Then we dig up all sorts of issues—as to how Dalits managed to enter schools. What did the British do and why did they start Panchama schools in Tamil Nadu? Why did they start separate schools for the ‘depressed classes’, as they were called then?

Ambedkar says, in a little editorial note, why he wrote this [*Waiting for a Visa*]. He says that he wrote this in order to enlighten the foreigners about the preponderance of discrimination. And he does not limit this to his personal stories; he starts bringing in examples of others who write letters and document atrocities. So when I decided to do this book, then the task became—which artist should we go to? In 2007, we had done a book with Durgabai

Vyam, Kancha Ilaiah's *Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land*, and I felt that may be this kind of art, which is not realistic but suggestive and conceptual, could be turned into a graphic novel.

VV: *The book is subversive at a number of levels. It is a departure from the comic conventions of the West, and also interlaces historical details with contemporary events. You have put in a lot of newspaper clippings about recent incidents of discrimination and atrocities against Dalits. What prompted you to make this choice? And how did this fit into the theme of the book?*

SA: We first storyboarded the book in terms of adapting it into a comic narrative. Back then, the storyboard was also biased towards the Western style of comic art. It was done by Srividya Natarajan, an old friend and a novelist who lives in Canada. However, she had no direct interaction with the Gond way of thinking—to be specific, the Pardhan Gond way of drawing things. Gond art, in its origin, is something they do to decorate their walls and houses. Every year, when there is a festival, when there is a karma dance, or when they have a wedding, they redo their houses. So these are both murals and also abstract geometrical patterns and conceptual images on their walls. And these are ephemeral. They would disappear every year and reappear in a different form the next year. So that is how it began.

In the 1980s, Gond art started moving to Bhopal, through J. Swaminathan who had founded Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal. He managed to invite the illustrious artist Jangarh Singh Shyam, and a whole lot of others followed him to Bhopal. And for the first time in the 1980s, Gond *bhitti chitra*, as it is called, started making its way onto paper and canvas. In the late 1990s, Tara Books in Chennai started using Gond art in children's books. Later, some critics and commentators called it problematic because it infantilises Gond art and equates it only with children. I don't see it entirely as a problem because children do like good art and it could equally be used for a general readership. When we started with *Bhimayana*, we did not think of it as a children's book at all. It could be used in schools, and with a general audience as well.

There is no realism or perspectival art, and there is no sense of sequential art, whereas most graphic novels are sequential art. So the challenge was not to do injustice to the way the Gonds think and imagine, and yet to help them frame the story in a sequential way. That took a lot of effort because for a year we were just thinking without arriving at a solution. Durgabai suggested that Subhash Vyam, her husband, and somebody who is also an equally talented artist—and I did not know about it—would collaborate on this. I was a little hesitant about this, but later it was Subhash who managed to use a very clever device, which is called the *digna*. So it was a long and arduous journey simply because it took us about a year and a half to crack it. But once the *digna* pattern was used to break down the pages, the free-flowing nature of Gond art could be transcribed into a kind of sequential form. All thanks to

Subhash and Durga, who managed to crack it, keeping it innovative and yet sequential. At the same time, they also managed to break the norm of Western comics. For instance, if you read someone like Joe Sacco, who is one of the best practitioners of the modern graphic novel, you will never find a bird or a tree or a dog or any of these objects in his work. Whereas in *Bhimayana*, when young Bhim is thirsty in a classroom, Durga drew an image of a fish struggling to get out of him. So you have to read the book in many layers and [at many] levels simply because if you just read the words on the page, you might get a sense of the story, but the visuals work at very many levels. And there are also some images that we have left without any verbal commentary to guide them [the readers].

VV: *Like you said, the book needs to be read at multiple levels and layers. It deals with Ambedkar's youth and his experiences of untouchability and also his struggles in his early youth towards the achievement of a more egalitarian society and the emancipation of Dalits. All of these seem to be lost in our history textbooks and also in the dominant discourse. How important are Ambedkar's ideas in contemporary times?*

SA: Dr Ambedkar's ideas resonate even today. When you spoke earlier about newspaper clippings, and how the Dalit children were denied water in schools, it was not just an issue for Ambedkar in 1901 when he was 10 years old; these kinds of incidents are prevalent even today. And at least in the kind of schools that I studied in during the 1980s, Ambedkar was not even a fleeting presence or a mention. So for me, the book tries to address that huge gap. And the fact that we do it creatively, not like the Children's Book Trust, though they have their own place, is important. In this book, we have tried to do it differently in terms of combining the imagination of Gond Adivasi art with Ambedkar's experiences. I think it is relevant simply because the Dalit experience has been kind of invisibilised in a lot of textbooks. Other than the fact that now, belatedly, NCERT [National Council of Educational Training and Research] textbooks do mention Ambedkar's experiences. To be correct, they do not really talk about Ambedkar's childhood experiences much. There are one or two references to the cart-driving scene, and the fact that he could not get a house in Baroda, but they are fleetingly done. The new NCERT books are talking about other Dalit autobiographies, giving some excerpts from Urmila Pawar's work or a poem by Namdheo Dhasal, and these are coming because of the contemporary Dalit movements, so this book fits into a larger group. At Navayana, we also did this because we are responding to the times we are living in.

VV: *Interestingly, this book came out in English and then you translated it into several regional languages. You have also used it with students and schools. Though you did not start out imagining this as a book primarily for children, you seem to have come around to seeing it as an important pedagogical tool. Could you please share your thoughts on this?*

SA: The regional language editions are now out in six Indian languages. The book is available in Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Kannada and Malayalam, plus English, of course, and in three foreign languages as well. Interestingly, the French publisher is a children's book publisher, MeMo. Eklavya, the Hindi publisher, did 3,000 copies, and Eklavya mainly focuses on the issues of children. Yes, the book has evolved into a pedagogical tool. I tried lobbying with organisations like UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund] to take it and adapt it. I also tried approaching the Ministry of Social Justice, Dr Ambedkar Foundation and various other government-run institutions, but all these things came to naught. It is a four-colour book, and the price is a key factor. In English, the price is ₹395 for a paperback, whereas in Tamil, Telugu and other languages it sells at between ₹200 and ₹220, and in Malayalam it is only ₹190. If you have the state agencies taking it up, printing about a 100 or a 1,000 copies, and making it supplementary reading in schools, then it becomes possible to bring down the price of the book dramatically because these things can be reduced if you have huge print runs. One does not have to worry about sustainability and access once there is that kind of support. So my dream would be to collaborate with the state and central boards of education and try to make the book reach a wider public.

VV: *The book has already been used in some schools. Do you have any experiences to share about that? How do you specifically view the book as a pedagogical tool in the classroom?*

SA: When we did a set of launches of the book, we took Durgabai and Subhash along. For instance, when we went to Chennai, we would have a public event with 50–60 people. Then we would get in touch with a school and there would be about 300–400 children from the secondary classes packed into a room, and we would make a small visual presentation to illustrate the finer points of the book. My experience has been that children are much better at cracking open the coded and the conceptual nature of Gond art. This is something I did not anticipate, to be frank. And whether we went to Bangalore, Kerala, Chennai or Delhi, we found that children have a much better and more enthusiastic response to the book and schools have sometimes purchased 20–25 copies. But I do not know how well it has been used in the context of the classroom. However, if it is done, I think that the teacher can just introduce it and the students have enough imagination to carry on with it. There is a hostel called Sakya Hostel in Chennai where they had adapted a play out of this book, and they had performed it very beautifully. I have only seen the photographs of this. So it is very much possible to use it as a pedagogical tool.

VV: *The book continuously goes back to Ambedkar's own experience in school, the oppression he faced in school, and the humiliation he continued to face upon returning from the West with prestigious degrees. Several Dalits across India seem to be reliving this narrative. You have written about it in blogs, newspapers and magazines, and have noted that the issue is*

often turned against the Dalit students to further humiliate them. In one of the articles, you write, 'What they do not do is sensitise the predominantly upper-class faculty and students. It is those who discriminate who need help' (Anand, 2012). Can you talk to us about this?

SA: When the book came out, people did ask me, 'Who is this meant for? Are the Dalits going to read it? Can Dalits really afford this kind of expensive four-colour book?' From the beginning, the Dalit movement has carried on the Ambedkarite tradition. Especially in Maharashtra, these experiences of Ambedkar have been translated into songs. Scholars like Sharmila Rege have documented this, and Badri Narayan has talked about it in the context of Uttar Pradesh, as to how alive these experiences of Ambedkar have been as far as the Dalits are concerned. So, yes, this kind of a book is not meant for the Dalits as such, but they also happen to read it. However, it is [meant] to sensitise the non-Dalit, the privileged-caste [individual], and the privileged-class person, to open their minds to the ideas presented in it, and the wonderful art helps them enter this [world]. Amar Chitra Katha has also done a book on Ambedkar, but it is weak; young Bhim, as a student, is made to look abject in it. In *Bhimayana*, the shift is in terms of art and also...a lot of non-Dalits write us mails, get back to us, and say that this book has made them rethink the whole issue and therein lies the minor success of the book. But in a huge country like India, even seven to eight language editions with modest print runs, as I said earlier, might not be able to make a dent. It is necessary to take it, largely, to a non-Dalit upper-class audience, especially to teachers who need to be familiarised with this, and who should know how to deal with these issues. They need to be sensitised because they tend to be the most discriminatory.

If you read *Joothan*, Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography translated from Hindi into English as well, most of his traumatic experiences occurred at his school, where he was told, 'Now you are a son of a Valmiki, so go sweep the yard'. We still see news reports about Dalit students who are asked to clean toilets and classrooms. It is the ultimate way of humiliating a person, saying, 'This is your station in life and this is what you are meant to do. Don't think that you can get educated'. I think that in most of the social science discourse and in public discourse, we have really not thought about the sickness of the mind of the non-Dalit who discriminates. The Dalit has every reason to embrace a kind of humanitarian logic and to move towards a kind of liberatory space. Whereas the non-Dalit is sicker in his or her mind in terms of wanting to retain the privilege, and the privilege comes, simply put, by denying others an equal space. So that battle is crucial, and I hope this book contributes a little to that battle of ideas.

VV: *There is a famous quotation by Ambedkar that has found prominence in the book and also in the merchandise related to the book. Could you share that with us?*

SA: Ambedkar's famous quotation comes from a speech in which he exhorts Dalits to 'educate, organise, and agitate'. It is in that context that he says, 'Ours is a battle not for wealth or power. It is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality'. It is not just a slogan for Dalits, but should also be adopted by non-Dalits, and it is a slogan or call that resonates with any kind of struggle for liberation, be it in Kashmir, or Manipur or Palestine, or among the Adivasis. It has a universal global resonance. And I think it is important for the non-Dalits to realise that they need to reclaim their human personality as well.

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