REVIEWS

Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability

Art: Durgabai Vyam, Subhash Vyam; story: Srividya Natarajan, S. Anand
Navayana
395 Indian Rupees, 108 pages
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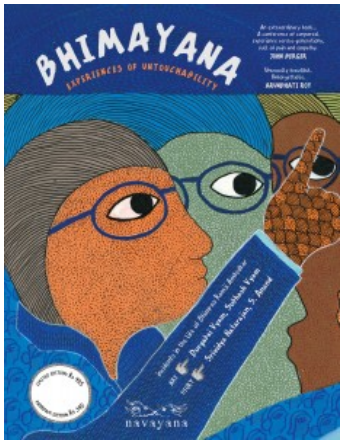
REVIEWED BY PRAJNA DESAI APR 18, 2012



They have brushes for the buffalo and shears for the goat. They won't trim a Mahar's [untouchable's] hair—they'd rather cut his throat.

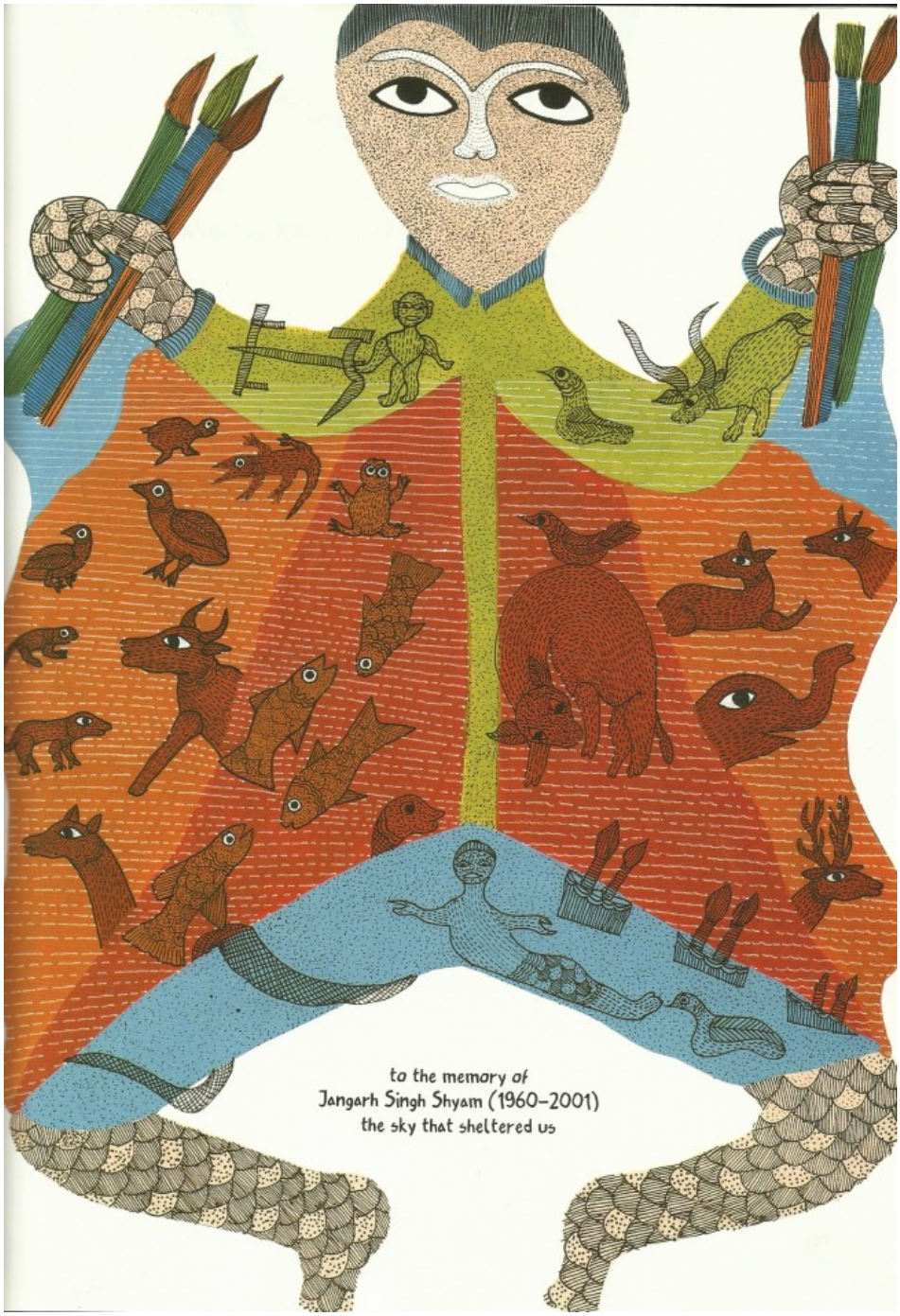
Early in *Bhimayana*, a boy named Bhim experiences the world through violence. Bhim is a Mahar, an untouchable. He knows it's no fun being one. His gentle face and Bambi eyes in the comic's version are nobody's idea of a kickass superhero, but when he grows up Bhim will become exactly that.

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956) was a leading champion of affirmative action, his labours anchored to the colossus of caste, though often he is only blandly credited with designing India's constitution. Beginning in the 1920s, he became the country's most vociferous conscience, criticising Hindu society's oppression of women and dalits (formerly untouchables) as being inherently anti-democratic. Armed with the liberal crux of reformers such as J.S. Mill, John Dewey, and Booker T. Washington, Ambedkar developed a model of social justice that was widely vilified by nationalists and even by Gandhi, whose own esteemed mandate of freedom comes away looking like the political charter of a posh boy fraternity. *Bhimayana* (2011) is a graphic account of Ambedkar's crusade to eradicate untouchability.

Frankly written and drawn in the mnemonic idiom of modern Gond art (as practiced by the central Indian tribal politic called Gond), the book ends up beautiful, punchy, and always readable. *Bhimayana* brings together writers Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand and Pardhan Gond artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam. Along with dalits, the Gond and other tribal civics are India's protected peoples called Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/STs). *Bhimayana* was published by Navayana Publishing, a niche press

founded in 2006 that focuses on the history and politics of caste in India. S. Anand, one of the book's writers, is Navayana's founder-editor.

Mainly two-dimensional and rich in natural motif, Gond drawing tells stories through visual aide-mémoires that artists once applied exclusively to domestic architecture. It's vibrant in imagery but only tentatively narrative. Yet, recent exponents, like *Bhimayana's* artists, owe their ken to artist Jangarh Singh Shyam (represented on the dedication page), who in the 1990s, urged to go professional, substituted multi-coloured clays with paints and ink used on canvas and single-sheet paper.



Dedication page depicting Pardhan Gond artist Jangarh Shyam Singh.

Beyond this graphic pedigree, the book is also unusually germane for being grounded in present-day journalism. Its two interlocking strands join

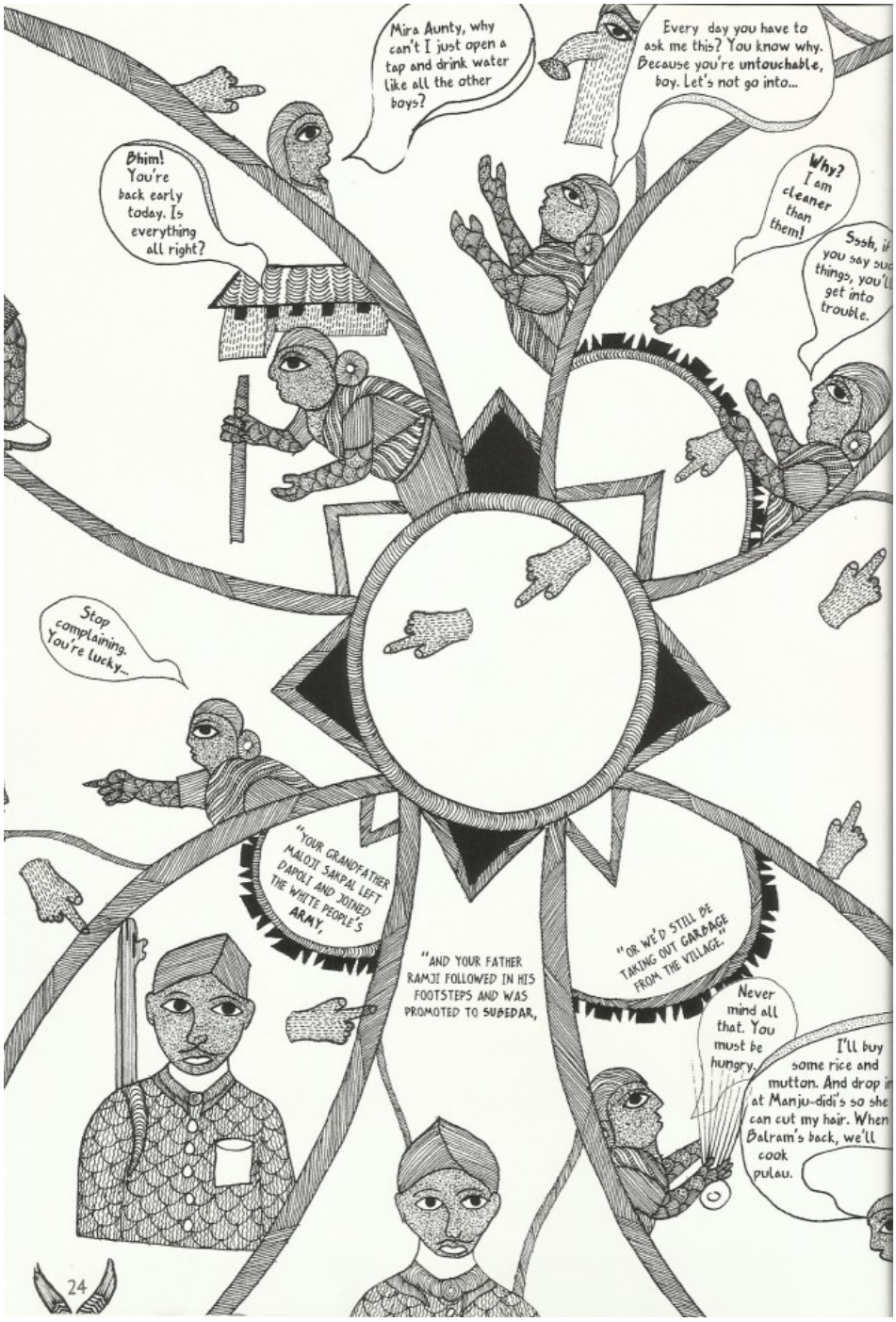
Ambedkar's biography with a string of thumbnails about present day caste prejudice, violently pervasive in villages, though all but invisible to most urban Indians. The barbed but seductive quality of this double narrative, the fact that yuppie ignorance is sometimes too easily mocked, makes it that much more impossible to resist second and third readings. This robust exposé about caste is not afraid to tell it like it is—that if you think caste is dead, think again.

§

Former untouchables were outcasts flushed outside the four-level Hindu caste structure topped by brahmins (priests) that was codified about 1500 years ago. They were described as impure and relegated to the rank of those who should not be touched. In reaction, Jotirao Phule, a 19th century anti-caste theorist and reformer, was first to refer to untouchables as 'dalit,' which means 'broken people.' Ambedkar typically used 'Depressed Classes'. Meanwhile, Gandhi popularised 'harijan' or 'children of Hari,' Hari being is the name of a central Hindu god.

But after 1974, when a militant anti-caste movement led by the Dalit Panthers (inspired by the Black Panthers) was crushed by right-wing Hindu political parties working for the state, dalits ditched Gandhi's benevolent jargon. For being linked to a Hindu god meant only more Hindu bondage. They went with 'dalit' to oppositely assert reconstitution and, presumably, also give the finger to its real meaning.

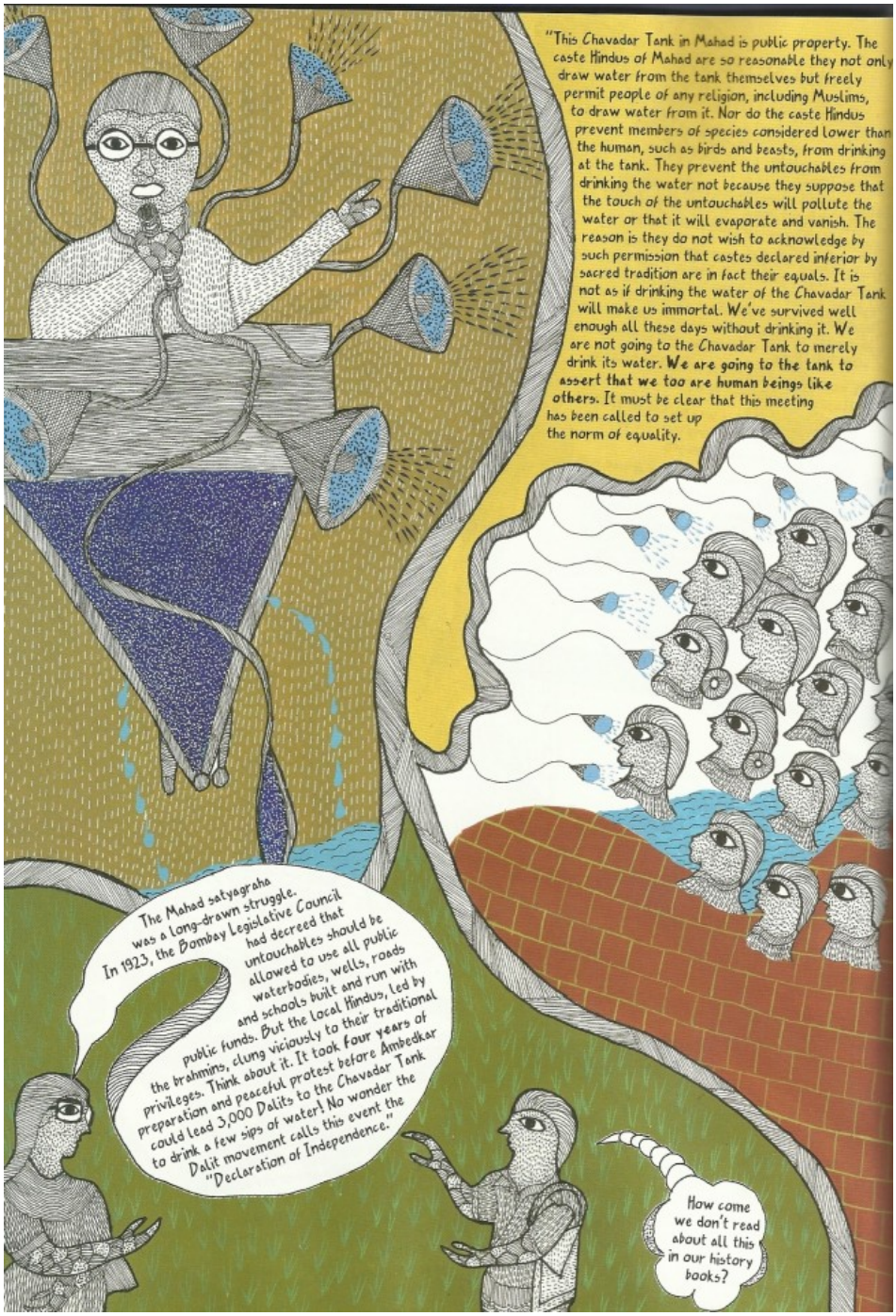
Historically, dalits were reduced to performing jobs caste Hindus found polluting. They handled dead people and animals, soil, and waste respectively as cremators, cobblers, potters, gardeners, sweepers, and scavengers. Those who farmed were landless and indentured.



Bhim's aunt explaining to him why their family was better off than other Mahars (untouchables).

Penury was common, though Ambedkar's family, like some others from western India drafted into the British army, managed to feint utter poverty. Yet, all untouchables were denied basic civic necessities. Grocery shops were open to limited access. Primary schooling became available only because of British law. Using wells and temples and building imperishable houses was entirely off-limits. Verbal humiliations, thrashings, and fatal threats were givens.

In seeking to reclaim what he called "human personality," Ambedkar's call to "educate, organize, and agitate" became a rallying point in his movement for social justice. The first big push came after 1924, when the Bombay Legislative Council's decree requiring untouchables to be granted access to all public utilities was universally disobeyed.



Ambedkar speaking at the First Mahad Satyagraha, 1927.

Collaborating with various progressives, Ambedkar became a leading voice in slowly organising dalits until finally, in 1927, a protest march of 3000 walked peacefully to a town called Mahad where they drank from a tank so far reserved for caste Hindus. This event is known as the First Mahad Satyagraha of 1927. Symbolic but momentous, Ambedkar compared its potential to that of 1789 French National Assembly that abolished aristocracy and liberated the poor. Later that year, he led 10,000 dalits in the Second Mahad Satyagraha. There he burned a copy of the *Manusmriti* (*Laws of Manu*), a Hindu text that apparently records the words of the universe's founder Manu who advises torturing untouchables, forcing them into poverty, and subjugating women.

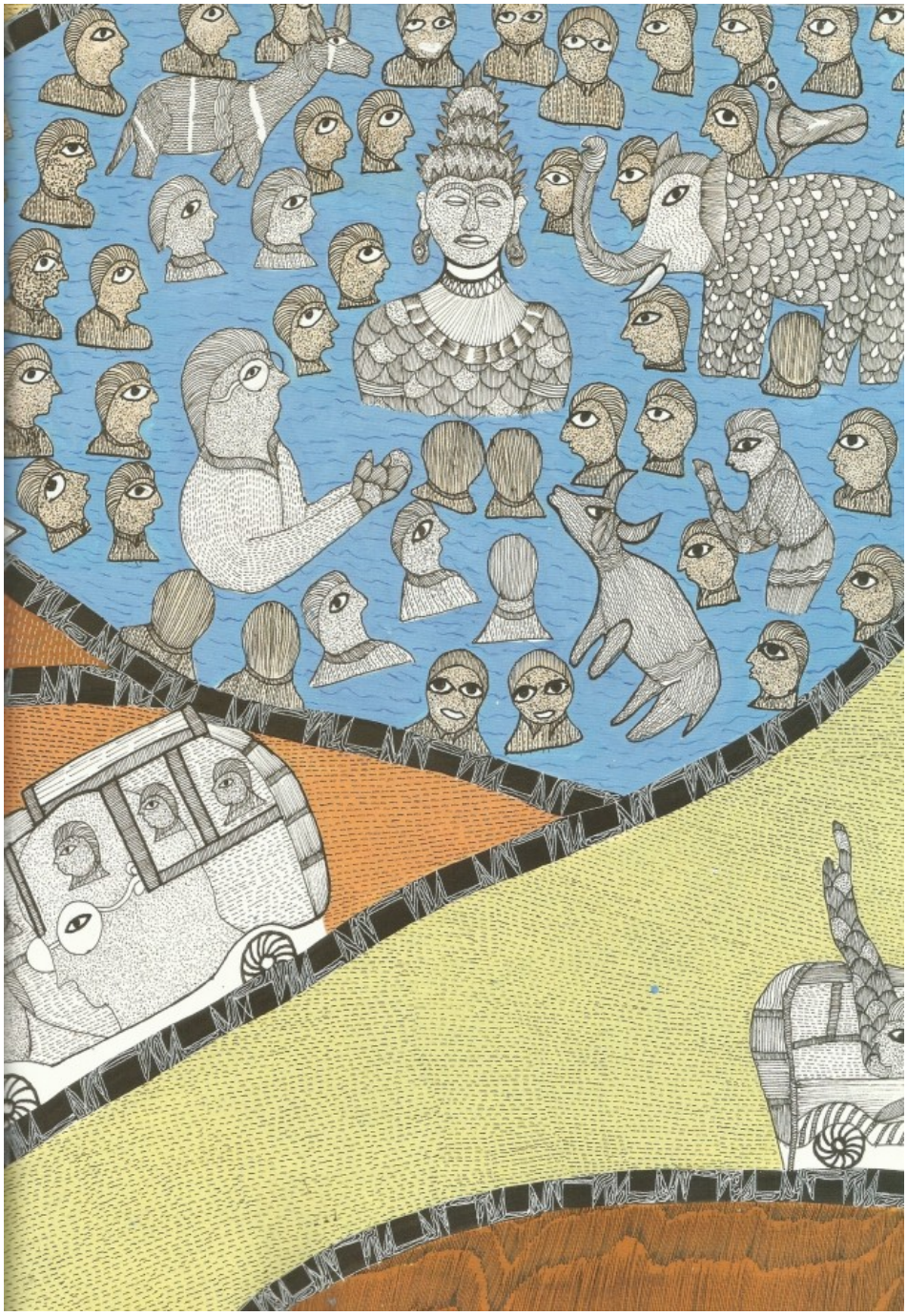
Almost instantaneously, Ambedkar's decisive segue to dalit political representation put him out of favor with the nationalist elite who called his

demands for equality divisive and thus detrimental to India's struggle for self-rule. In 1932, Gandhi, the holy cow of the Indian freedom movement, went on an indefinite hunger strike, forcing the British to reconsider granting untouchables separate electorates. For Ambedkar, the schism exposed the nationalist Congress party's doublespeak on caste. Gandhi, who was the Congress's spokesperson, sought Indian freedom at the cost of silencing minorities; Ambedkar envisioned India first freed from itself, or from Brahminism, which he classed with "the negation of liberty, equality, and fraternity," a doctrine that became a crucial punching bag in his best-selling *Annihilation of Caste* (1936).

Over the next fifteen years, Ambedkar spoke and published widely on various issues impacting dalits, such as water policy, agriculture, military reform, labour rights, and Buddhism. Meanwhile, his unabated resistance to the skewed politics of the freedom movement ended in a book released on the eve of India's independence. His damning critique in *What Gandhi and the Congress have done to the Untouchables* (1946) leaps off the title page with a quote by Thucydides: "It may be in your interest to be our master, but how can it be ours to be your slaves?"

Despite this, Ambedkar's polymathic abilities were sought after for the highest privilege. In 1947, the Congress party heading the new government invited him to serve as independent India's first Law Minister. He became Chairman of the Drafting Committee of India's constitution and later drafted the Hindu Code Bill, which sought to confer property and divorce rights on women, legalise monogamy, and introduce gender equity. For Ambedkar, it was the country's most crucial reform, but after a long wait, the Constituent Assembly rejected the bill in a majority vote.

Ambedkar snapped. In 1951, he resigned from the Cabinet with strong words for Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister, and his peers' perceived betrayal of comprehensive democracy. His parting speech called inequality the very soul of Hindu society that if left untouched was "to make a farce of the Constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap."



Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism with his followers

Within five years, Ambedkar lived up to his old promise to reject Hinduism for an ethically sound religion. In October 1956, about six weeks before he died, he converted to Buddhism along with an approximate 500,000 followers. Considered to be the largest single conversion in human history, it inspired many dalits to voluntarily seek monotheistic faiths. They became Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs, though conversion did little to dissolve the stigma of untouchability.

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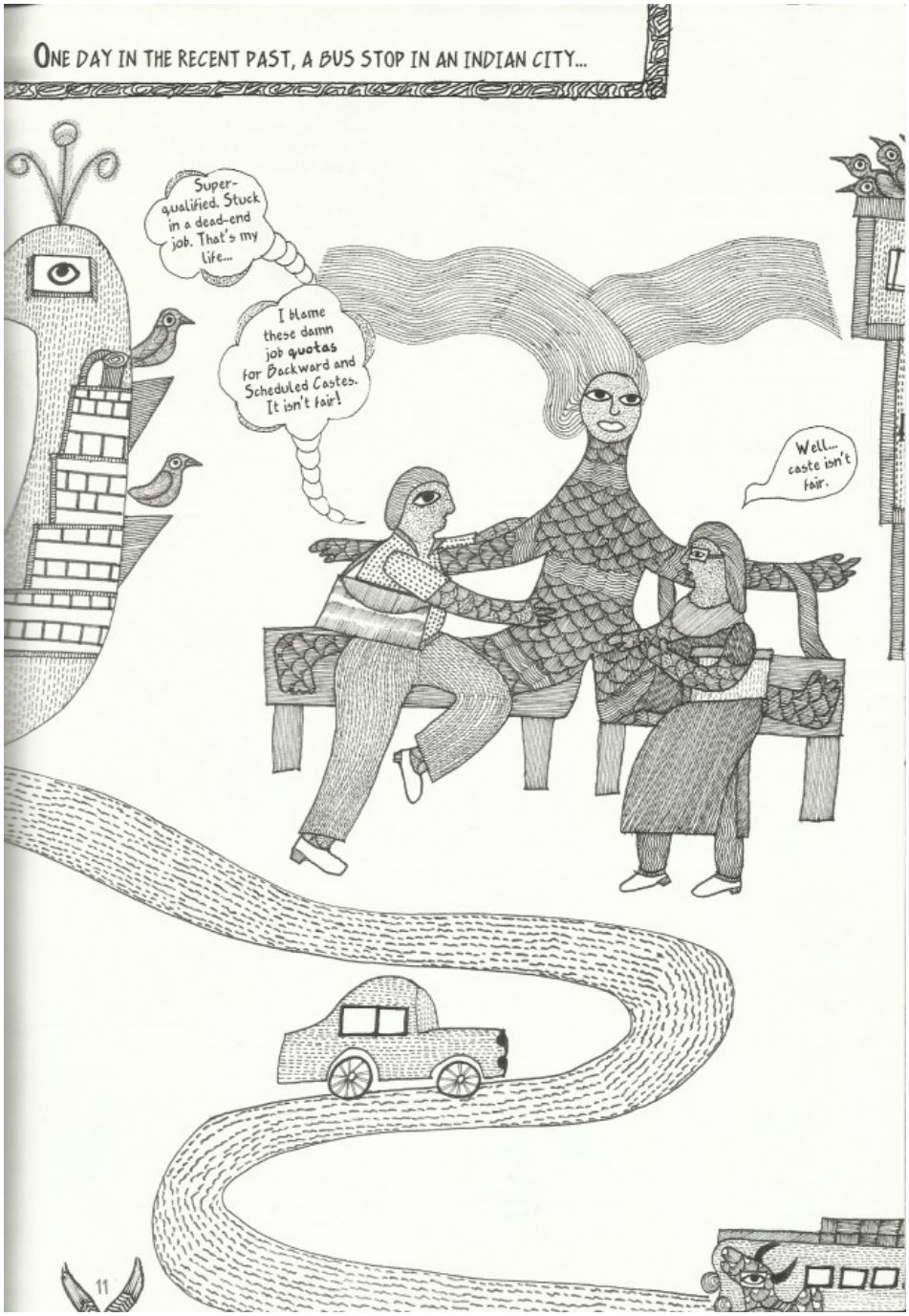
Aptly, *Bhimayana's* central character is not Ambedkar alone but also the degrading grind of dalit life among the 60 million in Ambedkar's time. Both are selectively based on his speeches and the little-known *Waiting for a Visa* (c.1935-36), a brief autobiographical text in which Ambedkar charts his

political education through a litany of life-altering episodes. Hence, the title *Bhimayana*, which could be a cheeky send-up on the *Ramayana*, a pivotal Hindu text that recounts the high-caste mythical god prince Ram's exile from everyday royal luxuries. *Bhimayana's* account of everyday expulsions from ordinary civic dignities — water, shelter, and travel — presents an alternative epic of heroism.



The opening scene of the preface.

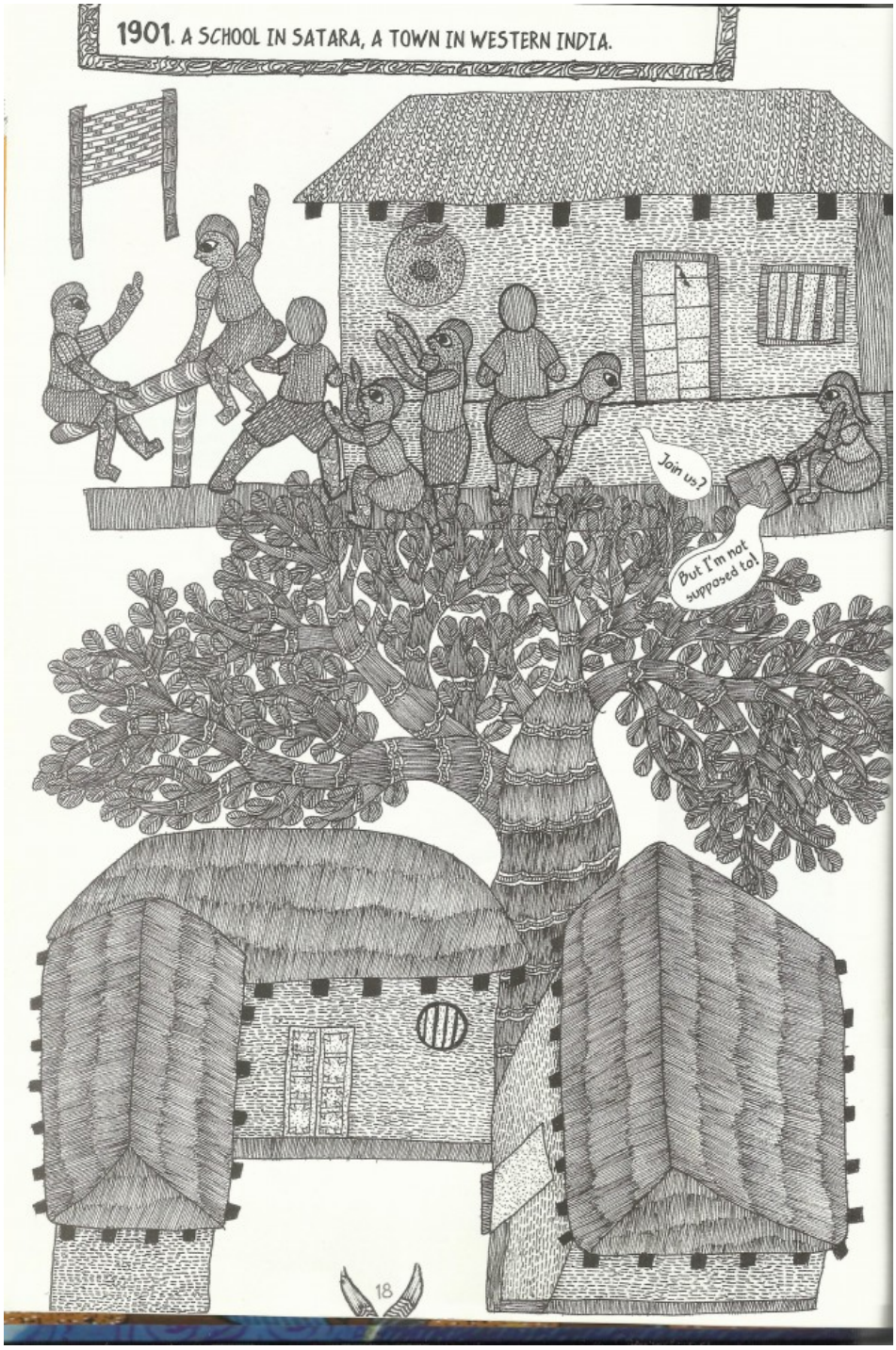
The narrative begins with a socially-literate woman and a blinkered man discussing affirmative action in education and jobs, the most common peeve against dalits. The man finds setting quotas aside for dalits unfair. "Oh yeah?" says the woman, and instead refers him to the September 29, 2006 massacre of dalits in Khairlanji, a small village in Ambedkar's native state of Maharashtra, an alleged bastion of contemporary dalit activism.

For two hours before being dumped into a canal, four members of a dalit family called Bhotmange were variously mutilated, raped, and bludgeoned to an audience of forty village residents. The events were suppressed for over a month. Dalits, mainly lead by women, did not break out into mass protests until a month after the event when a popular blog described the event, suggested state complicity in a cover-up, and encouraged agitation. Predictably, the government suppressed the protests under the charge of waging war against the Indian state.

In using the word Brahminism for such vicious conventions during his time Ambedkar was of course defining more than Brahmins discriminating against untouchables. For him, Brahminism was the very pathology of Indian bigotry ingrained even in non-Hindus, including Muslims, Christians, and Parsis that he foresaw migrating poisonously in low-caste Hindus who history allowing would assume the role of Brahmins. He was right. At Khairlanji, it was low-caste Hindus, not Brahmins, who lynched the dalit Bhotmanges. Note especially why the Bhotmanges were lynched: They were being punished for educating their only daughter, protecting their land from encroachers, and living with the maximum poise their finances would allow, basically exactly what Manu forbids untouchables to covet in the *Manusmriti* (*Laws of Manu*).

Bhimayana uses Khairlanji (not exceptional, but emblematic of caste in India) to set off a domino-like chain of news items about dalit lynchings that thematically intercut the three main events of the Ambedkar story and his various political feats, including the Mahad Satyagraha, Ambedkar's differences with Gandhi, the Constitution, and the Hindu Code Bill.

Book 1: Water is set in 1901, a landmark year in Indian education as Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, is initiating educational reforms to help Indian students find better jobs. This is fantastic news for the rich, who can afford higher education.



Bhim at school.

But back in Satara, Bhim is set apart at play and in the classroom. He's also having a tough time just getting a glass of water. From the school water pump to the village trough, untouchables are denied access at every turn. At one point, a teacher farcically blames Bhim's thirst on his long hair. The child himself would love a trim, but from whom exactly? Barbers won't touch untouchables. Through such gentle ironies Bhim's confusion at caste inequality expresses the wrench in simply being dalit: "Animals enjoy more freedom".

Book 2: Shelter jumps to Ambedkar's thwarted efforts to put a roof over his head. It's 1918. He is en route to work for the Maharaja of Baroda who had sponsored his education at Columbia University, New York. In Baroda, unable

to lodge at a Hindu hotel (because he might be found out and killed), Ambedkar suffers a dungeon-like room at a Parsi inn, though even this ends in threats to his life. For almost a fortnight he is compelled to hide in public spaces after work. Broken and disillusioned, Ambedkar quits his job and returns to Bombay.

Book 3: Travel is set in 1934. Ambedkar is 43 and a recognized dalit leader with various agitations behind him. Now he is on bus tour with a contingent of political workers. Initially thrilling, the journey ends disastrously when the bullock cart transporting him to his destination in the dalit village meets with a serious accident. The man driving the cart is an unskilled man because no regular driver would risk being polluted by the untouchable Ambedkar.

Continued

5 Responses to *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*

Prajna Desai *says:*
Apr 20, 2012 at 9:04 PM

ERRATA posted by the author:

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Dr Ravindr Singh *says:*
Mar 17, 2014 at 8:21 AM

It is nice. Young graduates will draw some aspiration from the life and work which he did. Pople are not being told mor about him. It is the land of Some for some.

Akansha *says:*
May 7, 2014 at 8:40 AM

each and every picture of book opens many doors to think ,,,

Riddhi *says:*
May 9, 2014 at 9:30 AM

Bhimayana is a small attempt to address the anamoly of casteism. I was never too familiar with Gandhi's wrong side than I am now. Gandhi was concerned with the independence of India by silencing minorities, while Ambedkar was working for the transformation of Hindu Society. Gandhi had to travel all the way to South Africa to experience a taste of what Ambedkar encountered as a 10 years old child in a small presidency of Bombay, India.

Sujoy Majumdar *says:*

Aug 4, 2016 at 11:32 AM

Eradicating the caste “power” hierarchy perhaps makes Dr. Ambedkar a bigger “freedom fighter” than Gandhi.
India really needed development in grassroot level to dispose all odds (caste structure) before an attempt to
drive
the intruders away. It is sad that even in the year 2008 (noted from above incident) Dalits are suffering.
This undoubtedly puts the attempt of Ambedkar towards a query of “big futility.

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Here and there in the time-travelling narrative, we confront the Khairlanji syndrome. In May 2008, a dalit man was hacked to death for daring to dig a well on his own small property. Earlier in Jan 2008, after decades of fighting for water, dalits earned the right to use a village pond. But caste Hindus — in a uniquely Indian way of saying *eat shit* — fouled the same pond by channelling the village sewer to it. In November 2007, two dalit women, new mothers, were physically assaulted before eviction from a government hospital. They died soon after.

Horrific regardless, these stories also outdo Ambedkar's humiliations, not least because they date within the last five years, or 60 years into free India's alleged ban on untouchability. Led by Ambedkar's force, the ban along with the enactment of protection of dalits and tribals (India's indigenous people) under the Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA) was enacted by the Indian Constitution in 1947.

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Since Ambedkar is more or less a messiah among dalits, today totaling between 165 to 170 million, or about 17% of India's population, *Bhimayana* fawning over him would have been more than okay. Instead, the revival of the hero, who is typically under-acknowledged in mainstream textbooks and popular media, takes place through factual reference and energetic prose. The litany of humiliations is compelling because the writing is talky, the pitch even. Little Bhim's acumen for unwitting irony mixes nicely with Ambedkar's calm eye, cut with the man and woman's dialogue. Include the steady tide of harsh news clippings flowing through the narrative and you have an all too necessary social history boot-camp.

If sections of the text keep your heart pumping, the graphic patois slows the looking, giving reason to sort out why a stick that beats is sighted like a panopticon, or why a water pump seems to want to burst into tears. We can guess that the stick with eyes, a striking theme, is the social CCTV monitoring

untouchable life, and the personified water pump is unhappy at Bhim left thirsty at school.

Overall, the drawing is formally busy. Dots, speckles, and mesh-like lines power the images, mainly done in black with the occasional color spread. But the images are always focused, tweaking the plot, making a comment, or leading the eye to wander into intended asides. Some pages insistently evoke Ambedkar's mental convolutions when confronted by social prejudice, like where he's on a train headed to Baroda. His groomed person, well-spoken manner, and general sophistication disguise his untouchability.

Ambedkar on the train to Baroda.

The entire journey, rendered as a live, swirling thing, becomes a game of hide and seek wherein Ambedkar must keep up with the false assumptions of his

train companions to ensure the journey goes smoothly.

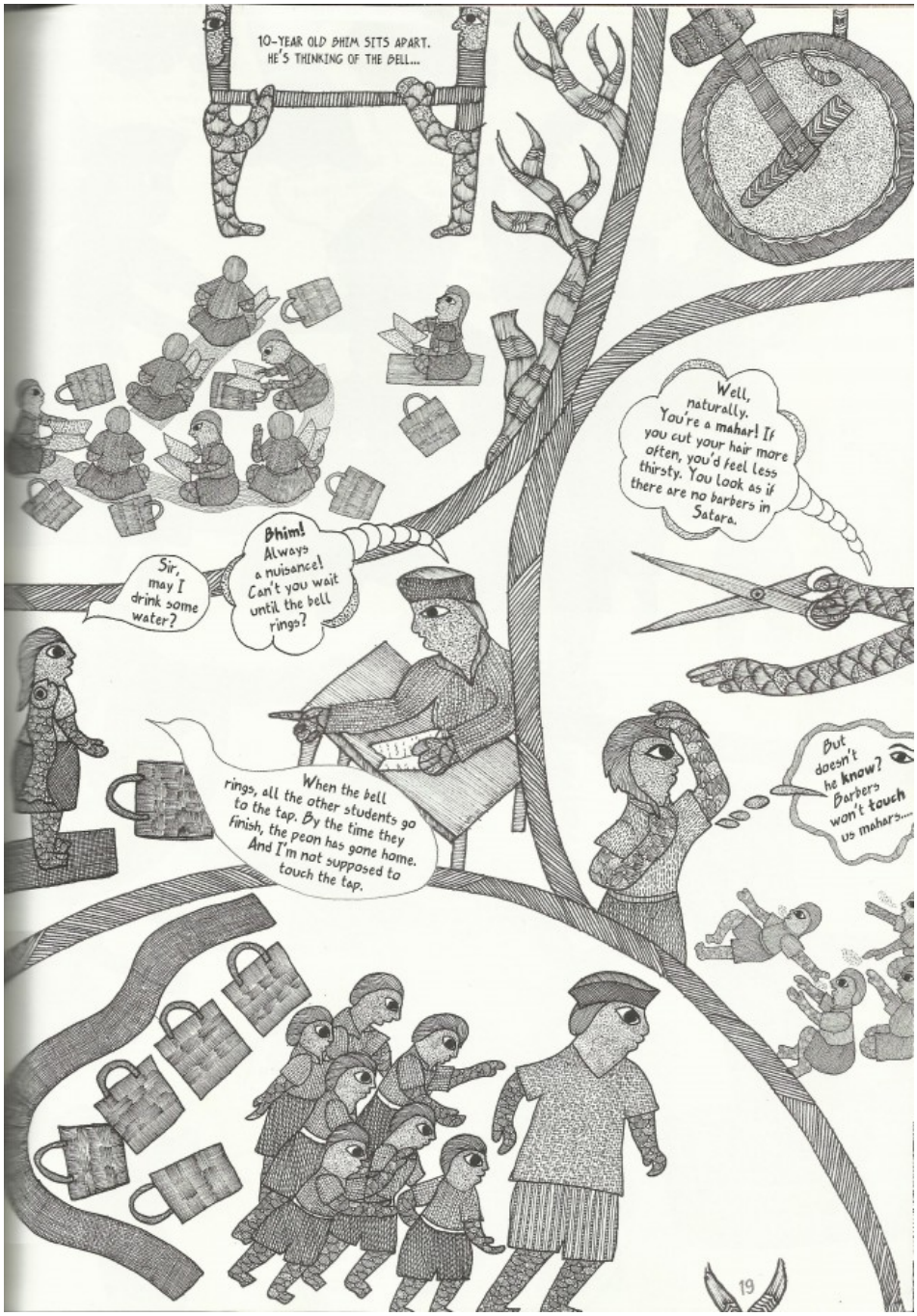
Many images are set within quasi-panels distinct from the traditional sequence of the sequential panel frame. You might say they have a mind of their own, perhaps even hinting at Ambedkar's own brand of nous, but the styling is collaborative. Where the tempo and method of the telling the story is largely novelistic, the artistic approach is typically Gond, which is a graphic shorthand for legends and genealogies produced in solo illustrations.

Now, *Bhimayana* is neither a compilation of single-sheet pictures nor a straight out linear narrative. There's oodles of plot and loads of elaborate scenes, but there's also heaps of asides, iconic freezes, and historical digressions to warrant chucking the sequential panel frame for something fresher. Like the Gond digna perhaps, a double-edged frame containing allusions to grass and grain, running and whirling water, and paling reeds.

In the book, digna take the shape of broken circles, fan-like insets, and natural forms like fish and hilltops. They let you savour images in bits and pieces and only sometimes link in clear sequence. When they appear to push against one another it's a signal. The story is on the move again, as in the opening spread of *Water*.

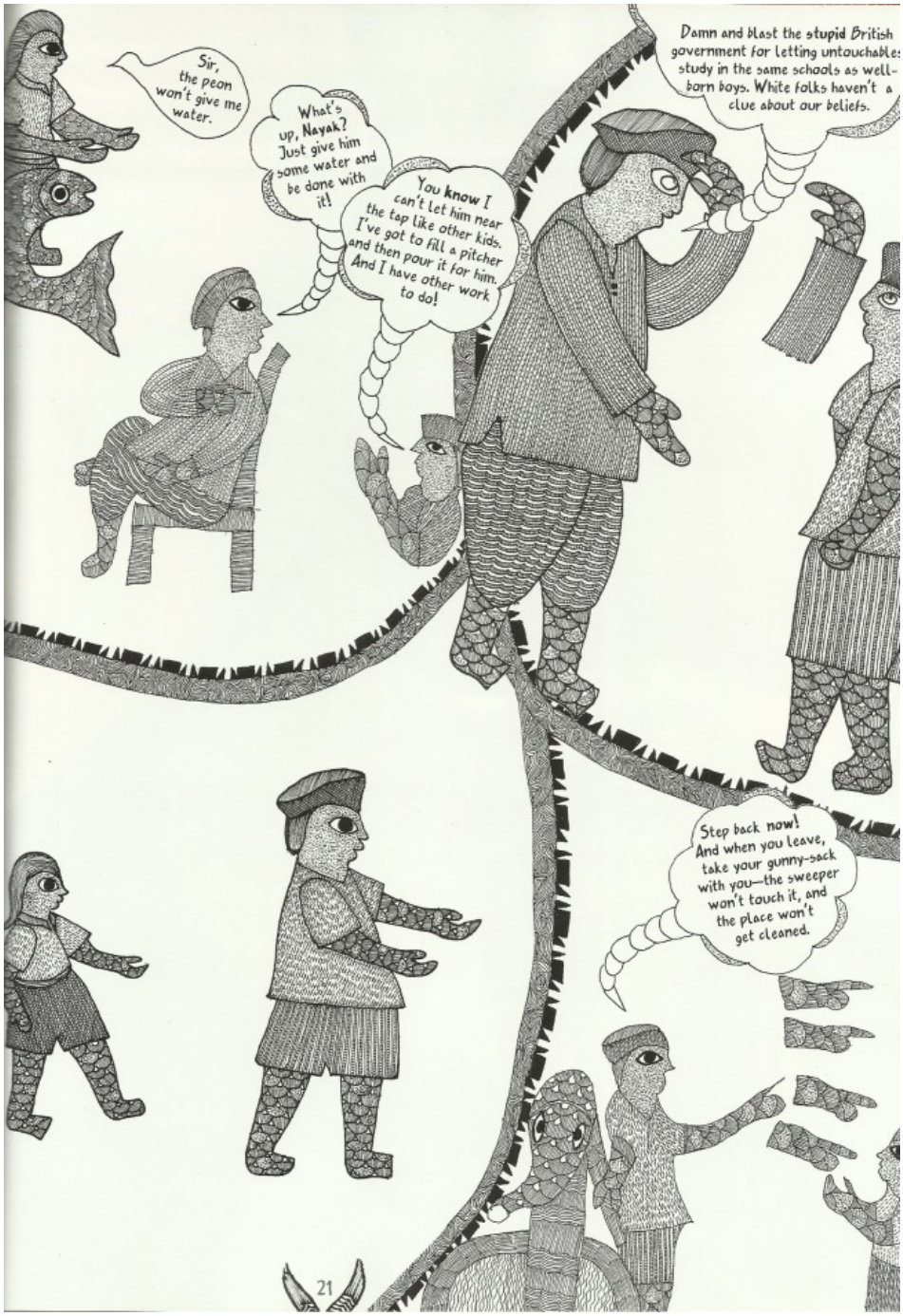
Pintsize Bhim knows all about the dos and don'ts of his station. A split perspective page quickly prospers into multiple digna. The bumpy pace of Bhim's questions about caste inequality shines through half-arc digna roughly intersecting. Over time, the digna trail sinuously, run jaggedly, or press symmetry on a page. But all over, the reading order, mildly headachy, maps the trespass of an untouchable's life. His life was no walk in the park. Neither is reading about it.

We get to feel for Bhim in other ways too.



The blackboard spelling out Bhim's thirst and the fish strapped on his side.

A personified blackboard spells out Bhim's thirst and the fish shape on his side turns dehydration into tangible cargo. The fish motif, as both desire and injustice, repeats wherever untouchables are shown struggling to access to water. Mingled everywhere are polarised speech balloons.



Personified speech balloons.

Bird shaped ones are for reason and good people. That would be Ambedkar and his social set. The scorpion stinger shaped ones are reserved for irrationality and bad folks. These are people who subject untouchables to humiliations. Everywhere they appear, the scorpion stinger inflects the atmosphere with contempt. This we might understand was the very air untouchables breathed.

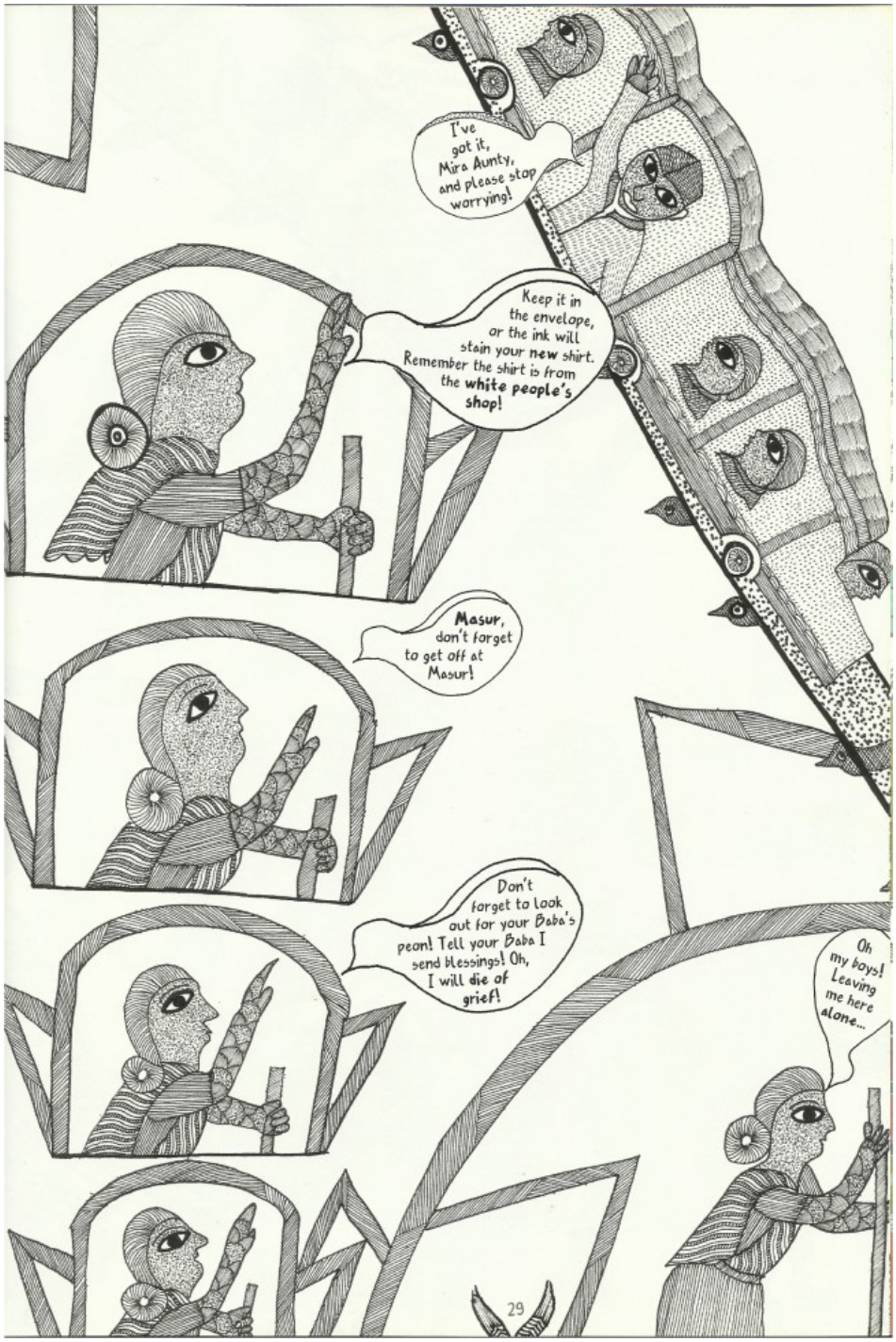
Still, Bhim is not without some ecstasies. The first explicit visualisation of this inner landscape is the image of a train with sprightly whiskers straddling two forest-filled digna. This marks the beginning of episodes in which four children, including Bhim, are on their very first outing 'abroad' to the city. No wonder the train evokes the spring and coil of a fantastical feline-reptile. Quaint lines, possibly the text's only moment of poetic weakness, headline this

page. Black ink sings the fresh green of trees. Yet nowhere is the implicit assumption that we all share a common sea of feeling. One is given an image to contemplate and the writing overlaps Bhim's feeling but does not reveal what he feels. It does not dilute the status quo of an untouchable's exile from ordinary dignity.

Though vivid and engaging in its details, the drawing is equally standoffish about pouring out its heart. It's got none of the routine sensuality that one might expect from a story filled with pathos. Figures and faces especially are marionette-like, or at any rate generic. Some wear functional insignia. Ambedkar is marked with glasses. Muslims have little beards. Brahmins have puny tufts of hair poking out from shaved heads. Characters neither smile nor frown. Shiftless pupils pin bovinely sedate faces. And everyone looks like they've had a ball with the eyeliner, so every face is equally striking, or nondescript.

Angry Muslims confronting Ambedkar and his colleagues as they try to access a community water tank.

Instead, the main prompt for mood and feeling is gesture, icon, and (oddly) chin contour. For instance, Ambedkar's speech at the Mahad satyagraha bursts out as fresh blue water through loudspeakers in the shape of spouts. The murder of a dalit farmer for digging his own well magnifies in the menace of a giant floating hand plough. Elsewhere, the sadness of Bhim's aunt, who waves goodbye to him and his cousins, graduates across her mercurial chin. It goes from plump to soft, then drawn in and pointed, all this on an otherwise impassive face.



Bhim's aunt waving goodbye to her nephews.

To hint at and not elaborate is typical in Gond art. In *Bhimayana*, it translates as art that doesn't give a toss. The book doesn't coddle the expectation that awful narratives should make you 'feel'. It seems more interested in stunning reality checks. That might explain why the preface's dialogue is dourly upfront about a basic equation: Stating that affirmative action isn't fair is claiming that Khairlanji and its innumerable cousins are. It might also explain why this is the narrative's one and only reference to affirmative action.

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Reservation or affirmative action for dalits in public education and jobs has been around since 1943, though the semblance of proper implementation didn't happen until the mid-1960s. Since then, many upgrades to strengthen

the resolution tacitly confess the state's failure in proper application. To this, some would say, serves the dalits right. Anti-reservationists, who number in rabid hordes and behave accordingly, claim that quotas lower the quality of education and government service. Their argument is predictably racist: "Dalits genetically lack merit."

Elsewhere, Anand Teltumbde, dalit activist and author of *Khairlanji* (2008), while absolutely in favour of the quota system describes it as "a graveyard of dalit aspirations." This is why urban dalits, aching for a leg-up into mainstream society, have been teaming with right-wing Hindu groups, the old foes of dalit emancipation. This new alliance is bad news for the 89% of dalits who are rural, half of whom are landless, only some of whom farm, the rest of whom are unemployed artisans. Most dalits are looking for better primary, not higher, education, sanitation, vocational training for non-farm work, and improved land distribution. Instead, the state has displaced dalits and forced migrations to appropriate their land for mega-projects and global investors, making rural dalits among the country's poorest, who Human Rights Watch slot with most pervasively degraded people in the world.

This might explain *Bhimayana's* eagerness to bed, not the reservation issue, but the Khairlanji syndrome, which forces one to consider Ambedkar's utopian oomph in light of atrocities against dalits, such as being coerced to eat each other's excreta (in the southern state of Kerala in 2003), as if the Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA) simply doesn't exist. Indeed, Ambedkar was a radical, a believer in socialist reforms like better land distribution, which few dalit leaders now broach for fear of being labelled communists, unquestionably the dirtiest word in India's mad race towards privatisation. To its credit, the book repeatedly underscores his radicalism and its potential to change dalit life without watering down dalit desperation.

It tells us that dalits are perhaps as, and sometimes more, vulnerable than in Ambedkar's time. Its biographical encomium, however ridden with human corruption and social depravity, doubles not so much as an elegy but as a serious wake-up call. Like the voice of reason, the dialogue between the socially-conscious woman and the blinkered man, another homage to Ambedkar's fight against patriarchy, refreshes the alarm at regular intervals—that one person's givens are another's death-wish.

To be published in French, Korean, Spanish, Tamil, Hindi, Marathi, Telugu, Kannada. Already available in Malayalam. Worldwide English edition to appear through Tate Publishing.

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Akansha *says:*
May 7, 2014 at 8:40 AM

each and every picture of book opens many doors to think ,,,

Riddhi *says:*
May 9, 2014 at 9:30 AM

Bhimayana is a small attempt to address the anamoly of casteism. I was never too familiar with Gandhi's wrong side than I am now. Gandhi was concerned with the independence of India by silencing minorities, while Ambedkar was working for the transformation of Hindu Society. Gandhi had to travel all the way to South Africa to experience a taste of what Ambedkar encountered as a 10 years old child in a small presidency of Bombay, India.

Sujoy Majumdar *says:*
Aug 4, 2016 at 11:32 AM

Eradicating the caste "power" hierarchy perhaps makes Dr. Ambedkar a bigger "freedom fighter" than Gandhi. India really needed development in grassroot level to dispose all odds (caste structure) before an attempt to drive
the intruders away. It is sad that even in the year 2008 (noted from above incident) Dalits are suffering.
This undoubtedly puts the attempt of Ambedkar towards a query of "big futility.
