

AN ANALYSIS OF THE BHIMAYANA: EXPERIENCES OF UNTOUCHABILITY- A DEPARTURE FROM THE HISTORY BOOK HEROISM OF INDIA

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Regaling ourselves with the histories of a benevolent, paternal past, superimposing it on the present to erase disturbing memories of the yore is a politics which has been in vogue since India's cultural nationalism period. This was strategized by a two pronged policy, one that of a deliberate oblivion, and the other through perpetuation of created histories, written, codified and sanctified by the processes of examinations. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar has always been one such figure who although occupied a place in the books of history for the school children as the Father of the constituent assembly, it was a liminal one beside the illuminated Gandhi and Nehru dynasty. The children in their most impressionable age grew up reading him as a matter of words.

However, memories are not storage of data alone, it is rather a permanent search for meaning, in which forgetting filters out the traces of experiences that either no longer have meaning, or that mean too much (Portelli 1997). *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, the graphic novel is a text which recombines oblivion and memories to churn out a story that is reflective of an angst long suppressed. This graphic novel presents past present and future juxtaposed spatially on the page, expanding on the historical and personal modes, and all the while positing itself on a genre that has never been known as a high brow literature.

The combination of a verbal visual text that weaves the journey of Dr. Ambedkar in a detailed discourse about the combined struggle of the Dalits, the downtrodden and the outcastes including women is a frank testimony to which children can relate to and comprehend. Among children a text which comprises of sequential art gives a practice in the form of meaning, and an imagination which gets concretised by the vivid imagery in the form of pictures. The journey of Dr. Ambedkar was never a matter of words alone, but of a struggle that is now relegated to the boring history books of records, and which eventually defeats the purpose of a holistic education.

History lessons in contemporary India have always portrayed the Dalits and lower caste communities as downtrodden and oppressed, but their demands for separate electorates in the First and Second Round Table Conferences with the British have been portrayed as selfish

and divisive rather than a means of empowerment; and Ambedkar is mentioned as a person who disagreed with Gandhi's idea of 'Harijans' and his vision of a united India during these conferences and subsequently who capitulates to the 'superior' Gandhian visions of a 'united' nation in the Poona Pact. He is then completely ignored until the constituent assembly debates and formation procedures, where his appointment is seen as a result of him being a representative of the Dalit communities rather than as a product of his role as a leader or his academic and scholarly qualifications. After the constitution was drafted, he disappears into the oblivion, sometimes mentioned only inside an insignificant "Did you Know" box and his further contributions and political opinions are disregarded altogether.

This depiction of Ambedkar is perfectly in tune with Carl Jung's idea of the collective conscious; wherein certain primordial and everlasting images and ideas are transmitted across generations of a society. Contextually speaking, the classical depiction of Lower Castes is them being both victims of past injustices and in need for additional safeguards and affirmative action; a fact that exists even today. The consequence of this idea that lower castes need protection is that leaders from these communities are expected to cater to the needs and demands of their own community, and are therefore relatively unrelatable to the other communities. Thus Ambedkar has been restricted in his universality in comparison to Gandhi or Nehru, and is in fact remembered as a figurehead for emancipation of the lower castes, not for his skills as a jurist, his capacity as the first Law Minister of Independent India, or his contributions to the freedom movement, or even as a sound critic of the Post-Independence Nehruvian policies.

Bhimayana – The Negotiations of Affect in Learning Methodology

Language in the novels are personal and brief (Starr), and so are the books meant for children to understand the history of India. Relating to a lovable figure of a 'Chacha' or a pious 'Mahatma' becomes easier to comprehend compared to a towering figure who headed the Constitution Assembly of the nation. This becomes the first step in creating a formidable distance in the young impressionable minds. Some of the examples of nomenclature used in common parlance in the history books for children in India are as follows:-

TITLES	PERSONALITIES
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Chacha Nehru	Jawaharlal Nehru
Netaji	Subhas Chandra Bose
Bapu / Mahatma	MK Gandhi
LauhPurush / Iron Man of India	Vallabh Bhai Patel
Lal,Bal, Pal	LalBahadurShastri, Bal GangadharTilak, Bipin Chandra Pal
Kokila	Sarojini Naidu
Father of the Constituent Assembly	Dr.B.R. Ambedkar

Ontologist Bickard made a point, that situation and conventions constitute a kind of ‘common understanding’ of what the social situation is, and this common understanding constitutes a higher level of ontology. Language develops as a system of operators on such social realities thereby greatly complexifying those realities: he went on to explain that once language has emerged, much of social reality is constituted in potentialities for further language interactions. If the language interaction is skewed in the initial years, it only leads to further distance and degeneration and further oblivion and forgetfulness in the adult years. Under such circumstances, the emergence of the graphic novel Bhimayana: Experiences in Untouchability comes across as an agent of change, a wakeup call for people accepting history of the nation with complacency and blindly being indoctrinated in the traditional depictions of Ambedkar.

The tables are turned by the graphic novel Bhimayana: Experiences in Untouchability, Incidents in the life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, published by the Navayana Publishing in January 2011, subsequently reprinted in 2012 and 2014. The initiative was taken by Navayana in 2003 with Ambedkar: Autobiographical Notes, a brief thirty six paged book priced at forty rupees. Further on, this book finds a mention in the multi volume text based on Ambedkar titled Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, edited by Vasant Moon. The editorial notes mention that some of the original reminiscences were written and drawn by Ambedkar in his own handwriting. The script writer of the graphic novel Srividya Natarajan and S Anand refer to the Ambedkar versions in the episodes and also creates new characters and scenarios. The graphic artists Durgabai and SubhasVyamwereunschooled people from the Gond Pradhan community of rural Madhya Pradesh. The stories of Ambedkar were

recounted by the writer in Hindi to their fourteen year old daughter Roshni, who in turn explained to her parents which finally led to the production of the book.

The aesthetics and narration of this graphic novel challenges the domains of devastating national histories of India, blurring the difference between a contorted image building process and a real life journey of an impressive figure in the history of the nation. Not only has the visuality made the processes of comprehension easier for the readers, the art which draws on the pathos from the present day world, incidents which take place degrading Dalits interweave to bring out succinct contextual issues relevant for the readers.

For instance, the opening chapters of the book highlight the plight faced by the Dalits still now, which is denied or deemed as a forgotten past by the upper castes in concentric overlapping circles in black and white. The newspaper clippings are used to remind about the incident at Khairlanji, where a caste mob brutally paraded and raped a mother and daughter in 2006, the case of honour killing at Swarop Nagar in New Delhi in June 2010, the incidents of practices of untouchability in 2010 at Kolhapur where Dalits were not allowed to draw water from wells, and the fine imposed on a Dalit woman at Morena in 2010 only because she had fed a hungry dog bring a stinging reminder of all those atrocities against which Ambedkar had rallied against. This process appeals to the emotions or the affect of the readers, to those sections who have not been exposed to this side of the society. An empathetic understanding of such issues which are missing in the text books of history in schools or are conveniently overlooked as a lapse of the memory needs to be reviewed once more with the introduction of Bhimayana.

Bhimayana- The Interface of Memory, Orality and Art in the History of India.

The Gond art was brought to the forefront by Jangarh Singh Shyam in the mid-nineties who belonged to the Gond tribal community in central India. Their traditional work consisted of maintaining family genealogies, transmitting legends and myths through paintings all which was transmitted to them through the oral culture within the community. The process of internalising of the Ambedkar journey came easy to Durgabai and Subhas Vyam as they heard the stories orally from their daughter. Even though they were made acquainted to the genres of graphic novels by the writer Srividya Natarajan, of Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, Shaun Tan and Osamu Tezuka, the artists counter posed their own ideologies to the visual imagery of the texts. They could relate to the trauma of seclusion and exploitation

better than the most. They however did not adhere to the western method of restraining the journey of Ambedkar in panels and gutters, they rather preferred to make it with a lot of open spaces, with air to breath. They felt that their art applied to a system which was 'khulla' and felt that they could not cage an expansive person like Ambedkar in boxes.

The open spaces provides the readers to make cognitive constructs of real and imagined events, creating meaning, interpreting symbols and an ability to predict and create cognitive mind maps, opening their visual fields. Bhimayana is neither a compilation of single-sheet picture nor is straight out linear narrative. The use of the Gond digna is like 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. Edmunds (2006) suggested that with the sequential art children do not need to decode texts to learn and practice comprehension skills. With an art inspired by the earth and its myriad wonderments, the process of a text book reading becomes easy and approachable.

Bhim is the pint size super hero of the novel, with doe like eyes who speaks in speech bubbles drawn in the shape of birds. Interestingly the novel has made a demarcation in the form of speech bubbles as a mark of protest, and subtly introduced the boy Bhim in the text. All the characters who are oppressed, differentiated against or denied speak in the form of bird like speech bubbles, whereas the oppressor's speech bubbles are markedly different in the form of a scorpion's sting. The same pattern follows in the story wherein the graphic patois gives reasons to sort out why a stick that beats has eyes similar to a panopticon, or why a water pump seems to want to burst into tears. As Foucault argues in his book Discipline and Punish that prison did not become the principal form of punishment just because of the humanitarian concerns of the reformists, but it is about the cultural shifts that led to the predominance of prison via the body and power. The casteist society that denies uniform access to water to young boys from a water pump by the help of sticks is also about a society that enforces its biases through misuse of power and politics of numbers.

The politics of numbers has been following a trajectory which 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." The numbers of Dalits are dwindling in places where there has to be a show of strength in numbers, the state also plays the role of a panopticon displacing rural Dalits to appropriate lands for mega projects and global investors leaving behind a trail of helplessness and inadequacy. The game of number is always pitched

in the same fashion, a few against the majority. Interspersed between the chapters divisions are the current newsarticles in never ending circles about the atrocities heaped on the Dalits even today, which is one of the most striking feature of the graphic novel.

The symbolisms in the Bhimayana is the next important feature of the graphic text. It is divided into three segments primarily, Water, Shelter and Travel. If one looks into the Dalit history, these are the main areas in the day to day living of a dalit, in which he/she has been a victim to continual harassment and torture. The oral culture of the tribal paintings amply bears out the fact, by the characters and story line of the book. Ambedkar is marked with glasses, perhaps to emphasize his erudition. Muslims have little beards. Brahmins have puny tufts of hair poking out from shaved heads. Characters neither smile nor frown. And eyeliner has been applied artfully to bring about the intentions behind the apparently impassive faces. The contouring of the faces are marked by the gestures borne out by jutting chins, for example the sadness of Bhim's aunt, who waves goodbye to him and his cousins, graduates across her mercurial chin. Furthermore, Ambedkar's speech at the Mahadsatyagraha 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. This harks back to the time when art was used to interpret day to day life, till the time verbosity took over.

The Importance of Bhimayana for Children of India.

The irony of a history text book of school is that the major emphasis is on key words and major events mentioned and reiterated by a classroom teaching methodology. The children grow up learning that untouchability, injustices and discrimination have been eradicated by the implementation of fundamental rights and directive principles of the state policy. However with little or no exposure to ground realities, a holistic comprehension of the real scenario is impossible. They grow up to be citizens who are apathetic about cases against atrocities of the depressed classes, with a half-baked sense of justice. The over dependence on the power of written history as an undeniable, incontestable domain also gives fillip to such a sentiment.

Texts like the Bhimayana bring about a revolutionary change in the thinking processes. The verbal visual texts are remarkable in the narration as they stem from histories from below. India being predominantly an oral society, the tales are unfurled anew at every performance, the telling is different, and it liberates the reader from a rigid storyline and accelerates cognition from various angles of a discourse. The discourse itself becomes fluid in such cases, which gets reflected in the language and the imagery used by the artists. The graphic novel has a huge ramification on the political consciousness of the readers, encourages diverse thinking and makes them question the issues of equality, discrimination, and imbalances in the society. It is explorative, non-judgmental and open to new ideas and forms.

To sum up, it makes Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar very approachable and relatable, his ideas and causes succinct and justified. The use of animal imagery, earthen colours and traditional fonts give a wholesomeness to a story which has still now remained caged in blurry boxes of the history text books. The interjections by the newspaper clippings reinforces the existence of a parallel system which thrives on casteist power and murky politics, inhumane, nasty and brutish. The exposure through a tribal art and an interesting narrative style would be instrumental in triggering off basic human goodness in the future citizens of India, and make it a better place to live in. This is what the great man Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar must have dreamt of eventually for his nation.

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