Background to *Bhimayana*:

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.

Bhimayana is the story of a boy named Bhim, Bhim is born as a Mahar, an untouchable and that is his only fault. Bhim grows up experiencing the world through violence and realizes at the onset of his life that it is no fun being Mahar. While the gentle faced, Bambi eyed boy is no one's idea of a superhero, Bhim grows up to become exactly that. Frankly written and drawn in the mnemonic idiom of modern Gond art (as practiced by the central Indian tribal community 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).

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 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 (God).' But after 1974, when a militant anti-caste movement led by the Dalit 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 create an identity for themselves. 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.

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.

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 action for 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, 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 Brahmanism, 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, and labour rights. 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." 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.

Title of the text:

The Vedas, Puranas and epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as prominent sources of myths have for centuries defined the image and place of Dalits in the society, validating caste ideology and depriving Dalits of dignity and personhood. Challenging Brahmanical epical beliefs of culture has been an important way through which Dalit intellectuals have attempted to produce counter-hegemonic discourse. It is in this spirit of Ambedkar's encounter to the dominant Brahmanical hegemonic forces that the title of the text under consideration, gains relevance. It is a counter-epic to the dominant Brahmanical, nationalist epic of the *Ramayana*. It subverts the commonsensical nationalist narrative of what constitutes an epic. While *Ramayana* 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.

Narrative of the text:

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 Brahmanism for such vicious conventions during his time Ambedkar was of course defining more than Brahmins discriminating against untouchables. For him, Brahmanism 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 lynching 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.

Reading the visual narrative of *Bhimayana*:

The visual narration is based on Gond art, a tribal art traditionally practiced by the Gonds on their walls and floor. The Gonds worshipped trees and nature in general which reflects in their numerous renderings of trees, animals and birds. Mainly two-dimensional and rich in natural motif, Gond drawing tells stories through visual aide-memoirs that artists once applied exclusively to domestic architecture. It's vibrant in imagery but only tentatively narrative. Recent exponents of Gond art 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.

Ambedkar is typically under-acknowledged in mainstream textbooks and popular media. There is a revival of him 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 lesson.

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 caricatured 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 colour 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.

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 narrating, 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.

Pg. 19:

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. Bird shaped ones are for reason and good people - 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.

Pg. 31,32:

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.

The disparate body parts that are shown swimming in a non-symmetrical frame

symbolically smash the Brahmanical hierarchy of caste order. The above discussion illustrates how the polemics of *Bhimayana*, as explicated in the discussion about content and intent, resonates in its form too, making the book highly subversive in many ways and making it maintain its oppositionality as an anti-genre.

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. Every face is equally striking, or nondescript.

When we think of visual narratives, we think of graphic novels, comic and picture books. A graphic novel consists of the following elements:

1. Panels: Squares of rectangles that contain a single scene
2. Gutters: space between the panels
3. Flush: A entire page with one panel
4. Dialogue balloons
5. Thought Balloons
6. Captions

Graphic novels help the reader read between the lines. While the text helps to take the story forward, a lot of additional insights are communicated through the imagery accompanying the text. They often go above and beyond the text to communicate an idea. The Gond artists couldn't understand the western concept of panels even after seeing the work of Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco and Marjane Satrapi, and hence resorted to dignas. In *Bhimayana* the free-flowing patterns of dignas allow the images as well as words to flow and interact with each other, making the text almost secondary. The images are steeped in tribal idiom and symbolism that provide a rich subtext to the narrative.