

Indian Graphic Novels Towards Decoding India

Prachi Agarwal
(University of Delhi, India)

Graphic novels are fast becoming a solid reality in the literary panorama of India. Rising over the shadows of the ubiquitous and omnipotent Amar Chitra Katha, the Indian graphic novel is far more than just gods and freedom fighters as it is commonly believed. Exploring a myriad of issues and formats, from myths to science fiction, autobiography to history and literary classics, this medium is steadily and continuously emerging as an effective way of representing contemporary India. There are graphic novels on development, sexuality, identity, social and political realities that tell more than what is already said.

Not only are the new wave storytellers and artists relying on the intrinsic quality of imagination that this format offers, but they are also experimenting new strategies taken from cinema and non-graphic literature and enriching them with numerous literary, historical and biographical references to be able to reflect alternative realities beyond the media-saturated realities of contemporary India.

The creators of graphic novel produce narrative and emotional impact by combining visual and textual elements towards understanding of histories and truths (political and social) about India. Caricatures are a powerful tool that allows to develop satire around the event. Historical, political or social caricatures are offering an insight into our political realities, social-economic conditions or even historical occurrences highlighting our hypocrisies and dual standards. But how do caricatures function to do this?

Promod K. Nayar explains that “caricatures are the distorted representation of any individual with a fair amount of exaggerated physiognomies to reflect the inner nature of the individual” (Nayar 2016, 194). With reference to Lawrence Stretcher, Nayar also affirms that

pictorial caricature pertain to the grotesque or ludicrous representation of scorn or ridicule of human vices or follies and exaggeration of their most characteristic features by means of graphic images. (194)

Thus, through exaggeration and grotesque the satire gives an alternative view of History, culture and society. Moreover, the focus of the graphic nar-

ratives on individual battles and traumas, stories of women, of individual survivors, of personal losses ensures 'critical literacy' around the event. The term 'critical literacy', explains Nayar, means understanding how such national events, processes or policies affect the individual and the family. Nayar highlights that by visualizing micro histories, the graphic narratives help to extract the event from being an objective reality, expressed in numbers and dates, and to restore its subjective meanings.

R.K. Laxman's pictorial satire on socio-political issues has been fulfilling the mission for long. But the current graphic narrative is working towards enabling a satirical critique of the Indian contemporary realities, thus making alternate and radical realities visible. *River of stories, Bhimayana, Delhi Calm, Drawing the Line, A Gardener in the Wasteland, This Side That Side, The Harappa Files* (to name a few) represent personal stories of victims, suffering, deprivation along with the larger national narratives of progress, equality, freedom and development.

While *River of stories* depicts the impact of building the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the local population, *A Gardener in the Wasteland* is an account of Jyotiba Phule's struggle for liberty and *Drawing the Lines* is a reaction to the 16 December 2012 brutal rape in Delhi of a young girl, popularly known to all as Nirbhaya. *Bhimayana: The Experience of Untouchability, Delhi Calm* and *This Side That Side* move further from just reviving certain events and the action around them, and take History to task to prove that indeed History is not only about the past. It is about how the present generation engages with this past today to negotiate with its legacy.

Bhimayana is an account of Bhim alias Bhimrao Ambedker - the man who goes on to draft the constitution of India -, of his encounter with untouchability and his fight against this inhuman practise that deprives a man of his humanity and forces him to believe that even animals have more freedom than them. In depicting the plight of the untouchables or Dalits as they are more commonly known, the narrative questions the very presence of the caste system that puts castes above all humanity. Intertwined with the past incidents of discrimination are the more recent incidents that jolt India that claims the abolition of the caste system and practicing of untouchability as a crime. What has then changed? A few Dalit political figures have been given privileged posts in the government to work for the betterment of the lower castes, but in pursuing their own interests they have ignored the problems of the castes. Also in the name of the improvement of these castes and to provide equal opportunities in education and employment, a system of quotas was put into place and this has only worked to create new divisions and categories among people. The narrative thus very clearly portrays in words and pictures the impossibility of rising above the curse of the caste system in India as it is deeply etched in the minds of even those who are born in the present-day 'free' India.

Delhi Calm deciphers the city during its state of emergency and the sus-

pension of Civil Rights during the Emergency of 1975-1977. Though set during the Emergency, the purpose of the author is not to showcase the violent episodes of slum clearance and forced sterilization under Sanjay Gandhi, neither does he want to reveal the state head's attempt to save her own power using the constitutional provision of 'state of emergency'. The main focus actually is the only movement against the masked threat to the country's democracy lead by Jai Prakash Narayan and his call for 'Total Revolution', and the fall of the movement because of the half committedness not only of his followers, but that of the country as a whole. This indifference and acceptance is what is alarming and dangerous. In the present time too, there is a strange daily calm along with the daily alarms on violence, jams, scams, inflation, communal politics and the fall of the very ideals of the republic.

By the same author, *This Side That Side*, an anthology on the Partition of India, has a more hopeful note. The anthology is a graphic account and exploration of the Partition encompassing memories and desires fostered with nostalgia, pain, yearning, speculation and curiosity written and illustrated by 47 collaborators from 'this side' and 'that side' of the borders - India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. *This Side That side: Restorying partition* is a representation as much metaphorical as factual of the Partition and what it means to live in the shadow of this epochal moment that has shaped the fates of three nations, and continues to define the lives of people across the three nations. Partition discourse no longer concentrates on the political drama emphasising the role of the state actors, but it is shaped by the memories of the survivors and the consequences of what happened when those lines were drawn. In exploring the present generations' relationships with the Partition that left gaping scars on our collective psyche and set of chains of external and internal violence that have not snapped yet, the anthology goes beyond the horror, the displacement, the severed relationships. *This Side That Side* is thus about the children of Partition - not only people but entire communities, ways of life both current and remembered. It is an attempt to restore the fractured perspectives on the same truth as in Orijit Sen's *Making Faces* that summons readers to create faces by choosing the upper middle and the lower portions through trifurcated pages reminding of the politely ignored truth - we are all the same, it is just a matter of seeing. It is an effort to reconcile with the pain of partition, of how ordinary people negotiated with the uprooting and displacement and how they continue to negotiate its legacy reminding all that 'This is not how nations are made' - a line from the story *Which Side* of the anthology.

The Partition of India is not a closed episode of history. It continues to widen the gulf and deepen the scars etched in the memories. We continue to feel the after shocks of the partition, whose social and political dimensions have given birth to new polemics of terrorism and the politics of appeasement. *This Side That Side* is an effort to renew and to flame the curiosity to reach out to the other side in the hope of opening new dialogues

for a reconciliation with a past that haunts this side and that side alike.

While socio-political concerns are a recurring theme in these graphical narratives, the desire is to resurface and to re-politicize these issues in order to present the new realities that have developed around them over the years. Another set of graphic novels such as *Corridor*, *Kari*, and *Hyderabad* offer a kaleidoscopic representation of contemporary city's fragmented realities and hidden lives and loves.

Soon to join these narratives on city life is Ram Vakettesan's *Black Mumba* set to release later this year. *Black Mumba* is a collection of four graphical stories, set in the city of Mumbai, portraying the dark shades of the 'city of dreams'. But what else can these stories suggest about an over-projected city that has only hopelessness and fallen dreams to offer? All the four stories in *Black Mumba*, narrated by the weary, dejected police officer Dev, are snapshots of incidents and cases that he encountered. Though the stories start as a crime fiction, there are no criminals in the stories. There are no good or bad guys in there, only the weird, the bleak and the dreamy nature of life that this city is famous for. The stories reveal the secret and the hidden mythology of the city that continues to find its magical influence despite the misery, the violence, the oppression that has gripped the metropolis. It is the relationship that a Mumbai dweller shares with the city that keeps the city alive in his memories even far away from there as is the case of Ram Vankettesan. Amidst the prostitute journalism and TRP driven media, the Indian Graphical novel is decoding India in all its verity.

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