

# The Hindu Comic of *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Bhimayana*, the Epic Tale of the Dispossessed: A Comparison of Empowerments

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As most of us already know, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (14 April 1891 – 6 December 1956), was a jurist, economist, politician and social reformer who also supported the rights of women and labour. He was Independent India's first law minister and the principal architect of the Constitution of India. Among the many socio-political activities of this prolific scholar was campaigning and negotiating for India's independence, publishing journals, advocating political rights and social freedom for Dalits, and contributing significantly to the establishment of the state of India. Popularly known as Baba Saheb<sup>i</sup>, Ambedkar, born amongst the untouchable Mahar caste is more or less a messiah among Dalits<sup>ii</sup>, today who are totaling between 165 to 170 million, or about 17% of India's population<sup>iii</sup>, and according to Dorothy M. Figuiera, in her book \* only 1% of whom were literate in his time (150). Under the circumstances, one of the many popular media adaptations of his life and works, *Bhimayana*, the "graphic book" by the publishing house of Navayana, did certainly have enough reason to be biased in his favour. Instead, the retelling of the chronicle of the hero, who is "typically underacknowledged in mainstream textbooks and popular media"<sup>iv</sup>, takes place through factual reference, such as newspaper montage and conversational prose flowing with energy and logical fervor, both of which complement each other. The litany of humiliations is compelling because they belong to a range of social stratum, that we the modern Indians, in our upwardly mobile global venture of "Unity in Diversity"<sup>v</sup> fail to perceive. According to Prajna Desai in her review of *Bhimayana* in *The Comics Journal*, "Little Bhim's acumen for unwitting irony mixes nicely with Ambedkar's calm eye"<sup>vi</sup>, interspersed with the conversation between the racist man in favour of caste-based discrimination, and the comparatively more learned, vocal and logical woman who undercuts his claims through insights into Ambedkar's life and contemporary reality.

The ACK edition has a style that is strictly westernized comic-book like<sup>vii</sup>. The rigidly defined musculature of the characters, the dramatic portrayals of emotions and events through pan and zoom, the panels and speech bubbles, the font (Comic Sans), the colouring strategy using RGB and 8-bit colouring – everything about it feels like a foreign import dressed in an interpellated<sup>viii</sup> Indian-ness that is out of tune with the representation. Even the English used in narrativization, that in the background and the characters, is crisp and economical, and lacks emotion. All in all, the comic book emphasizes the individuality and iconic stature of Ambedkar as a leader of his people.

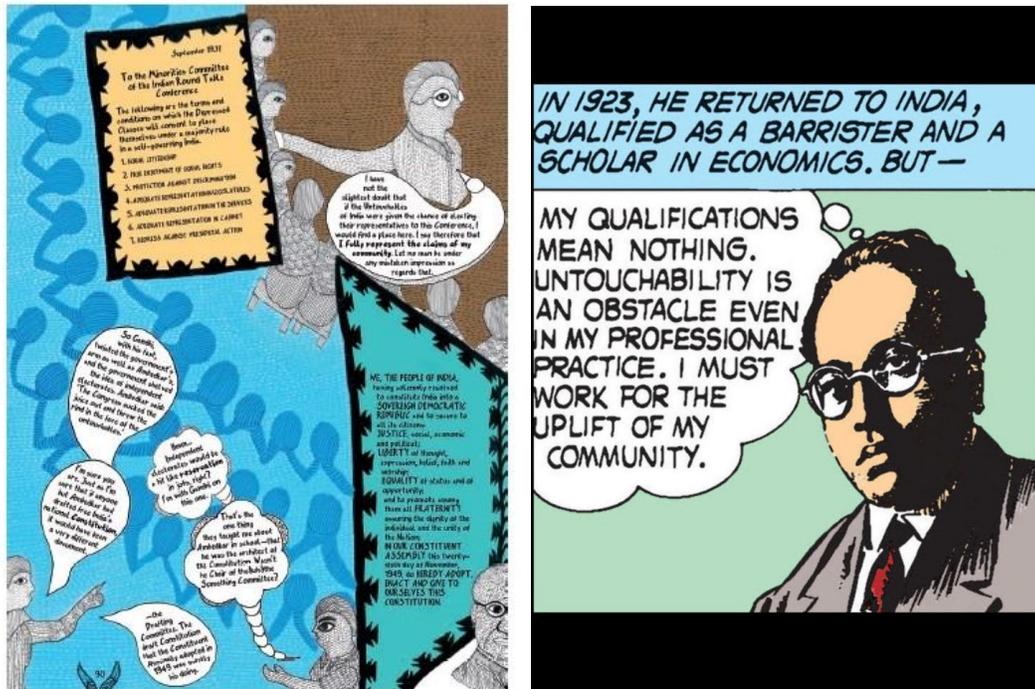


Figure 1: Comparison between art and depiction in *Bhimayana* (left) and *ACK* (Right)

*Bhimayana: Experiences Of Untouchability*, published by the publication for the dispossessed, by the more agential of the dispossessed, named Navayana, has its art done by the couple of rural artists, namely Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, who are the modern-day practitioners of the tribal art form of Pardhan-Gond for a global capitalist mercantile culture, that is interested in such tribal art as merely a rare-show-piece, one that heaps such artists in tents for a thousand rupees a day for such exquisite artworks that sell for tens of thousands Indian rupees to foreign-based art aficionados. The story of *Bhimayana*, adapted to suitability of purpose by Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand, speak of a crisis closer home, and through the participation out of their free will and active thought process, the Vyams render their craftsmanship to the level of avant-garde artistry, works in some way to free them of the raging commodification that denies their work the deserving socio-historical niche in the narratives of protest that their other dalit brethren undertake. This book of 108 pages, priced at 395 Indian Rupees, in its artistic, literary and aesthetic appeal, is closer to the works of Art Spiegelman and Marjane Satrapi, in its narrativization and coming to terms with the horror and discomfiture of being a Dalit in India. In a storytelling technique that takes recourse to visualization and newspaper montage to make sense of horrors that are otherwise non-descript or inchoate, it also depicts the attempt of one such Dalit, with his share of dark past, to rise above the circumstances through a personal pursuit, that in its wake, holds millions in its thrall. Whether it be in support of the observations made by the individual leader, as in the case of Mahar Satyagraha, or against the legislative sanctions acquired by his untiring effort by all other racially superior castes, and even other religions, Ambedkar makes himself known, and *Bhimayana*, an ironic skit on the name of the Hindu epic of the Kshatriya God-King Rama, namely, *Ramayana*, chronicles these endeavors and experiences.

The irreverent style of Pardhan Gond art helps facilitate a certain de-iconising, by making Ambedkar's individuality as inseparable from the collective destiny of his caste people. He is always shown to be with his brothers or colleagues, and even as he is alone, absorbed in soliloquy or thought, he is one with the nature that surrounds him. The organic style of the Pardhan art

form, that hems in animate and inanimate objects as part of a living, breathing universe, in its richly textured lines, a curious admixture of the scientifically precise lines of the German Rotring pen conveying the age-old tribal aesthetic sensibility, through the “khulla” page spreads that, according to the Vyams, do not create a claustal atmosphere like the panels, gutters and boxes of westernized comic art does. In *Bhimayana*, although his greatness is apparent, it is made humane and homely, as if Ambedkar is one of sufferers’ own, and this humanity prevents him from being cited as merely the great leader of the dispossessed. He is shown to feel bad, react and challenge people’s abusive behaviour. Not unduly modest, he flaunts his credentials when necessary; he lies whenever it is expedient to save himself insult. No superhuman godhead, he feels angry, and never succumbs to charitable thoughts about his oppressors. In other words, the narrative of *Bhimayana* affords emotional display, something that the filmic close-ups of ACK falls short of in its ritual representation of the Western generic idiom of comic book superheroes, who like the ancient Greeks, did not fall prey to excesses.



Figure 2: Left shows a khulla, mixed b/w and coloured page spread from *Bhimayana*, Right shows the western formulaic art of ACK

Even as sections of the written narrative excites the reader, the graphic patois slows the textual-visual dualistic experience, giving reason to sort out why inanimate objects, like a stick that beats is sighted like a panopticon<sup>ix</sup> or with fingers pointing “guilty!”, or why a during Mahar Satyagraha<sup>x</sup>, Ambedkar’s microphones spray out founts of water.

Overall, the drawing is formally busy, with dots, speckles, and mesh-like lines, which make the images attractive and performative, mainly done in black with the occasional color spread. Yet the images, vying for the reader’s active participation, 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, through spiralling lines spreading across pages, that can carry a journey motif, or the endless resistance he must put up as part of his project.

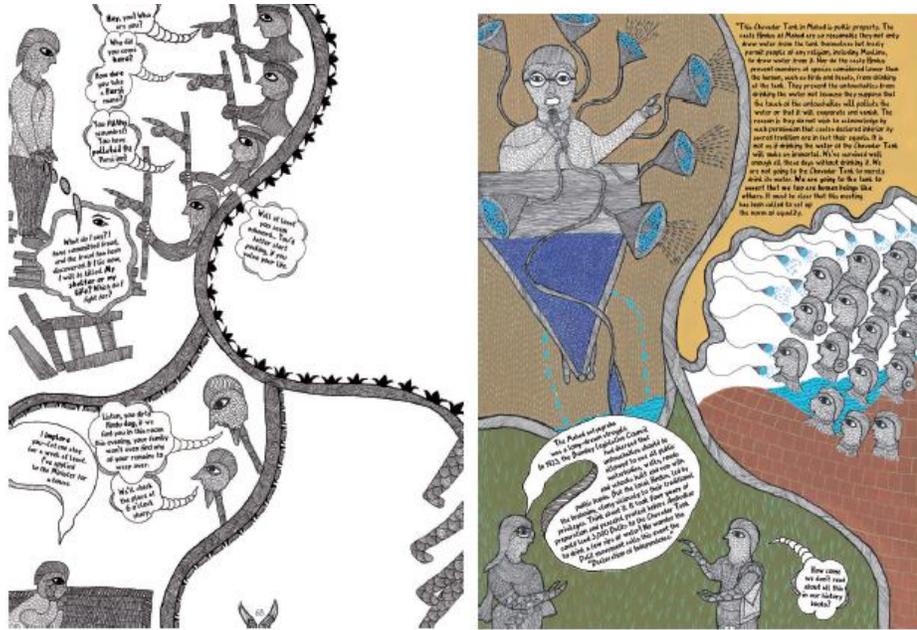


Figure 3: Left shows the Brahmins and the Muslims with the verdict-giving sticks, Right shows a scene from the Mahar Satyagraha. The lady in favour of the Dalits has a speech bubble shaped like a bird, the orthodox man has scorpion-insigned speech bubble.

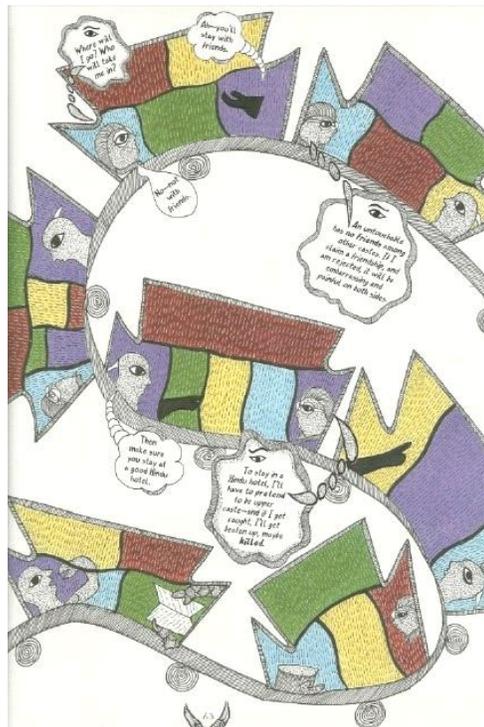


Figure 4: The spiralling journey where Ambedkar must use the situation to his favour

Bhimayana’s textual content is mostly based on Ambedkar’s autobiographical notes, collected and edited from the section titled “Waiting for A Visa”. The foreword by John Berger describes the book in terms of “a conference of corporeal experiences across generations, full of

pain and empathy, and nurtured by a complicity and endurance that can outlive the market”. The fourth section of the book, entitled, “The Art of Bhimayana”, which is a self-reflexive account of the creation of the book, and the agential decisions made by the artists involved. In a conversational style, the writer S. Anand talks about how this work was inceptioned, and the Vyams talk about themselves and their peculiar choices of representation, of the self and their art, as they came to know about Bhim, not as Ambedkar, but as one of theirs, and how the lack of rectangular framing and unilinear time serves as an alternative heroic mode suited for an alternative hero. This epilogue also details how S. Anand carried volumes of graphic novels by avant-garde graphic novelists such as Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, Will Eisner, Osamu Tezuka, Marjane Satrapi and Shaun Tan for his first session with the Vyams, for them to receive inspiration on how to visually interpret Ambedkar’s life. According to Nandini Chandra, “While the publishers shy away from calling it a Graphic Novel, and stick to the more universal category ‘Graphic Book’, the overarching frame in which it is slotted, marketed, and reviewed is that of the graphic novel.”<sup>xi</sup> The blurb, for instance, says: “defying conventional grammar, they infuse fresh energy into the graphic idiom.” Just as Ambedkar had warned his followers against making a personality cult out of his name and was deeply contemptuous of the subservient political culture rife among congress party workers, especially vis-à-vis the cult of Gandhi, this publication by Navayana marks a different step in the adaptation of Ambedkar and his significance into the popular culture medium, namely that of graphic novel, which is still not considered as a pop-culture artifact in India, especially from an Indian origin.<sup>xii</sup>

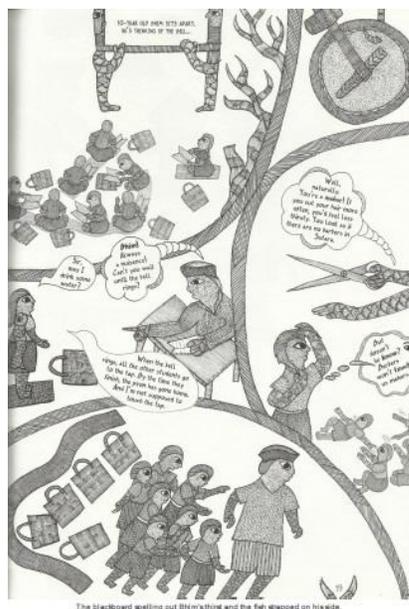


Figure 5: Thirsty Young Bhim’s body symbolically represented as a fish.

Images culled from nature abound in the book, where fortresses are fierce beasts; trains are a kind of feline-snake; the road is a peacock’s long neck; the handle of a water pump turns into an elephant’s trunk. The first section of the book, which deals with the right to water, is full of water-based imagery—when the young Ambedkar is thirsty, his torso turns into a fish; and when he urges a crowd to stand up for their rights, the speakers morph into showers sprinkling water onto the audience. A section on shelter has the recurring imagery of the banyan tree and its many twisted roots. The speech-bubbles carry clues about narrative sympathy (refer to Figure 4), examples of which are replete and uniform throughout the book. Harsh or prejudiced words

spoken by the racially superior are given speech bubbles that have scorpion-sting like tails to evoke their poisonous quality (such as the speech-bubble issuing from the peon). Gentle words of the dispossessed and the ones sympathetic to their causes (for example, the bubble issuing from young Bhim) are encased in bubbles that are shaped like birds, and unspoken thoughts are given an icon to denote the mind's eye.

The pages are not formally structured and digna patterns, with their nature based symmetrical-asymmetry and designs, divide the story into loose frames for a *khulla* (open) visual imagery, in lieu of geometrically precise frames that choke the organic story-telling craft of tribal India. Metaphors of carnivores and herbivores are used for Brahmins and dalits respectively. The characters with their “bovinely sedate eyes”<sup>xiii</sup> set on a non-descript, emotionless face typical of symbolic art, have functional insignias attached to them as markers. This is ironic since Dalits are usually seen to be devoid of merits, despite differences of circumstances and personhood. In a reverse display of artistic power-play, Brahmins are reduced to tufts of hair in shaven heads, Muslims to the tufts of beard attached to their chin. Anthropomorphism of inanimate objects is also used as a method to portray them as part of the living universe. These stances make the portrayed memory an instance of postmemory, the memory of the survivors of the violent onslaught of prejudice, that through this folkloric device, creates a validity of its own.

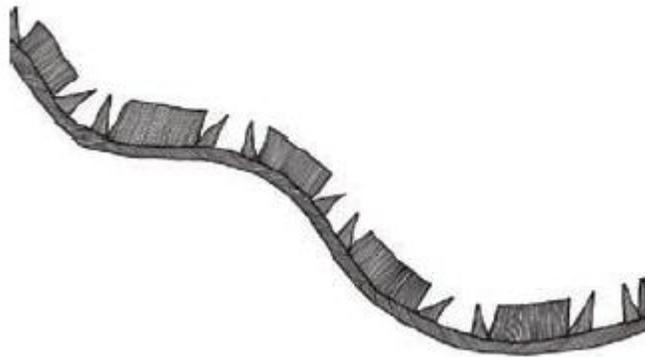


Figure 6: A *Digna*.

One must be alert to the fact that reification and incorporation,<sup>xiv</sup> the usual ways to reconcile the marginalised communities with the status quo might leave the artworks, both made by untouchable, rural artists, the ACK comic by Mahar artist Dilip Kadam, and *Bhimayana*, by Subhash and Durgabai Vyam, open to commodification and vice versa. Yet, by not emphasizing enough on the “formal aspects of their art—texture, textuality, and the symbolic” — we would deny them an understanding that they deserve. Whether politically appropriated or not, the formalistic and stylistic devices show how they have put forth in their agential endeavor, their personal representational politics (especially the validity of the *khulla*, non-photo-realistic art that speaks through symbolism, and doesn't encase the characters and situations in boxes). It is only a lack of faith in the artisans and their compatriots in publication, that would decide upon “the textured narrative's capacity to do little more than tell a story which compels the return to the unilinear discourse”<sup>xv</sup>, whereas in reality the interpretations of the works multifarious in their appeal to the audience, as the present study has revealed. As the study progresses, we come across a gamut of points of departure, as in a Bergsonian fashion, *Bhimayana* tells of alternative possibilities<sup>xvi</sup>, Deleuzo-Guattarian zones of becoming<sup>xvii</sup>, and the Existentialist idea of Clock-Time and Lived-Time being different from each other<sup>xviii</sup> — which prove the intellectual import of this atypical work of art, an artifact of philosophical artifice. There is also the concept of alternative

histories<sup>xix</sup>, and multiple truths/memory (as factual or experienced/personalized)<sup>xx</sup> used as narrative devices in the folkloric<sup>xxi</sup> storytelling. (these terms come in handy in comparison). No wonder then that Nuala Calvi, for CNN has rated this work amongst the “The top five political comic books” on May 23, 2011, in her story, where she shows how “Graphic novels take readers to places news cameras cannot reach and provide a personal insight into world events”<sup>xxii</sup>. As part of a genre that is still evolving, incorporating photojournalism and art traditions from “other” cultures,<sup>xxiii</sup> *Bhimayana* bears testimony to both the angst and the calmness, situated in an eye of the storm, the violence of Khairlanji<sup>xxiv</sup> merely a wind starting off the momentum, to a journey to the past, the present and the aftermath, and a future still up for change, a future of peace and cohabitation, if not a Marxist utopia<sup>xxv</sup>. No wonder then, that academia has embraced this harbinger of change with open arms, as *Bhimayana* is now included in Delhi University’s B.A. ‘popular literature’ segment<sup>xxvi</sup> and is being taught in over seventy colleges.<sup>xxvii</sup>

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> The cult website <<https://drambedkarbooks.com/>> dedicated to him and his teachings, works and analyses by other Dalit scholars, make him a live, digital phenomenon, that speaks of an alternative “Imagined Community” of learned Dalits, who harken not to the typical nationalist “Jai Hind” salutation, rather to “Jai Bhim”, in honour of the messiah of the Dalits.

<sup>ii</sup> Ambedkar’s fame as a champion of the causes of the marginalized has even made him into a global figure of aspiration and protest, as the Hindustan Times article shows, <<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/united-nations-describes-ambedkar-as-global-icon-for-marginalised-people/story-ILXxZpBiqAt43p8Xd7jcOJ.html>>

<sup>iii</sup> <<http://www.tcj.com/reviews/bhimayanaexperiencesofuntouchability/2/>>

<sup>iv</sup> <<http://www.tcj.com/reviews/bhimayanaexperiencesofuntouchability/2/>>

<sup>v</sup> Vincent A Smith, in his introduction to the *Oxford History of India*, 3rd Edition, 1958, p. viii. writes, “India offers unity in diversity... [the] underlying unity being less obvious than the superficial diversity, its nature and limitations merit exposition.” Is stereotyped into the oft quoted, propagandist phrase in history textbooks as merely “unity in diversity”, without the reference to Smith’s idea of India being “primarily a Hindu country” (p. 7).

<sup>vi</sup> <<http://www.tcj.com/reviews/bhimayanaexperiencesofuntouchability/2/>>

<sup>vii</sup> Comic book tradition cite Britannica/diamond comics, the why and the how of its relation to this project.

<sup>viii</sup> Interpellation, a term coined by French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, describes the process by which ideology addresses the individual. For more on the topic, refer to <[www.longwood.edu/staff/mcgeecw/notesoninterpellation.htm](http://www.longwood.edu/staff/mcgeecw/notesoninterpellation.htm)>

<sup>ix</sup> Foucault’s concept of the Panopticon, works to induce in the inmate of the prison (here the caste-conscious Indian society), a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. The eye on the stick functions like a CCTV, a modern day, digitized panopticon that is like the all-seeing and all-judging eye, of the godlike society, sanctioning its mass violence on the Dalits. For more on panopticon, refer to <<https://foucault.info/doc/documents/disciplineandpunish/foucault-disciplineandpunish-panopticism.html>>

<sup>x</sup> What how when

<sup>xi</sup> <[navayana.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/biblio-review.pdf](http://navayana.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/biblio-review.pdf)>

<sup>xii</sup> As a visit to the famous bookstores like Starmark or Crossword will confirm, most of the popular works of graphic narrative, even from Indian publishing houses like Campfire, use foreign classics as the plot provider. The few indigenous plot—driven works are mostly made for children and adolescents, rarely catering to an adult, let alone intellectual clientele.

<sup>xiii</sup> <<http://www.tcj.com/reviews/bhimayana-experiences-of-untouchability>>

<sup>xiv</sup> Akin to the Marxist concept of interpellation by Althusser, where we respond to the names we are given, and thereby follow the assumptions about us, made by the propagators of ideology, and let them decide our identity for us, tying us down by the symbolic expectations in the process. For more on the topic refer to <<https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/interpellation/>>

<sup>xv</sup> The unilinear discourse here refers to the irreversibility of clock-time, and narrowing down of possibility. <[navayana.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/biblio-review.pdf](http://navayana.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/biblio-review.pdf)>

<sup>xvi</sup> For the French philosopher Henri Bergson, events in reality were filtered spatio-temporally through the states of Actual, Virtual and Real, where of the endless possibilities, only one event could be actualized at any one instant. *Bhimayana*, with its alternative story-telling technique that is a mix of historical, perceived and folk-based truth, plays around with this idea. For details on the topic, refer to Hulse, Brian. "On Bergson's Concept of the Virtual." *Gamut: Online Journal of the Music Theory Society of the Mid-Atlantic* 1.1 (2008): 2.

<sup>xvii</sup> "To write is certainly not to impose a form (of expression) on the matter of lived experience. Literature rather moves in the direction of the illformed or the incomplete... Writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete..." For details on the topic, refer to Deleuze, Gilles, Daniel W. Smith, and Michael A. Greco. "Literature and life." *Critical Inquiry* 23.2 (1997): 225-230.

<sup>xviii</sup> Starting from Heidegger, philosophical writers such as Sartre and Camus have talked about the differences between chronological time, and spatial time, i.e., time as a lived experience across space. For details on the topic, refer to Lewis, J. David, and Andrew J. Weigart. "The structures and meanings of social-time." *The sociology of time*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1990. 77-101.

<sup>xix</sup> As works by subaltern historians such as Pandey, Chatterjee and Chakraborty suggest, the undermined histories of the deprived find an outlet through such memoir based works. For details on the topic, refer to Guha, Ranajit. "The small voice of history." *Subaltern Studies* 9 (1996): 1-12.

<sup>xx</sup> The works on postmemory by Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer shed light on trauma and its effects on memory-narratives. For details on the topic, refer to Hirsch, Marianne. "The generation of postmemory." *Poetics today* 29.1 (2008): 103-128.

<sup>xxi</sup> For more on the concept of folk-truth, refer to Cowan, Jane K. "Folk truth: When the scholar comes to carnival in a "traditional" community." *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 6.2 (1988): 245-260.

<sup>xxii</sup> <<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/europe/05/19/graphic.novels/>>

<sup>xxiii</sup> <<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/europe/05/19/graphic.novels/>>

<sup>xxiv</sup> Anand Teltumbde's book, *The Persistence of Caste* uses the shocking case of Khairlanji, the brutal murder of four members of a dalit family in 2006, to explode the myth that caste no longer matters. Analysing context and crime, it seeks to locate this event in the political economy of the development process India has followed after Independence.

< <http://navayana.org/product/the-persistence-of-caste/>>

<sup>xxv</sup> A utopian state of government where specified property or means of production are owned by the state and not citizens or persons, and which may also provide for a form of equal distribution of national production.

< [www.duhaime.org/LegalDictionary/C/Communism.aspx](http://www.duhaime.org/LegalDictionary/C/Communism.aspx)>

<sup>xxvi</sup> <<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/gone-with-the-wind-james-bond-make-way-for-ambedkar-in-delhi-university/story-AnTHqHNhrfnCRzwM1J56KI.html>>

<sup>xxvii</sup> <http://navayana.org/blog/2014/03/16/bhimayanaandthepoliticsofinclusion/>

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