

Exploring 'Ugliness' as Resistance in Indian Graphic Narratives

This study aims to explore the ways in which Indian graphic narratives employ the aesthetics of ugliness as a tool to dislodge social, political, and cultural hegemonies. My paper by no means claims to be a comprehensive exploration of all existing Indian graphic narratives, but includes within its scope the analysis of the nature and function of ugliness in select Indian graphic novels and comic books in English. Dislodging dominant ideologies or culture often requires a revision in style and it has been a fascinating experience to delineate how the revisionary nature of ugliness coupled with a genre that is linked with both the popular and the elite has established itself as a potent site for dissent in India. Orijit Sen's *A River of Stories*, published in 1994 and one of India's first graphic novels, was born as a result of the artist's participation in the Narmada Bachao Andolan. This establishes that the very origin of graphic novels in India is rooted in resistance.

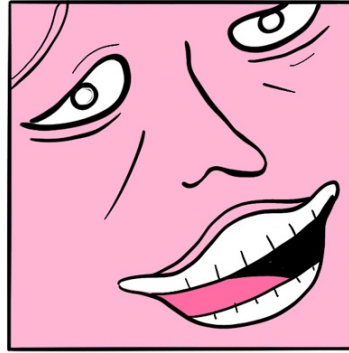
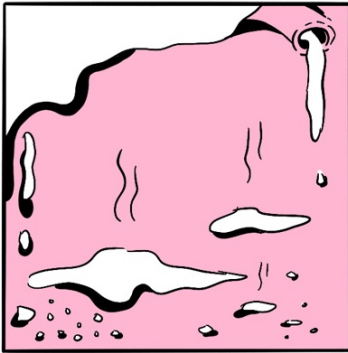
Visual depiction of the aesthetic of ugliness can be a tricky affair. Explicit portrayal of the unpleasant is often easier written about than visually portrayed. A visual medium comes with its own set of advantages and limitations. A gang of skeletons meant to incite horror for instance, might as well look hilarious if not drawn right. It is this which makes the presentation of ugliness in graphic narratives different from that in written texts. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing while examining the ways in which artistic representation of Laocoön differs based on whether the subject is rendered in poetry or the plastic art of sculpture, points out how negotiating with the ugliness of the anguished body, specifically the mouth, poses a specific challenge for the sculptor.

'There are passions, and degrees of passion, which are expressed by the ugliest possible contortions of countenance, and throw the whole body into such a forced position, that all the beautiful lines, which cover its surface in a quiet attitude, are lost. From all such emotions the ancient masters either abstained entirely, or reduced them to that lower degree, in which they are capable of a certain measure of beauty.'

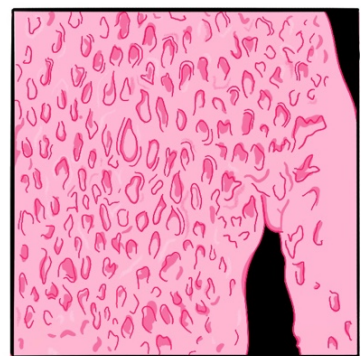
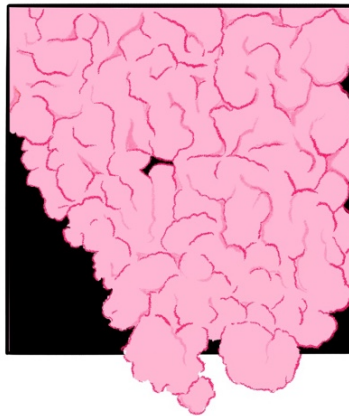
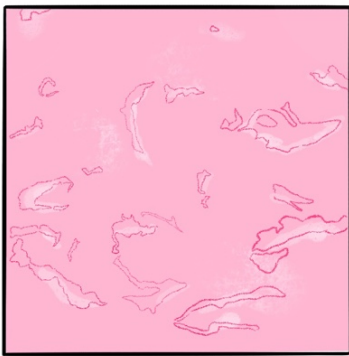
- G.E. Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*



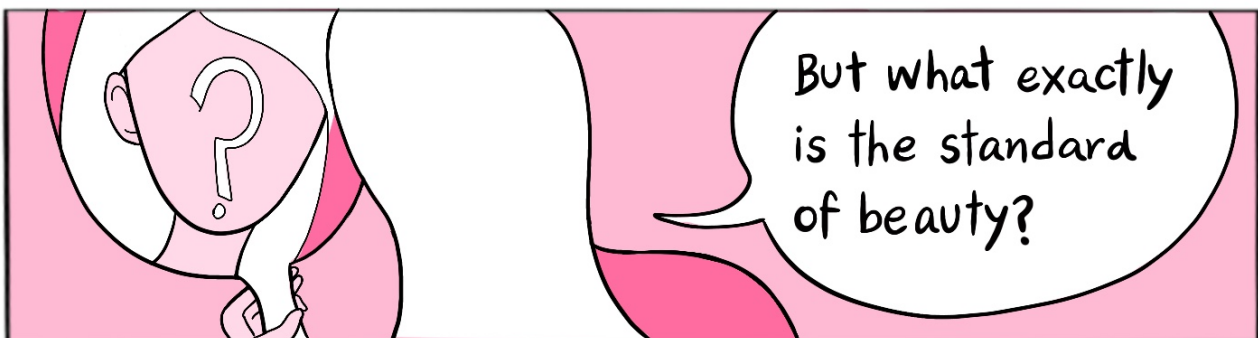
Ugliness in graphic narratives can be found in the form of the explicit portrayal of the sordid or the unpleasant,



The employment of particular kinds of visual textures and colours,



and deviation from mainstream standards of beauty.




Aesthetic choice is shaped by cultural and commercial demands of a particular society. Certain objects like rotten meat and its stench might be universally repelling, but aesthetic standards determining the attractiveness of an art-object is relative. However as Umberto Eco points out in *On Ugliness*, the realm of ugliness has received substantially less attention compared to the efforts artists and philosophers have put to come up with definitions of beauty and it has for long been simply 'defined as the opposite of beauty' and 'relegated to passing mentions in marginal works' (8).

Inheriting Ugliness:

Classical Indian aesthetics or *saundarya shastra* foregrounds the aspect of beauty. Bharata's *Nāṭya Śāstra* prohibits the depiction of content that is repellent to the senses.

The Determinants like bloodshed, corpses, ghosts, ominous noise etc are not to be depicted.

Only responses to the Determinants, that is the emotional state or Bhavas evoked are to be expressed on stage via the performers' expressions and gestures.



Furthermore, Indian folk art deemed 'grotesque' by nineteenth century English writers and art historians for what they perceived as their lack of symmetry and harmony was simply being evaluated by those with different set of standards.

The monstrous shapes of the Puranic deities are unsuitable for the higher forms of artistic expression and this is possibly why sculpture and painting are unknown, as fine arts, in India.

George Birdwood

(1832-1917)

In the expression of human passions and emotions Indian art has completely failed, except during the time when it was held in Graeco-Roman leading strings.

Vincent Smith

(1943-1920)

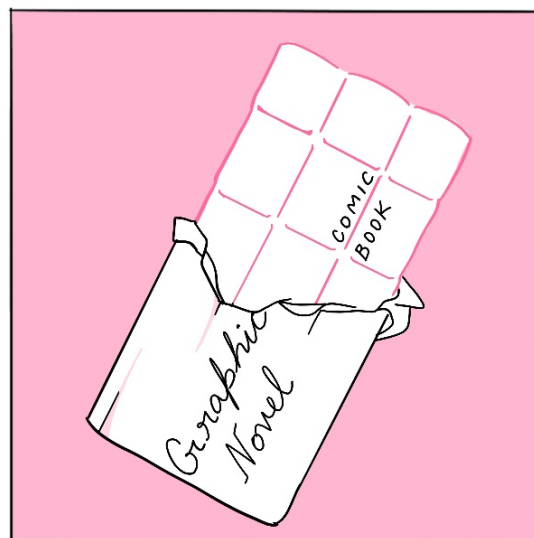
Long years of colonization indeed makes the creation and reception of Indian art a complex affair. The need to satisfy the colonisers's demand for the 'picturesque' and 'sublime' necessitated the colony's becoming a romanticized space and a source of pictorial illustrations. "British officers engaged with the company came from upper-middle class backgrounds" and "increasingly engaged local Indian artists who adapted their style to suit European taste and palette" (Maholay-Jaradi 64). This inevitably led to the rise of Indian collector-patrons who localized this new realist art. Thus, as opposed to the more earthy narratives of rural India, emerged the polished and elegant art composed by individuals influenced by an English sensibility.



It was not until the formation of The Progressive Artists' Group in 1949 that the Indian art scene witnessed a conscious engagement with the ugly. The realm of Fine Art however occupies a niche space and the tendency to lean towards beauty and realism in art, unless ugliness serves to shock or titillate, remains entact in contemporary mainstream Indian popular culture. The regenerative aspect of the grotesque in folk culture and art was with time replaced by a reductive form of beauty.

Aesthetics of the Margins:

The term 'graphic novel' incites mixed reactions in critics and enthusiasts alike. Many use the terms 'graphic novel' and 'comic book' interchangeably, insisting there is no need to differentiate between the two. Others contend that graphic novels unlike comic books 'treat serious topics or are aimed at an adult audience and present a socio-political critique' (Martin 171). I would like to add that what makes comic books and graphic novels different is the fact that with the term 'graphic novel' is attached the aspect of commerciality. Will Eisner had no choice but to market his *A Contract with God* as a 'graphic novel'. Therefore, instead of dismissing the term altogether, it is important to engage with it.



In the context of this study I have divided the selected texts into two categories:

Graphic narratives that feature unpleasant sights and smells to jolt readers out of their passivity and ensure their attention is drawn towards otherwise unsavoury aspects of society.



Graphic narratives that feature visual styles that do not emerge out of dominant cultural industry, for instance, graphic novels that feature authentic folk or indigenous art.

The first Indian graphic novel I read in 2011 is Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008). The eponymous protagonist of the text is a young queer woman residing in Mumbai, recovering from heart break and a failed suicide attempt. Her queerness coupled with her sensitivity and worldview sets her apart from those around her. We find Kari tied to a job in an advertisement agency, the artificiality and superficial glamour of which is in direct contrast to the values she nurtures.



She is a metaphorical boatman who is in a deep relationship with the city. Instead of shunning the filth that surrounds us, she seeks it out and associates herself with the dark unclean water of the sewer. From the boundless mantles of filth, Kari salvages meaning. She offers us a catalogue of smells she detects while aboard the public bus “Tiffin box vapour. Biscuit factory. Potty. Sexy armpit. Awful armpit. Rust. Heated Tracks. Sulphur, Sulphur, and Sewer” (Patil 41).



Fig.1. *Kari*, Amruta Patil

The book is for the greater part rendered in grey complimenting the mood and tone of the book. A visual depiction, in mixed media, of the image the name 'Crystal Palace' invokes is one among the few colourful panels. But Crystal Palace is no fairytale and is in reality a cramped, messy apartment with "strands of hair on the drain cover, novel tucked away in the blinds, a paper-covered something someone forgot to throw away" (19). It is as if colour only exists to depict fantasies while the real world abounds in images of alienation, identity crisis, abandonment, abuse, and abortion. Kari is then in many ways a graphic novel about the city and falls in tradition of the novels depicting the dark and grimy city life, but featuring a flaneuse in this case. The book was followed by two graphic narratives by the author featuring tales from the *Mahabharata*. The author realises "certain universes demand a certain colour palette" ("Amrita Patil's Mahabharat" 2016) and from the gritty world of Kari with its awkward but charming misfit of a protagonist and her musings on, readers following Amruta Patil's oeuvre move on to the resplendent world of *Adi Parva* and *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers*.



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Fig.2. *Kari*, Amruta Patil

Gritty in both style and content Appupen's *Moonward*, a nightmare rendered in monochrome, is a vehement attack on the corporate world that endangers nature, promotes greed, and enables severe exploitation. The narratives woven by the author play out in a dynamic mindscape named Halahala. Though the book is set in a mythical world, the narrative unfolds in a recognizably Indian context and Halahala can be read as 'some kind of alternate-dimension Bombay' ("Man of Spiel" 2016). *Moonward* begins in a primeval setting home to innocent beasts but the narrative gradually shifts to a soulless urban set up inhabited by denizens monstrous in their greed and desperation. With hardly any words used, the bleakness and viciousness of the world *Moonward* portrays is presented wholly by means of visuals. Commenting on the content and art style, the artist remarks that his second book titled *The Legends of Halahala* is 'not as ugly as part one' ("*Moonward* Writer to Release Sophomore Work" 2012).

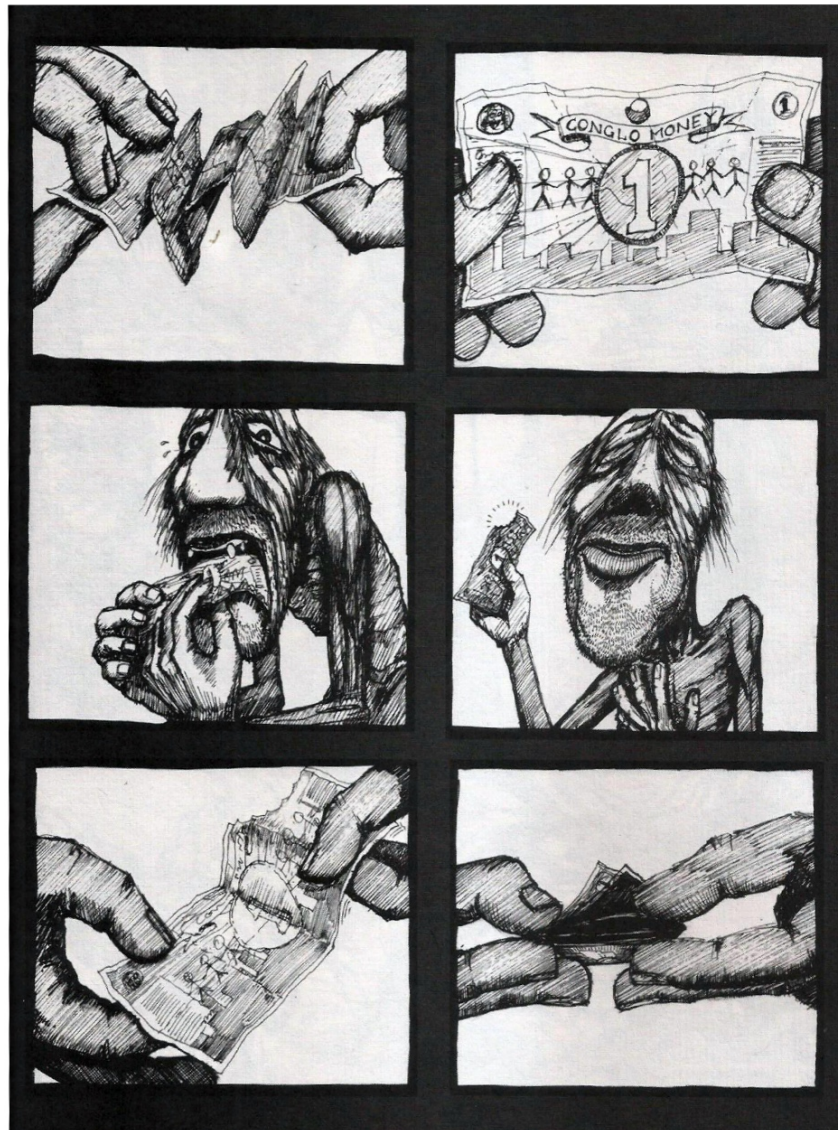


Fig.3. *Moonward*, Appupen

The dystopic White City in *The Snake and the Lotus* is as evil in essence as the city in *Moonward*, only equipped with different mechanizations of oppression. A sinister, hypermechanized and sanitized, dystopic space, the city is a totalitarian set-up run by denizens who live on lotus-milk.

The portrayal in comic books of the human figure, especially that of the hypersexual female form, has garnered a lot of criticism and with due reason. The reception of the physique and getup of strong female warriors in fantasy lands frequently demand a suspension of disbelief in part of readers who are not satisfied with mere titillation. *The Snake and the Lotus* however features humans whose forms are in keeping with the world they inhabit. One of the central characters is a young woman with stunted growth just as a post-apocalyptic world with limited resources demands. The text is permeated with the voice of the Green, who is undoubtedly the protagonist of the book. One of the highlights of the text is the redemption of the creatures of the Green - These beasts are not the benign looking animals we find in *Moonward* nor the playful creatures of *The Legends of Halahala*. But despite their intimidating and monstrous appearance, these inhabitants of forsaken wastelands, are marked by a dignity in appearance and gait which posits it with all that is good.



Fig.4. *The Snake and the Lotus*, Appupen

The oral narrative or folk tale is another way to depict reality and counter the hegemony of historical records that erase or exclude the stories of individuals or entire cultures. Parasmitha Singh's *The Hotel at the End of the World* deftly makes use of the motif of storytelling along with magic realism to aid the characters in coping with various kinds of trauma. Set in an unnamed region of North East India, thereby symbolic of North East as a whole, the characters are metaphorically and literally stuck in an inferno-like edge of nowhere. They find themselves in an endless, fruitless chase for the legendary Island that brings salvation from a world of fear, poverty, underdevelopment, political turmoil, and gunshots.

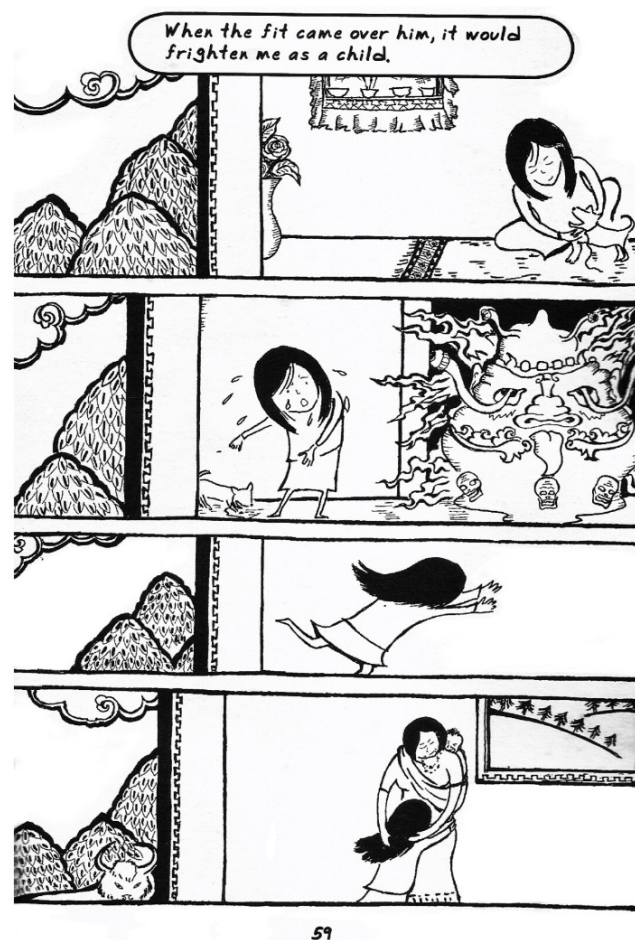


Fig.5. *The Hotel at the End of the World*, Parismitha Singh

A particular review of *The Hotel at the End of the World* unwittingly sheds light on the gap between content and its privileged audience. The reviewer denigrates the book in the harshest of words and it will not be an exaggeration to concur that his disdain of the book falls in line with the tendency of disrespecting narratives of marginalized communities that do not come packaged in an aesthetic or structure conforming to the familiar. The review contains statements that reveal disrespect for a culture and space one has not experienced. What to the reviewer is a 'feverish attempt' with 'the forced sketches, the strained and uninspired storyline, the barely conscious language' (A. Betageri 256) is in reality not only a remarkable work of art but a valuable documentation of a people's culture as well.

Considering the grim state of affairs, it is not surprising that instead of the regenerative aspect of the grotesque readers come across nihilistic scatology in a number of contemporary Indian fiction. Gautam Bhatia begins the introduction to *Lie: A Traditional Tale of Modern India* (2010) citing the proximity of beauty and filth as a physical manifestation of the psyche of Indian society:

“A Delhi flower-seller provides an array of colours – Tulips from Holland , purple gladioli from Himachal, White Hibiscus from Bangalore, all seeded and grafted from some of the world’s most delicate hybrids; the sale occurs against the stench-filled wall of suburban market’s urinal. Aspects of beauty mingle freely with waste and decay in daily encounters, the India that is revealed to us is one of ironic contradictions and surreal paradoxes. It strikes neither the middleclass housewife buying flowers for the puja room, nor a shop owner using the urinal, that the proximity of their actions contaminate the other. Similarly, union carbide will not settle the death claims of a gas tragedy but continues to display its philanthropy in the maintenance of flowered and manicured traffic islands in Bombay. In the Indian mind the visible expression of philanthropy far exceeds actual philanthropy.”

Informed by the idea of the civic consciousness and beauty related to the management of public spaces, this sort of dichotomy created between filth and cleanliness to evaluate the Indian public space is entrenched in a way of looking that is both colonial and modern in nature (Chakrabarty 541). It is however the artwork of *Lie* that provides insight into the tension between precolonial and modern sensibilities. The book is illustrated by Shankar Lal Bhopa, Birju Lal Bhopa and Ghansham who are folk art painters from Rajasthan. According to Gautam Bhatia “We had long arguments where I said things that were farther away should look smaller and they disagreed” (Venugopal 2010). This clash between the mainstream and conventional preference for realist narratives and non-linear folk art is seminal in our understanding of the politics and reception of contemporary Indian graphic narratives. The subversive thematic content of the text aside, even the very use of folk art is in itself an act of dislodging elitist aesthetics and colonial hierarchy.

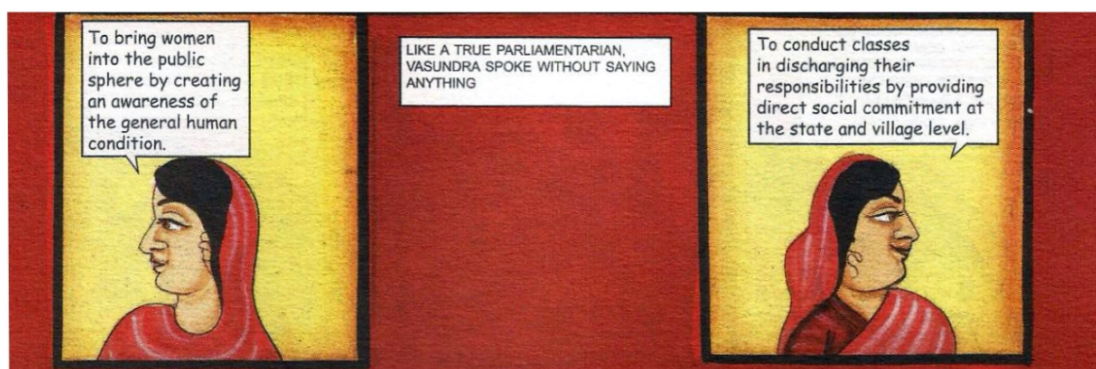


Fig.6. *Lie: A Traditional Tale of Modern India*, Gautam Bhatia

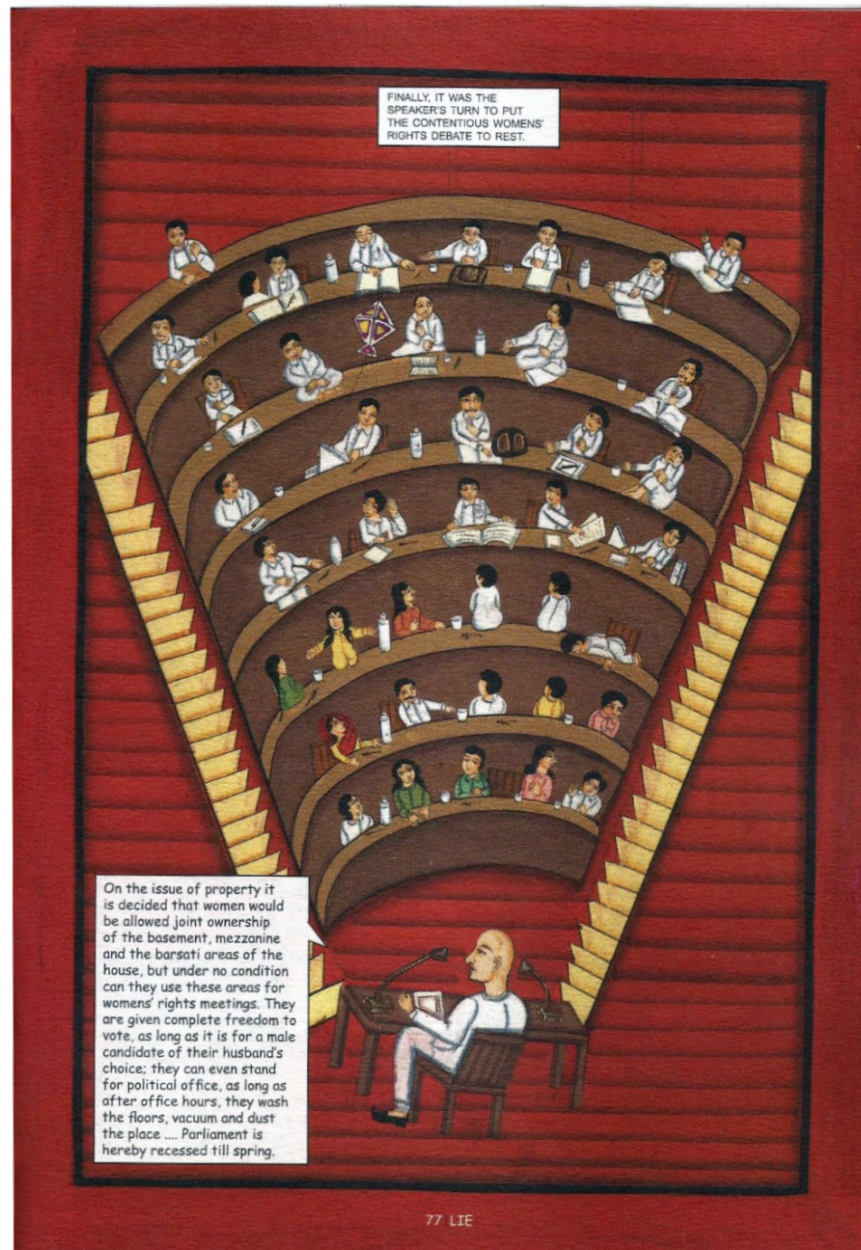


Fig.7. *Lie: A Traditional Tale of Modern India*, Gautam Bhatia

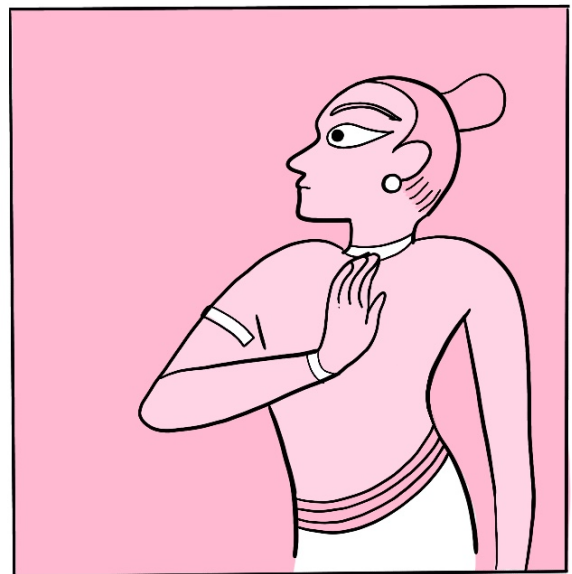
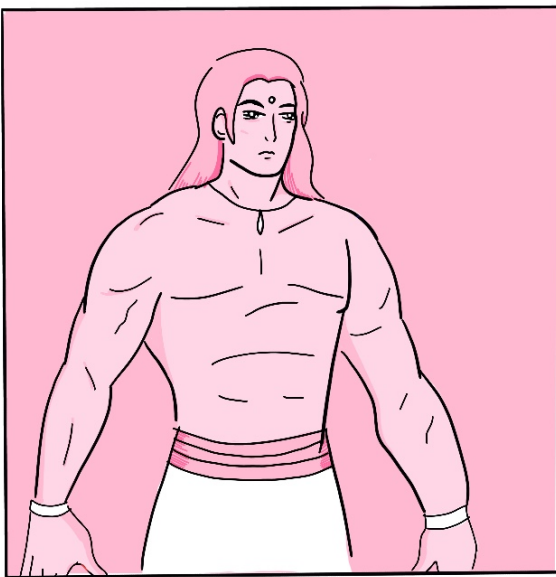
Incidentally, Indian folk art like Pata Chitra, Chitrakathi and panelled narratives in Indian Miniature Art are excellent examples of sequential storytelling which is the basis of comics. The reviews of *Lie* I came across online by Indian readers reveal an alarming dearth of appreciation for this style of art. I contend that this is an instance which highlights how far the modern Indian subject is disconnected from folk culture or what was once India's popular culture.

It is therefore a matter of immense significance when the biography of B.R. Ambedkar is presented in *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar* through Pardhan Gond art. The fact that it is illustrated by Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, artists of the indigenous Gond community, sets the book apart from graphic narratives in which a particular folk art style employed is after all in imitation or a recreation or a study of an artform not generally practiced by the artist in question. Gond art, vibrant and far from non-realist, is fundamentally intertwined with the ethos of the community which creates it.



Fig.8. *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar*, Durgabai Vyyam Subhash Vyam, Srividya Natarajan and S.Anand

Most graphic novels in India throw light on the numerous ways capitalism functions to render a subordinate position to individuals while transferring power and agency to corporate forces. The irony however lies in the fact that these works which make use of grotesque visuals and language as tools of resistance against the oppressive hegemonic forces, and which thereby stand in favour of the masses, are hardly what the masses consume. The graphic novel, many of which are marketed by upscale publishing houses, as opposed to the comic book always enjoyed a niche readership. There is also the issue of cost and availability. During my undergraduate days I remember travelling to the nearest city expressly for the purpose of buying graphic novels. If luck would have it, a new read would be available.



Though the Indian graphic novel arrived in the literary scene as a genre linked to the stories of the subaltern, presenting narratives in a variety of experimental styles, in recent years graphic novels retelling classical mythologies in visually appealing, colourful pages have emerged to gain considerable attention and popularity. A host of works like *Ramayana 3392 A.D* , *Shekhar Kapur's Devi* , *The Sadhu: The Birth of the Warrior*, *Myths of India* which take up a prominent space in the graphic novel section in bookstores have an aesthetic that conforms to popular taste - the ideal of beauty portrayed in these works conforms to the standardised version of commercial attractiveness and the artwork is hardly any different from that of Marvel comics. The much beloved *Amar Chitra Katha* is a classic example of how certain aesthetics both contribute to and are in keeping with popular imagination. Interestingly, *A Gardener in the Wasteland: Jotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty* has a thought provoking panel where the creators of the book Srividya Natarajan and Aparajita Ninan bring up the casteist visuals and content of this series (30). Visual artist Chitra Ganesh brings the much familiar *Amar Chitra Katha* images closer home by debunking and resituating them in *Tales of Amnesia*.

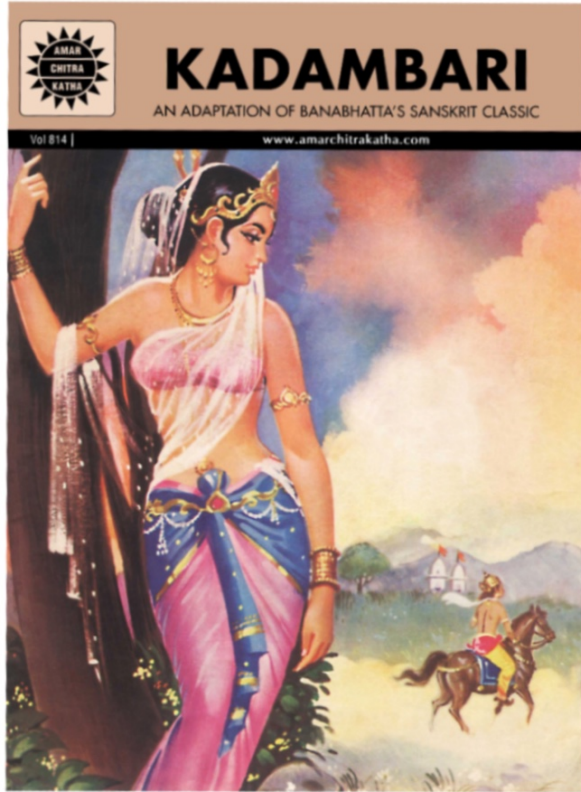


Fig.9. Cover of Amar Chitra Katha

The paintings of Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) which embodies the celebration of European aesthetics in modern Indian art, the iconography in Amar Chitra Katha series and television shows of the 90s like B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharata* and Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana* which enjoy continued popularity, have shaped the way Indians visualise their culture.



Fig.10. Cover of Sekhar Kapur's *Devi*

The graphic novel shelf in Indian bookstores is proliferated by comics based on Hindu epics bustling with colour and tantalising it's readers with superhero-glamour. The popularity of these comics is within the framework of the larger demand for novels on Hindu Mythology like Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* and Amit Majumdar's *Sitayana*, and Devdutt Pattanayak's oeuvre.

Another compelling example wherein comics have succeeded in being used as an exercise of self-assertion by marginalized communities is the *Grassroots Comics* project launched by political cartoonist Sharad Sharma as a part of World Comics India. The collaborative nature of the project dislodges hierarchies by disseminating public discourse and empowers the public by engaging the masses in the creative process. The website of World Comics India states :

Everybody has a story to tell but not everybody has the medium to express it. The simplicity of this approach lies in the fact that it just requires a pen, paper and something to say or in other words, requires the lines to speak for themselves. What makes these comics different from a professional creation is the ownership on the content as well as local settings and drama. The comics are pasted up in all possible locations i.e. villages meeting place, bus stops, shops, offices, schools, on notice-boards and electricity poles or even on trees. One more important thing in these comics is that it creates a bond between the creator of the communication and the readers because of its local relevance.



Fig.11. *Grassroots Comics* entry on 'No Stereotypes Plz' by Nikarika

The disregard for a set standard of skill in artistic style and emphasis on content plays a major role in dismantling hierarchies that control and shape artistic output. *Grassroots Comics* succeeds in launching a potent site of reform only via its lack of dependence on the official, whether in terms of language or form.

By grouping together these diverse works of graphic narratives my aim is not to undermine their uniqueness but to highlight their immense contribution in creating an alternate tradition of storytelling that facilitates the telling of uncomfortable truths otherwise conveniently unaddressed. In an era of multinational capitalism marked by emptiness, Indian graphic narrative scene has managed to come up with ways to resist being reduced to mere products to be consumed. An event like the Indie Comix Fest which provides comic book artists a platform to sell their self-published alternative comics and interact with fellow artists and readers is also gradually gaining ground. This indie world of the small-scale, personal, and the creative, which values art more than money is the space where ugliness can thrive to rear its dissenting head.



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