



## Voices from the margin in *Bhimayana*: A postmodern perspective

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### Abstract

The oft-argued and oft-quoted statement that Indian society is progressively becoming a casteless society in the wake of modernism is in fact a consensual view gathered by upper class people and projected by media. The fact is that the monolithic Hindu social order is making all measures and movements aimed at social justice inconsequential and ineffective prevailing over the rational and scientific attitude to life. The present study seeks to examine the above-said view in the graphic novel *Bhimayana*. The novel uses new art form—a fine blend of traditional Gond art and modern graphic/ comic art, rejecting the conventional sequential art. The novel manifests the experiences and struggles of Ambedkar against the evil of untouchability in the past by connecting it to the experiences of Dalits in the recent times. The novel in a way is a strong critique of Hindu social order that deprives Dalits of natural and human rights in the name of purity and social sanctity. The text not only highlights the hardships and sufferings of Dalits in the past and present times but also foregrounds the struggles of Dalits to get unshackled from the system of denial and deprivation, debasement and despotism. The novel underscores the view that unless and until Indian society dispenses with the system based on the arbitrary norm of purity and impurity cannot be a progressive one.

**Keywords:** untouchability, denial, deprivation, despotism, digna art, egalitarianism

### Introduction

The traditional Hindu social order arbitrarily excludes Dalits from social, cultural, economic, political and artistic spheres of human life, considering them unintelligent, uncreative, unclean and weak. They are forced to live an abject life of poverty, hardships, indignities and humiliations while living at the mercy of the so-called upper castes. They are deprived of education, identity, dignity, self-respect and even life chances. Likewise, they face exclusion from the mainstream literature in that their experiences and struggles are either neglected or misrepresented. The lopsidedness of the mainstream literature is that it is indifferent to the lived experiences of the deprived and crushed ones. The mainstream writers ignore the lived experiences of Ambedkar from the childhood to adulthood. He is given only a passing reference on The Republic Day and during the elections to woo the Dalit voters. The fact is that his experiences of untouchability and crusading zeal to improve the conditions of Dalits are almost pushed to the background in the mainstream Hindu or National discourses. In response to the neglectful and discriminatory attitude of the mainstream literature, Dalit writings in the recent times have begun to foreground the sufferings and struggles of the marginalized. Dalit literature, as a parallel body of literature, not only gives voice to the hitherto silent and subdued section of Indian society but also highlights the neglected creative urges of Dalits. The graphic novel *Bhimayana* (2011) shows how Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956) suffered in life on account of his birth in Dalit community though he was equipped with talent, capabilities and potentialities. His works, achievements and outlook subvert the stereotypical view that Dalits are unintelligent, uncreative, impure and lazy. The book not only visualizes and verbalizes the experiences of

Ambedkar in his life time but also the indignities and humiliations faced by Dalits now and then. Besides, the book charts a prolonged struggle and protest of Ambedkar against the tyrannical system to build a modern egalitarian and secular society.

Even today Dalits are struggling to seek freedom from the system of denial and deprivation. Despite the law enacted against the evil of untouchability and caste segregation, Dalits are still being oppressed, thrashed, exploited, humiliated and slaughtered for breaking the unjust complicit social laws. The authors juxtapose the experiences of Ambedkar in the pre-independence period with that of Dalits in the post-independence days. Ambedkar rightly observes about the life of Dalits, “They are born impure, and they are impure while they live, they die the death of impure, and they gave birth to children who are born with the stigma of untouchability affixed to them. It is a case of permanent hereditary stain which nothing can cleanse” (Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They...* 21). The text reveals the bitter truth that the complicit social laws are still prevailing over the laws provisioned in the Constitution. The recent news of Dalits being beaten up, brutalized and even lynched for realizing their human needs exposes the age-old negative attitude to Dalits that continues to characterize Indian society even in the post-independence period. It negates the falsely claimed view that India is progressively going to be a democratic and egalitarian society.

The text divided into three major books shows the three stages of Bhim's life as well as three basic needs of human beings: water, shelter and travel. Each chapter stands for the natural need of ordinary human beings. Bhim's struggle is not only for the basic needs but also for social equality, dignity and

liberty. The text also depicts the development of Pradhan Gond art and the experiences of the tribal artists Durgabai Yyam and Subhash K. Yyam. The novel links Yyams' experiences to that of Ambedkar and Indian Dalits in the twenty-first century.

In *Bhimyana*, artistic devices such as imagery, symbolism, parallelism, metaphor, irony, reportage and journalism are employed to present an accurate and comprehensive social reality. Most of the images and symbols taken from the natural world reinforce the need for human and natural rights. Ambedkar's basic need for water is manifested in the image of a fish out of water. The image of the thirsty boy pleading for water is followed by the newspaper clipping showing atrocities on Dalits for drawing water from the public tanks and wells in the present times. Juxtaposition of the past and present reveals the bitter fact that Dalits are still being considered sub-humans even below the animalistic existence. Images of animals and birds are used to signify human emotions and needs. The image of "an ox in the oil-press, walking in circles and going nowhere" (Yyam *et al.* 66) suggests that there has been no change in the plight of Dalits over the time. Comparison of Bhima with an ox in the oil-press, walking in circles and going nowhere signifies the relationship between animal and human needs. The image of Bhim with a fish in his stomach pleading for water is juxtaposed with the image of animals drinking water from the tank. This suggests that Dalits are considered below animals. Happiness of people of Chalisgaon, when they receive Bhim, is conveyed through the image of a dancing peacock.

Images of birds in the shape of word bubbles suggest the victimization of Dalits. They are "men and women who speak like birds" (Yyam *et al.* 100). The image of scattered body parts suggests the social order based on the division of humanity along human body parts. It also suggests the dreadfulness and unkindness of the caste system. The image of upper-caste people with sticks in their hands suggests the violence inherent in the caste system. The cyclical nature of Dalit identity is depicted through the circuitous path of the slithering train on which once Bhim was travelling. Juxtaposition of the images of touchables and untouchables suggests the democratic character of the tribal Gond culture. The tribal community is able to "flaunt an alternate holistic structure" through the use of Gondi art" (Chandra 22). Thus, the new art-form upholds the dignity of both the tribals and Dalits. The novel not only gives a peep into the life of Dalits but also critiques the prevailing social value system.

The newspaper headlines are used to show how pregnant Dalit women are mal-treated in the public hospitals, how young boys are mob-lynched for carrying affairs with upper-caste girls and how Dalits are bullied for demanding wages. Even today Dalit students are not given accommodations in the houses of upper castes and Dalit women are not allowed to draw water from the public taps and wells. In most of the villages and even in cities, Dalits have separate taps and wells, separate means of recreation, separate places of worship, separate deities, separate toilets and even separate places to cremate their dead ones. In the beginning of the narrative, the caste-biased girl remarks, "Caste is no issue" (Yyam *et al.* 12). But the shocking fact is that "caste never seems to go away" (Yyam *et al.* 13). The incident of brutal murder of four

members of Botmange family "in full view of people" (Yyam *et al.* 13) for asserting their right to life and dignity" (Yyam *et al.* 12) suggests that suffering of Dalits is a continuous phenomenon.

Hindu religion, a primary religion in India, believes untouchables to be diseased or polluted. Higher castes consider and treat them as the lowest form of life; they are subordinate to animals. They do not allow them to drink public water or bathe in public baths. If someone from the upper castes catches them doing this, they usually suffer a beating sometimes resulting in death. The novel exposes the hideous character of Hinduism and its insidious impact on other religions. All the main religions join hands together in discriminating Dalits, though "all religions teaches the equality of men in the eyes of God" (Yyam *et al.* 76). The popular saying 'Unity lies in diversity' reflects the tragic irony that Parsis, Muslims, Christians and Hindus participate in mal-treating Dalits. The text shows that "a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is an untouchable to a Parsi, and also to a Christian" (Yyam *et al.* 71). The novel reinforces the view that change of religion does not mean change of one's mindset. "Even though people change their religion-they all cling to the caste system" (Yyam *et al.* 76).

Hindus do not prefer to live in the localities or areas of untouchables and do not let them live in their own localities. Bhim opposes Hinduism because it is "a religion of rules, compendium of rituals, regulations which are based on the caste ideology of hierarchy and untouchability" (*Annihilation of Caste* 120). Though Bhim got education from Columbia, he was not given shelter at night on account of his low birth. His search for shelter was a search for comfort and recognition as a human being. The way he was driven away by the Parsis of the inn and insulted by a Muslim suggests that all other religions internalize the negative attitude of caste Hindu towards Dalits. In a poetic strain, his position is reflected: "Vadodara, named for the kindly banyan tree/ In all your crowded streets there is no place for me." It is clear that the evil of untouchability in Hindu society also makes inroads into Christian and Muslim societies. The novel also shows how Ambedkar was denied ride in a *Tonga* on account of his low caste. Finally, he found solace in the shelter of Buddhism just before his death.

Ambedkar holds Hinduism responsible for the ill-treatments of Dalits in Indian society over the ages. His despair against Hinduism is reflected in the lines: "To untouchables, Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors. The sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, Smritis and Shastras, the iron law of caste, the heartless law of Karma and the senseless law of status of birth are to the untouchables veritable instruments of torture which Hinduism has forged against the untouchables" (*Ambedkar, What Congress and Gandhi have Done to the Untouchables* 277). For him, Hinduism is not a religion in a true sense of word as it goes against the rule of nature. To him, a true religion gives the gospel of brotherhood and fellow feeling. Amedkar once remarks: "The religion which does not recognise the individuality of man is not acceptable to me" (Kadam 45). He also rejects the caste system eulogized in *Manu Smriti* that has led to annihilation and effacement of identity of lower sections of Indian society.

Bhim's experiences during his schooling are presented in both

words and pictures. He is not only humiliated but also denied an access to the basic need of water. The first book entitled "Water" is set in 1901 when educational reforms were initiated to democratize the education system. Dalit students like Bhim found an opportunity to get education but he was forced to sit apart from upper-class students in school so that he could not pollute the so-called pure castes. Besides, he was denied an access to school well to quench his thirst. Thus, he was deprived of "body's needs and feelings" and "forced to face the full reality of caste" (Yyam *et al.* 45). The upper-caste teacher made fun of him holding his long hair responsible for thirst. Though he wanted to have short hair, barbers did not touch the hair of untouchables in his times. He expressed his disgust at the unjust system in the lines: "Animals enjoy more freedom" (Natarajan, Anand) than Dalits as human beings.

A new art-form is employed to highlight the social issues, rejecting the conventional art-forms. The text breaks the convention of sequential art which is used in comic and graphic narratives. The artists instead of confining their art into boxes leave it open. "We shall not force our characters into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is khulla (open) where there's space for all to breathe" (Natarajan, Bhimayana, 102). The use of traditional Gond art tuned with the form of modern graphic novels visualizes the social reality from a new perspective. The text provides a peep into the life and value system of Indian people through the value-system of the artists. They connect the past events to the recent incidents through the new art-form which is focused on "the possibility of bringing marginal structures to the centre" (Nagaraj 151). The use of new art form suggests new forms of self-esteem and rebelliousness. The new style asserts freedom from the traditional styles, addressing the experiences of Dalits. "The new is dealt with through a deliberate choice of the antique" (Freitag 367). Combination of pictures and words makes the reader come face to face with the social issues by connecting him to the story on a more physical, emotional and cognitive levels.

The title *Bhimayana* seems to be in harmony with the title of Indian epic *Ramayana* but presents an alternative epic of heroism. The latter recounts the high-caste mythical god Ram's exile from everyday royal luxuries whereas the former presents a graphic account of the exclusion of Dalits from the dignified human life. The title signifies the opposition to the epic *Ramayana* which elevates Rama to the stature of a Hindu hero rejecting the cult of hero or superhero as upheld in the traditional literature and comic books respectively by placing Ambedkar on equal footings with Dalit peers. He is not projected as a hero in the way the legendary Bhima is shown in *Mahabharata* and Rama in *Ramayana*; rather he is presented as a common man with uncommon creativity, courage and capability. The novel critiques the prevailing political culture that gives importance to social hierarchy. Thus, the novel deconstructs the binary opposition of touchable and untouchable, pure and impure. Thus the novel "subverts the commonsensical nationalist narrative of what constitutes an epic" (Oza 353).

Ambedkar emphasized the importance of education and unity among Dalits to reclaim human dignity. He went on a peaceful protest march to the town of Mahad where Dalits were

forbidden to draw water from the tank reserved for upper castes. The movement was in line with the French Revolution that liberated the poor from the tyranny of nobility, feudal lords and priestly class. In the second phase of the agitation, they burnt a copy of the *Manusmriti (Laws of Manu)*, a Hindu text that advises torture for untouchables and women. Though his movement was opposed by the nationalist elites in the name of national freedom, he continued to crusade against the system through his speeches and writings. He embraced Buddhism, rejecting Hinduism for its unethical high-handedness. The mass conversion led by Ambedkar was a vehement protest against the ills of Hinduism. He kept the view that only sense of brotherhood and fraternity among various castes can remove untouchability.

The novel falsifies the claim that modernism has cleansed Indian society of the ills of caste system. The matter of fact is that Dalits are still being mal-treated in various ways from the birth to death. Dalit women are battered, paraded naked, gang-raped and killed by a frantic mob headed by men of the Kunabi-Maratha caste. Reports of newspapers, official letters and speeches of Ambedkar map "a continuum from late nineteenth-early twentieth-century India to the present" (Nayar 11). The artists employ the techniques of reportage and journalism to visualize the sufferings of Dalits. The new art form suggests the rejection of traditional caste system which paralyzes rationality and modernity. The use of Pradhan Gond art signifies the creativity of the authors in the way they represent the basic human needs of Dalits through the use of imagery and symbolism from the world of nature. The democratic character of Gond art is shown through the use of colour in delineating the images of men and women. The same colour is used to delineate the different characters irrespective of their caste, race, or profession suggests the need for social equality. The use of the same colour for each image reinforces the view that all people are equal irrespective of the caste, class, colour and creed. The flat color works as a background for the text highlights important news clippings and stories about a caste system still in practice.

The foregoing argument reveals the hidden and hideous face of Hindu social order that refuses to consider Dalits as human humans. The text employs the new art form to visualize Dalit experiences, rejecting the art form that is indifferent to the plight of Dalits. The new art form uses graphics and words rejecting the traditional art-forms and introduces us with the creative urges of the marginalized. The novel not only centres the marginalized tribal art but also illustrates the system of exploitation and exclusion. The novel presents social reality through a new art form-combination of both old and new art-forms.

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