

CONTEMPORARY INDIAN GRAPHIC NARRATIVES: TRACING INDIAN SUBJECTIVITY, CONSCIOUSNESS AND HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

In India Graphic Narratives have been a relatively less researched form within the magnum corpus of what is considered Literature in the contemporary age. Indian Literature itself eschews any straitjacketed forms or styles due to its historical longevity. Nonetheless, many of its most influential works of Graphic Fiction have proliferated at the turn of the century, or are simply post-millennial. This reflects a trend in the publishing industry and the spaces available for Indian Fiction. It is important because it can provide a sliver of reflection on the upcoming Indian social milieu. Graphic Narratives provide a different form of language for the author and artist to express themselves. This language is purely visual and is aided with text, usually the form of which, or its lettering also provides an important insight as to what is being conveyed through the narrative. Visual aesthetics within graphic fiction cannot simply be reduced to descriptions within written language, and that is what makes it a complex mode of expressing and understanding the world around us. This paper is an attempt to understand Indian Graphic Narratives and their importance in the contemporary literary and intellectual environment. The texts discussed are *The Hotel at The End of The World* by Parismita Singh, *Delhi Calm* by Vishwajyoti Ghosh and *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* by S. Anand.

Keywords: Graphic Narratives, Indian Graphic Narratives, Post Millennial Literature.

Introduction

Delhi Calm, *The Hotel at The End of The World*, and *Bhimayana* are important artefacts of Indian visual culture, constituted by Indian Graphic narratives. It is understood that these graphic narratives have a limited, English-speaking urban audience which transmutes into a

class of educated people being able to access these particular narratives within the larger canon of Indian Graphic Narratives. These three stories speak in the language of Indian Activism, where they can socially speak into the space of the History of trauma that people in India have faced within the different sections of society. *Delhi Calm* and *Bhimayana* are politically charged but speak of entirely different issues within History, namely state brutality and caste-based discrimination, which are relevant today as well. *The Hotel at The End of The World* focuses on memory and History told orally, along with the focus on the trauma experienced by Indian soldiers, and certain forgotten pasts.

The Re-imagination of the Emergency in *Delhi Calm*

Delhi Calm catalogues the Emergency years in India and through its artistic style of the visual mode, communicates to the reader the darkness of the time, along with the dictatorial sense of “calm” which was maintained during the time. The Emergency was imposed on June 26, 1975, during the tenure of Indira Gandhi as the Prime Minister. The “Calm” in the title *Delhi Calm* can potentially refer to many things, along with the voices of dissent that were compulsorily silenced at the time. In the novel, Vibhuti Prasad and his friend Parvez embody the voices of dissent that have to camouflage themselves during the state of emergency in Delhi and their sense of idealism undergoes a myriad of challenges because of heavy state censorship. The calm is imposed through complete state control over the newspapers and the media, where no articles could be published that voiced themselves against state policies. The entire graphic novel has a unique art style with a blend of sepia tones with monochrome black and white sketches, that refer to the eerie state of the affairs in India during the time of the Emergency where free speech and basic human rights were usurped from the Indian citizens under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, who is referred to as “Mother Moon” in the text.

The graphic novel starts at a self-reflexive note, where it calls itself a work of fiction, proceeding to mention further that due to its nature of being categorised as “fiction”, where the resemblance to any people or events in what people consider to be reality is entirely coincidental, and thus it is a “self-censored” work. Censorship is a major theme that runs throughout the text and was a major component of the Emergency that lasted for a long period of twenty-one months in India. The time was

characterised by forced muteness of the people and due to no freedom of the press and assimilation of unlawful arrests within the realm of legality, the nation was forcefully put in a state of a metaphorical slumber where the everyday activities of the Capital, Delhi and its core atmosphere of political education, free expression and artistic freedom was forcefully curbed. The novel repeatedly refers to the radio announcements, stressing that “there is nothing to panic about” (Ghosh, 2010, p.3), which contributed to the ironical state of affairs during the time. The emergency was announced by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for her own self-interest, and the nation was plunged into a state of internal panic, heavy surveillance, bureaucratic violence and mass incarcerations, that the text focuses on. The government silenced all the criticisms against the Emergency era with the tool of censorship. Furthermore, it became another major component of the forceful suspension of the rights of Indian Citizens. The events that were proof of tyrannical state power were invisibilized through heavy censorship of the press.

Democracy is another major theme in the novel, and it is crucial to understand how the curtailing of democracy becomes detrimental to the safety, rights, and humanistic progress of the citizens of India in the country. The setting of the novel, as the title indicates, is Delhi. Delhi is referred to as the power polis of India by the narrator, and the nature of the term “power” is ruptured and faces a great degree of change within the text, as it did during the time of the Emergency. The infrastructure of politics, which is condensed in the tangible form of governance, called democracy, is not just a method of structuring the political power of the state. The structure of political democracy is a method of dissipating power among the citizens of a particular state. A democratic structure makes sure that if not evenly, power can at least be distributed at different degrees amongst all the citizens of a particular country so that accountability within a state set-up is not lost. During the time of the Emergency, the democratic distribution of power was curtailed leading to the concentration of power within the hands of the Prime Minister herself. This kind of concentration of power escaped the accountability of the government and paved the way for a kind of continuous fear among the citizens. Democracy becomes an important structure for the citizens of a country to form an active political society. A visible change in the period of the Emergency was the wilful expulsion of the Indian citizens from politically participating

in the democratic structure of the government, thus making Mother Moon almost immune to all forms of accountability.

The seventies were a unique period for Indian society. It was still a young democracy, trying to find an identity that would be more than its postcolonial characterization. Post-coloniality has been historically shared by many formerly colonised nations, but it is their economic, social and political infrastructures that move in and out of their anxiety of influence and characterise their individual state identities. India was also in the middle of its pre-cable-television era, where the radio was an important part of popular culture and its own infrastructure. It was also a means of spreading information and communication at a collective level. The late seventies and the early eighties would see the earlier attitudes of the Indian state towards an era of free market capitalism and its characterization of the meaning of “progress”. In such a malleable period that could be looked at from a point of retrospective gaze, Indian Democracy was turned into a collapsible caricature of itself and the Emergency was imposed. Through the lens of Vibhuti Prasad (VP), one sees Delhi as a representative space of the Indian Political; atmosphere and its quick metamorphosis during the emergency months. The Indianness of the graphic narrative, which removes it from its Western contemporaries, is represented through the spatiality of Delhi, its culture of poetry, street food, films and collective cultural ethos which also faced grave precarity during the emergency era.

The spatiality of the events of the text is another major component of the novel. Delhi is a site of freedom of speech, protests, and a freedom of exploration of oneself, where prescribed frameworks of morality can be questioned and navigated through. Delhi is represented through its street food vendors, local markets, *chaiwallas*, buses, public transport infrastructure, and the like. The spaces within the infrastructure of the urban space, namely Delhi, can be seen as spaces that can be open to signification and can be turned into what the inhabitants of the space want them to be. A significant example is that of the cinema hall, where people engage in a pleasurable voyeuristic gaze to understand their desires and not repress them. The spaces within Delhi are localised versions of significations for Indian citizens. The text represents those spaces within Delhi and then goes on to trace a state of radical change in those very spaces during the Emergency, where freedom is repressed and people face incarcerations without committing any

crimes. Addressing the city, as if all its infrastructural components were alive, VP remarks, “Bloody hell. This city I have almost adopted is now staring at me suspiciously. As suspicious as a new neighbour, not sure whether to smile but constantly gauging. I am surrounded by invisible eyes, watching only me. Trailing me, step by step. When did Delhi get this way?” (Ghosh, 2010, p.9) This becomes important because the city changes in terms of its nature and the way people inhabit its spaces. The food stalls of political discussion are stripped of their freedom and it also addresses the mass surveillance that took place during the Emergency years. Promod K. Nayar puts the change in the spaces of Delhi succinctly, pointing out:

When travelling on public transport VP wonders why a fellow passenger stares at him (Ghosh 8). Roads, buses and coffee houses have new décor: signs announcing silence and conformity (5). Intruding into public spaces are the regulatory, regimenting and disciplining call-ins such as ‘do not guess’, ‘do not think’, ‘punctuality is next to spirituality’, ‘an ideal family is made of four, don’t even think of more’, ‘no bargain in the times of emergency’, ‘no talking politics’ (Nayar, 2017, p.25)

The Emergency can be seen as an event in the History of India, that serves as a rupture in the middle of the chronological continuity of the Indian socio-political climate. The event is categorised by a sudden change in the social dynamics of Indian citizens during the time and the extreme changes of signification that followed after. The nature of development and progress changed radically during the time of the Emergency when Indira Gandhi pushed for hurriedly executed reforms. These reforms were situated in the ethos of the aesthetics of Late Capitalism. Neoliberalism reached its zenith of a structural framework in Indian society during the nineties. Nonetheless, as the text documents, the wiping out of slums and the aesthetic view of a progressive family of New India was situated in the social ethos of free market Capitalism. The nuclear family is an essential component of free market Capitalism and its policies around the family and housing. Multi-storeyed flats and residential high rises are a testimony to that. The rhetoric of “*hum do, hamare do*” or simply the idea of a couple needing no more than two children was actively disseminated by Indira Gandhi’s government. Slums were wiped out in Delhi, an early foreshadowing of Sanjay Gandhi’s politics during the time as well. This evidence harkens forward to the shape Neoliberalism would take in India in the post-nineties era. *Delhi Calm* as a graphic novel serves the

purpose of prolonging the event, which is the Emergency Era, within the mode of a graphic text. The event, in this context, is understood as a rupture within the everyday life of the common person in India, which was characterised by the Emergency. The mode and the event come together in a later time of the post-millennial era, that E Dawson Varughese traces the proliferation of Indian Graphic Narratives to, in *Visuality and Identity in Post-millennial Indian Graphic Narratives*.

The sterilisation drive by Indira Gandhi is also an important subject of discussion in the text. It is one example of the state exercising body politic over its citizens. Here, the biological intersects with the political. In the novel, an entire page is dedicated to the artwork of an umbilical cord attached to a baby, and it is surrounded by razor blades. Masked faces are directly looking at the baby, implying the danger that people's reproductive rights were at the time. The most marginalised people were targeted through the sterilisation drive, with meagre benefits offered in lieu of sterilising their bodies. This dystopian nature of the events surrounding the Emergency is effectively documented in the text and the art style of the panels in the text. The state being able to create subjects out of its citizens and enter their private sphere of existence, where they stripped them of their biological rights in the name of family planning, was a dystopian reality in which the citizens had to live during the time.

Delhi Calm can be viewed as a subjective reanimation of history as it played out in the retrospective gaze of the narrator, VP. It does not only offer an individual's subjective gazes but stands as a representational testimony of a collective national memory and experience. The dark tones in which Delhi is represented, and the imposing juxtaposition of the radio acting as a mouthpiece of the state are important to note in the text because its visuality indicates the experiences of fear as an everyday reality, and the symbol of the radio acting as an animated piece of propaganda of the government. People are represented as wearing smiling masks, which serves as visual irony to the reader because, in contrast to the smiling masks, the people embodying the government's narrative only carry out acts of violence and encourage suppression of freedom.

Popular culture and the objects constituting it become a site of repression and a mode of distraction in the text. The radio becomes a symbol of

authoritarian state power in the text where all the announcements of government reforms are made through it. It becomes a symbol of irony and fear simultaneously. Films become a site of suppression because there are police crackdowns in the theatres, as shown in the text. The radios keep on announcing a myriad of vague-sounding reasons for the imposition of the Emergency, which turns into a symbol of irony and propaganda at the same time. After the Emergency is announced to be over, people still live in the fear of something similar happening again, where one's power over oneself can potentially be taken away.

***The Hotel at the End of the World* and its Reformulation of Narratives**

After understanding the historical significance of the graphic reimagination of the Emergency in India, one can shift their gaze to a different Graphic Novel of the Indian literary imagination, *The Hotel at The End of The World*. Written by Parismita Singh, and published in 2009, its focus is completely different, as it represents the stories of different travellers and the owners of a hotel, which in its literal sense, seems to be at the end of the world since its geographical location seems to be nowhere. The graphic text is divided into several stories, which are narrated by different inhabitants of the hotel. The text is infused with Indian subjectivity and harkens back to oral modes of storytelling. The shaping of a contemporary Indian identity is seen through a unique mode, where one can visually engage with, and read different kinds of narratives and History, and understand contemporary Indian subjectivity.

Through the narrative of the graphic novel, it can be understood that it takes place somewhere in the North Eastern part of India, although one cannot deny the fact that the geographical location of the hotel is not specified. Moreover, the nature of the people being travellers also creates a dissonance in the sense of the geographical location of the text. The conversations and storytelling mention wars and delve into tales about the ghosts of soldiers. Nonetheless, it starts with a humorous note of a tale about the yak and the cow and how the former borrowed the latter's coat and failed to return it. The tone of the narrative establishes itself in the beginning where the gutters are extremely clear and panels usually do not intersect. The style is simple and it is a juxtaposition of bold black sketches on white background. The juxtaposition of black against white can be seen as similar to Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. The similarity between the two graphic texts also lies in the fact that scenes that depict violence have stronger shades of black and hardly

any white background is visible. Page number 82 and 83 depict the violence that took place during the Battle of Shangshak. This takes place in “The Soldier’s Story,” one of the stories that make up *The Hotel at the End of the World*. According to Wikipedia, “The Battle of Shangshak took place in Manipur in the forested and mountainous frontier area between India and Burma, from 20 March to 26 March 1944. The Japanese drove a parachute brigade of the British Indian Army from its positions with heavy casualties, but suffered heavy casualties themselves” (*Battle of Shangshak*, 2022). These panels have bold shades of black and certain panels have entirely black backgrounds to depict the darkness that the soldiers faced during the war.

Promod K. Nayar argues that “As ghosts of political processes and decision making, the soldiers represent the haunting past of the entire region. It is a region populated by such ghosts from the wars that shaped the place, and the subjects of that place” (Nayar, 2017, p.37). This testifies to the fact that present-day attitudes of aspirations and morality, among other cultural aspects of a society, are deeply entrenched within such events and chronological ruptures and turns within history. It is also interesting to note that one soldier is shown as the representative of all the soldiers in the wars mentioned chronologically in the book, carefully picked from history. The depiction of suffering in war through one individual’s experiences shows the reader the monotony and similarity inherent in all wars throughout time. Each war fought within History has proved to alienate the soldier from his own individuality and identity. Parismita Singh goes on to say that this was not the war of the soldier which further implies the alienation of the soldier as a subject from the state and the soldier as an individual from the event called war. Here, the rupture within different courses of history is war and the subject that loses out on their own self-recognition are usually the people who experience it in an unmediated manner.

Nayar goes on to comment on how the art style within the graphic novel also depicts the burden of historical trauma one after the other on people who experience those historical events. According to him, the vertical sequence of panels juxtaposes one onto the other showing that very burden of chronological history. Nonetheless, one can go on to argue that it is not the only singular function the art style serves for the reader. It is important to note that page number 92 and 93 do not consist of any panels in “The Soldier’s Story”. The vertical sequence

of the panels functions in a horizontal manner. It is clearly divided into horizontal gutters. In simple words, the horizontal space taken up by the panels that make the vertical sequence possible shows us the larger background against which the soldier is juxtaposed. Nayar does mention that it is to show the weakness and vulnerability of the soldier against the larger background which is depicted by the hills. Nonetheless, I would like to argue that this is also a testimony of the deep solitude that a soldier goes through during war because of the isolation that he feels. Graphic depictions on page number 92 and 93 are important because there is no depiction of any background. This serves as evidence to showcase how the graphic novel engages the gaze of the reader to depict the pure isolation of the soldier. During the time of war, the soldier is separated from the normal sequence of events within his own country. War also forces many soldiers to go away from their places of residence. The soldier's identity is encapsulated only in the instinct of self-preservation and the annihilation of the "other". Having to exist in such bodily precarity without a clear means to identify oneself in a holistic manner forces soldiers within states of mental illness and isolation. The written narrative also mentions. "And then one day. . . he stopped. Looking around, he couldn't understand. . . . Where was the war? Where was his regiment? And the British, he couldn't see them anywhere. They had gone. There were other battles, he could see. But this was not his war. . . ." (Singh, 2009, pp. 92-94)

The historical perspective that one can understand in the graphic novel is extremely interesting because it engages with the history of India in the Global context yet manages to localise the events that took place within the part of Indian history which is mostly overlooked. The North Eastern states within India are mostly underrepresented and therefore their histories are usually given lesser space or are intentionally or unintentionally invisibilized. *The Hotel at The End of The World* through its oral narratives brings to life the recollections of a traumatic past that the people of the Northeast have had to face due to international aggressions and post-independence skirmishes at the Indian border.

"The Girl's Story" takes place in the present time as it can be easily noted that it is the only story which is not narrated and she is the youngest inhabitant of the hotel. It is an extremely interesting example of the intersection of history with the present. The girl is the subject of the present and the history of war is not her experiential history.

Nonetheless, when she goes to fetch water in the woods, she has visions of the soldiers running. A very interesting aspect of the graphic novel is that it is represented visually through all its panels. Thus, figments of imagination and fragments of objective reality within the graphic novel are all represented equally. The reading of the girl's story can be that of Magical realism or it can also be seen as psychological hyperrealism. One cannot determine if the vision of the soldiers is just imaginary or if it is real in terms of its materiality. The girl directly interacts with history when she is the one who goes inside the war tank and fires tank shots over the hotel. Her experience can be argued as an example of post-memory. Post-memory occurs within Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. In *Maus*, Spiegelman recounts the experiences of the Holocaust which were not directly experienced by him but were a recollection of the memory of his parents. The historical trauma is real for him because it is generational. He has authorial power over it because he comes from a past that he has to make peace with and understand the Holocaust as a part of his identity. Similarly, the girl graphically interacts with the soldiers and the tank as symbols of war which has been experienced by the generations before her. As she is born to a generation of a history of war, she is co-opted into it through the narratives told before. That is why she does not narrate her story directly but it happens to her and it is the last story of the novel. Post memory is extremely interesting because it is shared by a myriad of people inhabiting the newer generation. *Delhi Calm* becomes an interesting example of the reader engaging in their own post-memory. The Emergency of 1975 has been experienced by all the Indian people of that time. Interestingly the contemporary reader can only read *Delhi Calm* in the post-millennial era which makes it a very potent example of the reader engaging in post-memory.

Historical Experience of Untouchability in *Bhimayana*

Bhimayana is a graphic novel that broke most of the conventions of even graphic storytelling. It is important to emphasise that because even graphic storytelling is something that did not get immediate recognition as a medium that could be taken "seriously", in terms of defining it as a literary mode or "high art" form of storytelling. One can even observe that this kind of perspective is comparatively stronger in the West, as most forms of media and storytelling associated with graphic art mostly consisted of themes that could be consumed by children or teenagers, or could be easily commercialised, with flashy themes of superheroes and

the commonly perceived idea of what “nationalism” could mean, which was a strong subtext of what a superhero should embody. Contrarily, Japanese Manga for instance has been more liberal in terms of who its target audience was, what kind of themes they would handle, and also how the graphic works could convey the philosophical and/or political ruminations and leanings with the reader. We can take many texts to understand this, for instance, the almost never-ending *Marvel Comics* universe, which recently started diversifying its themes, versus different manga like *Akira* which was written in 1982 first, covering various themes, from political stagnation and religious revivalism to technology addiction and drug abuse. American storytelling chose the medium of films to cover cyberpunk themes instead.

This series of ruminations can go on but one must understand how *Bhimayana* is related to all the debates and ideas surrounding the larger climate of graphic storytelling and its position in the world of storytelling. *Bhimayana* tells the story of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar through the medium of graphic art, conveying the message that merely written storytelling in an already existing font cannot truly convey the story of Ambedkar that has unanimously represented the story of millions that have gone through caste-based discrimination, and a lot more people who throughout history have faced discrimination due to the prejudice in their society. It also appropriates a mode of storytelling that has been identified with popular culture, at once making itself a work that should be in the realm of common knowledge, almost like a book of bedtime stories or a highly famous work, which after a point has to become common knowledge for all. It can be seen as doing that, along with visual art and written material that deserves critical attention and can be used as a pedagogical tool to undo the injustices that take place to date in Indian society due to caste.

A comic book is usually divided into panels, and can also be defined as a sequential combination of pictorial art and text that conveys a story and within it a sense of time and instant visual engagement. According to Scott McCloud, even this definition can prove to be insufficient to truly understand graphic works. Many critics tend to separate the terms “graphic novel” and “comics” to convey the difference between the kind of material offered by the text in terms of its themes, and thus how seriously it should be taken. In the vein of the arguments made by McCloud, one needs to understand that these binaries simply cannot be

absolute. Thus, for the sake of the graphic novel and its art, and doing justice to its cultural importance, one can also see it as an extremely interesting comic dealing with the issue of caste and a novel attempt to bring it into the realm of global awareness.

The graphic novel is exceptional because it modifies the very mode it opts for in order to convey its story and ideology. As it is mentioned in the book itself, *Bhimayana* makes use of the Pardhan Gond Art and the creators made their own font which they used in the creation of the novel. It is a radical form of breaking away from what has already been established. Gond art is one that “does not represent, but signifies” and if one reads the graphic novel, this nature of Gond art is evident. Unlike most graphic novels, the art of *Bhimayana* does not try to use photorealistic images or even try to represent human beings, animals or objects in a realistic art form, or an abstraction that one is used to seeing within most eastern and western comics. On the contrary, it is highly symbolic in nature and uses anthropomorphism pretty extensively to convey its ideas about a more philosophical nature of understanding what humanness is. Attributes like kindness, sorrow, and empathy are time and again expressed through inanimate objects, to make the reader understand the nature of being a Dalit time and again. The answer to the how of truly being able to empathise with the plight of being a Dalit in India is through art, which is never violent in its graphic form, but one which constantly represents the state of being alone without much agency. Most people who communicate through the speech bubble of a bird are shown to be Dalits themselves or those who are against caste and its evils. The tragedy is that power is concentrated with those who love caste and derive power through it. The speech bubble represented by the scorpions does not only represent a binary of mere evil but rather is a larger symbol of oppressive power that also generates fear and anguish. There are various examples in all the three parts that the book is divided into, namely “Water”, “Shelter” and “Travel”.

One of the most important significations in the book is that of emotions expressed through inanimate objects and animals. The hierarchy of caste only exists in the human realm, which further makes one think about how hierarchies and power further mechanise human beings to act without sympathy or emotion in fear of social ostracization or losing their share of power if they do not partake in the wrongdoings that a social compartmentalization such as caste inherently can make

them do. An argument can also be made that reduces the most primal nature of humanity to something wholly bestial, evil and that which does not hesitate to kill or inflict the most torturous pain on others regardless of any logic or reason. Hate crimes are prime examples of this. It can also be said that due to social hierarchies not existing within the animal world or that of inanimate objects, they are the only ones who can truly feel the pain of wrongdoings, and especially their appropriation by caste Hindus to execute the evils that they act by.

Conclusions

Delhi Calm, *The Hotel at The End of The World*, and *Bhimayana* have visually executed important functions of taking a critical look at Indian politics and history alike. It is interesting to also note that these novels were published in the post-millennial era, signifying that Graphic narratives appealing to an intellectually oriented audience has found a place in India. More accurately, one can understand that the audience for graphic narratives who wanted to take a visual look at more sombre topics in a realistic vein was always present, and have started to find that with a diverse publishing market. Many times, simply written history, literary archives or even films are not enough to look at one's own past and national trauma, and graphic narratives can provide a viable alternative to understanding oneself in relation to collective histories and memories. These novels discussed above are a few out of many that have given artistic expression to memory and historical experiences.

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