Narrative, Public Cultures and Visuality

in Indian Comic Strips and Graphic Novels in English, Hindi, Bangla and Malayalam from 1947 to the Present

UGC MAJOR RESEARCH PROJECT F.NO. 5-131/2014 (HRP) DT.15.08.2015

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The Principal Investigator would like to acknowledge the contribution of the Project Fellow, Ms. Shreya Sangai, in drafting this report as well as for her hard work on the Project through its tenure.

Opportunities for academic discussion made available by colleagues through formal and informal means have been invaluable both within the college, and in the larger space of the University as well as in the form of conferences, symposia and seminars that have invited, heard and published parts of this work.

Warmest gratitude is due to the Principal, and to colleagues in both the teaching and non-teaching staff at Gargi College, for their support throughout the tenure of the project: without their continued help, this work could not have materialized.

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Project Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Scope and Objectives

The primary objective of the project was to review and to theorize the corpus of comic books and graphic novels available to Indian audiences primarily in English and by extension in three connected Indian languages, namely Hindi, Bangla and Malayalam. We have sought to examine what "public cultures" emerge through the medium of the Indian graphic narrative and the comic book. Visuality is often under-explored in many forms of literary scholarship and this project has sought to correct the overprivileging of textual art. What are the subject areas of importance and how are they mediated and created through the form of the graphic narrative, what practices of visuality and textuality accompany them and how they function to create meaning is explored across mass-market print as well as digital format comics. This project aimed at interdisciplinary study of how the comic strip intersects with narratives of nation, transnationality, cosmopolitanism, modernity, tradition and individual self-fashioning. Secondary objectives included enhancing the extent of academic engagement with the field through creation of opportunities for formal study of the medium.

2. Summary of Findings

Our major finding is that intersectional understandings of Indian comic book and graphic narrative texts are necessary to examine the complex connections between various markers of identity such as gender, caste, regionality or religion, class, ability and personhood. The project analyses a variety of contemporary productions using an intersectional framework so that a nuanced reading of contexts emerges.

Digital and visual cultures in contemporary South Asia are no longer local, they are instead very transnational and cosmopolitan, ranging over spatial as well as temporal formations. One example of texts with such a large footprint is the digital comic Priya's Shakti, which is today regarded by the UN as a vehicle for women's empowerment and social transformation in South Asia. This project has analysed the meanings of feminism/feminist work and social transformation presented through and of such globally circulated texts and found that mythological and fantastic tropes can be interwoven and overlay one another to produce a new lexicon of the superheroine who is quintessentially "Indian" but whose Indian-

ness is limited and contained by variables drawn from only one religion and through selectively highlighting only some parts of Indian women's struggles for equality and freedom from gender-based discrimination. Thus, digital texts that present themselves as universal can pose special challenges when decontextualized and consumed free of substantive referential pedagogical frameworks. At the same time, the digital cultures of the Internet are also not favourable for literary audiences in India that lack the literacy necessary to navigate the Internet successfully, and thus, one key finding of our work is that the graphic novel medium is not as democratic as its use of images may initially suggest.

Next, mythological texts are a staple in the Indian comic book market, with a continuous flow of new interpretations and renditions. Our analysis shows that on the one hand many of these representations focus only on some aspects of the narratives they study (such as war in the *Mahabharata*) thus glamorizing and commoditizing that theme, and further reinforcing normative and hegemonic value systems (such as those of masculinity in this particular example), whereas interpretations that are born of deeper study and scholarly engagement can help break ideological barriers or polarities and contribute to an understanding of what "culture" and "heritage" come to mean.

Religiosity is a terrain of contest today in India, with "liberal" and "religious" (conservative) mindsets seeking to fix ways of seeing religion against a polarized political context. Through the work of Indian graphic novel and comic book authors and artists, this project has been able to explore the contemporary processes whereby religion is updating itself even as it stabilizes its meanings in the present. Engaging via their art with what presents as progressive/regressive, eco-feminist, spiritual, in their rendition of "religious" lives, identities, or stories, the project has explored the contours of what it means to be authentically "Indian" in current contexts. The experience of citizenship further has been mediated differently depending on how characters identify and are perceived in terms of their gender, sexuality, caste, bodily ability or disability, and we find that making visible these risks and secondary citizenships through the graphic narrative serves a pedagogical function, especially when these texts are discussed in classroom contexts, in making visible these differences in a fashion different from the word-text or the cinematic text.

2. Outcomes and Objectives Attained

The project has been able to comprehensively survey the field and outline several areas wherein research can be conducted, and meaningful outcomes derived. Key subject areas that

emerged through the project's examination of a wide corpus of comic books and graphic novels include issues regarding the representation of gender, caste and mythological subjects, as well as the nature of personhood. Over the duration of the project, the importance of examining digital cultures was felt as many artists started to work on comics that were often never published in conventional print, and thus this objective was additionally pursued.

The objective of ensuring dissemination of knowledge on the field has been met by introduction of an undergraduate course on comic books and graphic novels at the University of Delhi through a syllabus-formation committee headed by the Principal Investigator. Elective papers for first and second year undergraduates have been taught at Delhi University now for nearly four semesters and this is a major achievement for the project, going beyond its initial goal of creating a network for studying comics and graphic narratives. Further, the Principal Investigator and Project Fellow also participated in a wide variety of academic seminars and conferences to disseminate their work emerging from this project.

One difficulty experienced is that of the lack of available good quality translations of comic books published in Indian languages. Another has been the availability of published comic books in the market; editions often disappear with little archival trace remaining and this will be an impediment for future scholars too.

3. Achievements from the Project

Principal Investigator, Papers at Conferences/Seminars:

1. Invited speaker on "Literatures of 21st Century: Fan Fiction, Graphic Novels and Memes," at Traversing Texts: Literature and Arts of our Times, the Ramjas College Annual Seminar 2020-21, 12.03.2021. Delhi
2. Invited to present the paper "Reading the intersecting ecologies of gender and caste in select graphic novels and films" at "Literati: The Literary Exploration," Summer Cycle of lectures, organized by Maharaja's College Ernakulam and Government College Tripunithura, 20.02.2021.
3. Invited paper as Keynote speaker. National Seminar on "Remapping Eco-criticism: Postmodern Eco-consciousness in Literature." 22.12.2019. Post Graduate Government Autonomous College, Rourkela, Orissa.
4. Invited paper as Keynote speaker at the 'The Varieties of Religions and Secularities: The case of equal rights' held at University College London (UCL), 4

March 2019. Travel and all costs funded by The Transforming Values: Gender, Religiosities and Secularities across the Globe network/The Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Science.

5. Invited paper, “Mythologies: Revisionism and an Intersectional Feminist Aesthetics in the contemporary graphic novel in India” at the 10th European Feminist Research Conference, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Goettingen, Germany, 12-15 September, 2018.

6. Invited speaker to the Annual Festival of The Enabling Unit, Gargi College, to speak on disability in comics and graphic novels at the panel discussion on the topic-Disability, Sexuality and Mental Illness.13th April, 2018.

7. Invited paper on language and pedagogy in comic books and graphic novels, to the session on “Language, Literature and Gender in the Contemporary Scenario” at the National Seminar on language education, the Department of Education(CIE) on Saturday, 17th February,2018, University of Delhi, Delhi.

8. Invited paper, "His-Story/ Her-Story: Intersections of Gender, History, Myth in Contemporary Indian Graphic Novel Narrative. Writing Women's History: Locating Visibility, Voices and Agency", at the Department of History, Gargi College, Golden Jubilee Seminar, Gargi College, 24-25 Oct 2017.

Project fellow, conference papers:

1. “Memory and Mourning: Studying Permeability of Media in Graphic Narratives.” Narratives of Violence and Terror in South Asia. North Eastern Hill University. Shillong, India. November 16-18. 2017

2. “Heroes, Citizens and Villains: Recognizing the Stigma.” Humanities and Social Sciences’ Graduate Students' Conference. Indian Institute of Technology-Delhi, India. April 21-22. 2017

3. “Picturebooks of Nation: The Contemporary Graphic Novel and National Iconography.” National Young Researchers’ Conference. Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India, February 16-17. 2017

4. “Momentous Acts of Violence in Ponnivala: Gender, Heroism and Graphic Art.” Doing Graphic Stories. Jadavpur University, West Bengal, India. January 12-14. 2017

5. “The Liminal Spaces of the Little Tradition of the Epic Bharath in Apposition with the *Mahabharata*”, American Folklore Society/International Society for Folk Narrative Research Joint Annual Meeting, October 19-22, 2016, Miami, USA.

PUBLICATIONS

Project Fellow:

1. "Munnu: Testimonials of Counteractions Curated in the Graphic Narrative." Trajectories of Popular Expression: Form, Histories, Contexts. Ed. Navneet Sethi and Ananya Saha. Aakar Books. New Delhi. 2019. ISBN 978-93-5002-575-8.

2. "Many Eklavyas and the Continued Embodiment of Caste." Embodiments and Graphic Narratives. Ed. by Jodi Cressman and Lisa DeTora. Leuven University Press. Berlin. 2021. ISBN 978-94-6270-267 7.

Materials in preparation for publication:

Three papers currently in publication process in journals and edited collections

Creation of Undergraduate Elective Papers as part of University of Delhi CBCS curriculum for the Generic Elective paper, code 6903512, "Comic Books and Graphic Novels". PI has served as a resource person and as head of the committee responsible for preparation of the syllabus as well as all tasks pertaining to evaluation and examination of the course thereon.

5. Contribution to the Society

Knowledge production in formal and informal spaces: Through our analysis of texts and reading pleasures as well as discussions with students in co-curricular and curricular spaces, the texts this project has taken up are now understood to be a viable medium for reflection and analysis by students in the formal classroom space such as those created by having undergraduate courses and papers that study comic books. Analysis of the themes underlying narratives and images helps understand those issues that are significant to society at this point in time, and aids in examining the values being created and disseminated therein through popular comic and graphic narratives.

Creation of Literacies on Visual Cultures: Through the study and analysis of these pleasurable texts, the student/reader is equipped with image literacy and critical reading skills on visual cultures. Naïve consumption and promotion of images is thus mediated through the reading and discussion practices initiated by knowledges produced through this and similar projects.

Training of Project Fellow: Project Fellow trained through the project will be pursuing PhD at Northeastern University, Boston, USA from academic year 2021-22

DETAILED REPORT OF RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION: SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

This project studies the world of representations available in the hitherto dismissed "lowbrow" though highly popular medium of the Indian comic book and its more recent longer avatar, the graphic novel. The comic book is perhaps the single most easily available book in any part of the country. One can find one's comic book fix in the neighbouring paan-shop, the nearest railway station, the nearest bookshop, not to mention the newspaper-stand. A variety of comics are also available even in the humblest such kiosk, from *Tarzan* to *Mandrake* to *Phantom* to *Nagraj* to *Chacha Chaudhary*, besides the *Amar Chitra Katha*, while more upmarket vendors would often also carry *Tintin*, *Asterix* and *Archies Comics*. Within the marketplace, there is an inbuilt and unspoken hierarchy wherein the former are regarded as down-market while the latter set are considered upwardly mobile and aspirational. Nevertheless, the former are as much part of growing up in pre-globalisation India as the latter have been. Today, these two categories of popular books have been joined by a third format, the indigenous long-form sequential narrative of the graphic novel, which is marketed as upwardly mobile rather than as down-market, as the prime placement of these books in bookshelves throughout the country demonstrates.

The *Hindustan Times* (article titled "Comic Punch" dated February 14, 2010), reports that the Indian comic publishing industry is worth about Rs. 300 crore (three billion) and sells around 12.5 million copies annually; in its heyday, Indrajal Comics sold 8 million comics per year while Diamond Comics, one of the oldest today in the business has a turnover of approximately US$5.6m and puts out 2 million comics each month, translated into 21 Indian languages (Daigle). Cartoons are visible in a range of media from advertising to the

animation film; political issues also increasingly find themselves discussed in the full-length comic-book format rather than prose, a recent example being Mallika Sarabhai's critique of the Commonwealth Games of 2010, *The Game.* Meanwhile, it is already possible, as Vidyun Sabhaney's and Orijit Sen's *First Hand* (2016) shows, to anthologize non-fiction in graphic format. New Delhi held the country's first ever – and very successful – Comics Convention in February, 2011 and the event has since successfully been repeated each year thereafter. Given this multifaceted presence, it is important that the genre of the cartoon and the graphic novel acquire a significant corpus of serious scholarship; this project is part of that endeavour.

While the often single-panel political cartoon in India has an earlier ancestry, dating at least from the colonial encounter, the comic-strip has a much later entry in the post-Independence period, with *Chandamama*, the children's magazine founded in 1947 being one of the first to make a viable foray into the medium in the periodical form. The success that Indrajal had with syndicating Western-origin comics like *Mandrake* and *Tarzan* was followed by the establishment of *Amar Chitra Katha* in 1967 which cornered the mythological market, followed later by cartoonists like G. Aravindan whose "Valiya Lokam, Cheriya Manushyan" (Big World, Little Man) and V. T. Thomas with "*Bobanum Molliyum*" (*Boban and Molly*) firmly established the indigenous comic strip in everyday life, and of many magazines in North India, such as the *MAD* Magazine inspired *Deewana*, *Chacha Chaudhary* and the like.

By the end of the 1980s, the Superhero-style comics, *Nagraj*, *Super Commando Dhruv* et al already had loyal devotees and high sales. The advent of liberalisation and mass television in the 1990s arguably shrank the market to current levels, but the last few years have seen a renaissance in the Indian comics-world. Many reinventions of existing strips was promised or already released, in addition to a new form in its own right, the graphic novel having firmly established itself, the first one, Orijit Sen's *River of Stories*, equal parts journalism and creative literature, inspired in content by the Narmada Valley agitation and in

style by the Japanese Manga-comic, having been written as early as 1994. The last few years have also seen the establishment of new comics companies alongside the old magnates *Amar Chitra Katha*, Diamond Comics and Raj Comics: many new companies, which do not have the distribution outreach or resources of these older firms, have established newer protocols of both production and distribution that are changing the face of the Indian comic-strip. Authorship terms and intellectual property control are also now viewed differently, particularly after the lawsuit that V. T. Thomas won against his erstwhile employer *Malayala Manorama* and disturbed further by the production of titles like *Bhimayana* (Navayana Publishing, New Delhi, 2011), with the artwork done by award-winning Pradhan-Gond artists.

Today the graphic novel and standalone independent comics market in India is larger, but questions about sustainability and cost-effectiveness still persist. While there are a number of young artists in the field, not enough book-length productions have emerged to sustain the market as most young artists make mini-comics and web-comics (on independent websites, aggregators like Bakarmax, and also on Instagram) while creating a market and sustaining it, as noted publisher V. Karthika has observed on several fora, there should be at least five to six graphic novels a year. Several collaborative works have also come up and suggest ways forward for creators, though issues of coherence and artistic integrity in the process have to be ironed out by each group over the creative process. The most important issue, however, as opposed to comic industries in other countries, is that too many graphic novel manuscripts are unoriginal, with content inspired from the West or from our own mythologies dominating, besides repetitiveness in the settings of the narrative and the characterization: overpowering levels of homogeneity can mean the market of readers does not grow and suggests that creative freedoms are lacking as well as diversity amongst artists is very necessary for output to attain vibrancy.

Commercial spaces like comic fests, Comic-Cons and web comics allow creators to interact with readers directly and to better understand market preferences, and ensure that the financial support that is essential in the early days of producing work is available to artists. Commercial production houses unfortunately have taken a commercial route and publishers do not immediately invest in young artists or new mediums, particularly where the market does not appear to be interested in comics and graphic novels beyond the space occupied by *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) type narratives. Support from not-for-profit organisations and crowdsourcing have been two other avenues for creators, though both do mean precaricity and sustained work on the craft cannot develop if the craft is entirely dependent on unsustainable sources of income. In contrast to countries like Japan where the film industry often invests in the manga industry, Indian comic artists get little support from public faces, though things may shift once graphic novels receive their film breaks as *Munnu* might. Graphic novels that can be converted into movies, a sister-genre in terms of the elements of visuality involved, might give visibility to this art form though projects that have taken off have belonged to the children's content framework, like *Chhota Bheem*. The adult audience for these works is yet niche and awaits mainstreaming.

Within the graphic novels and comic strips industry also, there is a wide range of audiences that are being catered to. On the one hand, there is the world of Raj Comics which produces lakhs of comics every year, with a mass readership that is spread across age groups, but on the other hand is the high-end world of the graphic novel where high-quality printing and paper are necessary to communicate the art that the artists put out, rather than just the plots as is the case with many mass market narratives. For the Indian audience, the tussle between quality and/or quantity has yet to attain its breakthrough in the shape of seeing graphic novel art as "art". The publishing industry in this particular area can however reach the niche reader and publicize graphic novels to those seasoned readers who are likely to

enjoy the form, but cost-effectiveness in the form of sustainable e-versions of books is a solution for reaching the larger readerships the texts themselves seek with their content. Talking about Indian readers, Karthika explains that there is no progression from easy to more challenging books in the Indian market wherein this larger readership can be pitched to and sought, because despite the size of the Indian reading audience, the preferred reading materials are extremely light and / or short reads, thus creating intense content stagnation whilst very rewarding and accessible graphic novels go unread because they are viewed by these readers as out of their league (Address at conference in Jadavpur, 2017). While there is a distinction between conventional textual literary works and graphic novels, it is fairly common that graphic novels are thought to carry political opinions, minority narratives, narratives that question the role of institutions in the making of popular accounts.

The creation of well-publicized awards structures, or industry grants would lead to more visibility for the form and certainly improve both content and readerships. Websites like Bakarmax are another way in which the form has surged forward, producing content that is sometimes independent short-form graphic narrative and serials at other times, where readers can look forward to new material drops at fixed periodicities. However, despite all these forms of digital content there is the lack of aura of ephemerality and thus the readership's unwillingness to pay, meaning that sustained innovation or rewarding artistic work cannot often be thrown up in these formats except where artists are able to maintain their economic autonomy by other means. Graphic novels will not be part of this quick and easy genre of web-comics, and many Instagram artists also build oeuvres that are far from ephemeral but once the market is ready for graphic art narratives, then content must be also available to the extent that the market demands. One major gap is in the availability of good translations: there are neither literary translations of earlier comics available in the sheer volumes required, nor are translations across linguistic spheres equally accessible, with the result that

the huge market of regional language readers that is not tapped. Academics, authors and students all agree that there is an intense need to create translations and that collaborative efforts of a high quality are necessary so that the artwork and the textual elements mesh satisfactorily.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Through an exclusive focus on select indigenous comic strips and graphic novels, this project examines this popular medium of sequential graphic art as a form of "public culture" in the sense in which Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge employ it to suggest a zone of cultural engagement and debate. "Public cultures" can be seen, in this deployment, as "a set of arenas that have emerged in a variety of historical conditions and that articulate the space between domestic life and the projects of the nation-state – where different social groups (classes, ethnic groups, genders) constitute their identities by their experience of mass-mediated forms in relation to the practices of everyday life" (4–5). Our focus is split equally between narrative and visuality, so as not to privilege the written word over texts where drawing and painting are paramount. Appadurai and Breckenridge, see public culture as a form of cosmopolitanism that creates transnational spaces of cultural production in the post-Cold-War world. Public cultural cosmopolitanism is, in their view, a development consequent to the various (global) networks of circulation of capital, goods, ideas, people, and thus, its analysis is necessarily a transnational project, one that breaks with the opposition between popular and high cultures, or of the ethnographic model of authenticity/purity of faraway cultures. Late capitalism's realities are expressed by a cosmopolitanism that is heterogeneous rather than homogeneous and thus the concept of "public cultures" is expressive of how texts are constitutive of the everyday as well as constituted themselves in and by the everyday. Art in this model is one that can productively examine how technology and mass media circulate

messages; this project studies the cosmopolitan public cultures around the Indian graphic novel and comic strip.

Scholarship on South Asia has no doubt produced very insightful and finely discerning studies of many facets of this region's past and present, but studies that move beyond the written word to theorise on the plethora of other visual texts available have been few and far between. While historians of post-colonial Indian creative activity have indeed produced groundbreaking scholarship on a variety of texts they have been, as Sandra Freitag puts it, "astonishingly slow to theorize beyond the role of print in their efforts to interpret this complex past. They have treated the immensely rich visual primary source materials simply as accompanying illustration for a narrative drawn solely from textual evidence" (35).

In choosing the comic strip and graphic novel as its area of study, this project is adding to the growing corpus of scholarship on narrative technologies that go beyond the written word. Where study of the comic book as a medium of its own, with its own narratival and thematic strategies has now become an established area of enquiry in the West, even a cursory perusal of the history of scholarship into this form of Indian popular literature reveals that much remains to be done. The *Amar Chitra Katha* series has attracted a series of eminent monographs and full-length studies; at the same time, other Indian comic-books, from *Chacha Choudhary* to *Nagraj* (in Hindi) to the *Boban and Molly* series (in Malayalam) and *Nonte-Phonte* and *Handa-Bhonda* and *Batul the Great* (in Bangla) and the more recent graphic novel have hitherto not attracted serious study, a lacuna this project proposes to remedy. The visual language influences in graphic novels such as *Kari* span diverse sources, from Freida Kahlo's art to Byzantine iconography, and are the more impressive in that these languages are assimilated to produce new artistic truths about indigenous spaces, such as the city of Bombay. These language choices are also strikingly different from the choices made

by earlier graphic artists in the genre; the project's focus is thus equally on visuality as it is on narrative.

Next, this project's multi-linguistic focus enables it to include otherwise "local," or "regional" and therefore little-studied comic arts. These four languages together enable the project to attain a pan-Indian inclusiveness, spanning as they do different geographical territories of the nation, with English serving, in addition, as a de facto link between many readers in the zones these languages are spoken in. While comics in the local languages have always thrived, particularly in West Bengal and Kerala – cartoonists like Narayan Debnath, Mayukh Choudhury, G. Aravindan and V. T. Thomas (fondly known as "Toms" in Kerala) are legends in these regions – these have received little national recognition. A book-length study in English is a necessary starting point as a remedy, given the rich history of first rate creative artistry available in this medium in these languages.

Finally, cartoon and graphic novels as dealing with and shaping everyday contemporary Indian life in the last twenty years is a question that deserves specialized focus. This is a period in which many individual cartoonists, like Manjula Padmanabhan and Rajneesh Kapoor have been featured in national dailies (unlike "Toms"), even as graphic novels have gone beyond the "authentic" depiction of mythology that Ananth Pai prided his *Amar Chitra Katha*s for: an example is Vimanika Comics' attempt in "*The Sixth*" series at showing Karna, the warrior from the ancient Indian epic "*Mahabharata*," as a high-flying businessman who, suffering from recurrent nightmares, discovers he is the reincarnation of Karna. Amruta Patil in *Sauptik* and *Adi Parva* has re-imagined the world of the *Mahabharata* and simultaneously reshaped how the *Mahabharata* will be available to future generations of new readers.

This project performs a long overdue interdisciplinary study of how the comic strip intersects with nation, globalisation, tradition and individual self-fashioning in select comic

strips in four Indian languages. The average comic bookshop shelf or indie store in Euro-American topographies leans almost entirely towards the Far East, and sometimes provides a sliver of space to *Persepolis* and/or to graphic non-fiction about the Middle East. Meanwhile, the graphic narrative's subcontinental iterations are narrativizing local histories but within a global framework, with histories, visual languages and tradition intersecting, exploring and queering one another in rich and generative ways.

This project explores the visual languages used by graphic novelists in India, particularly with respect to how caste and genders are represented, positing that the way the body is drawn/visualized, creates paradigms for "normal" bodies versus bodies marked by otherness of "caste", "gender" or "sexuality". A massive visual archive of contemporary India is being generated wherein representations of how people and India in general look is constantly evolving, and contests expressed in terms of how corporeality is manifested need to be studied. For example, *Bhimayana* and *A Gardener in the Wasteland* are two (relatively new) graphic novel biographies of Bhimrao Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule, visionaries in the struggle against the caste system. The aesthetic and forms employed in these graphic narratives is strikingly different from earlier comic book art because of their use of tribal art as well as contemporary pedagogical visual strategies, creating an interruption of how dominant visual aesthetics privileges tall, thin and fair forms for representing "good" personhood. Simultaneously, Amruta Patil, whose art has provided new expression to the *Mahabharata*, articulates femininities and masculinities using a visual and textual vocabulary that draws on Frida Kahlo as well as botanical textbooks is creating a different paradigm for the representation of social identities using bodies of women in many spaces where one would not think them to be typically present.

Various independent collections represent women's attempts in contemporary India to fight erasure, appropriation and violence including ecocidal and sexual violence; the specific

texts that emerge both dialogue with international moments like #MeToo even as they provide a lexis for imagining non-normative sexualities and legal/social strategies for fighting femicide, sexual harassment and rape culture, thus presenting a very important field of study for feminist praxis.

This project considers the labours these texts perform to depict/challenge/subvert caste or heteronormativity or that of normative gendering through focus on a variety of texts, from a few retellings (*Bhimayana, Sita's Ramayana, Sauptik, Adi Parva*) of biography, of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata,* and of contemporary femininity in collections by feminist artists (*Priya's Shakti, The Elephant in the Room, Drawing the Line*) to explore how visual revisions of the historical/mythical overtly challenge the silencing of women for example; yet, the visual language and aesthetic that is employed may in turn be stabilizing and normativizing constructions of femininity and/or feminist work, such as upper-caste, or fair-skinned, etc, which in turn has implications for the (very large) circulation these texts attain. The project makes an intersectional exploration of corporo-ethics, or the ethical frameworks that emerge through ideas of the body that under-write and are implicated in generating this visual knowledge corpus that is the graphic narrative, arguing that the different representations of embodiment, of person, of landscape, of chronotopes seen in subcontinental graphic narratives contribute to an important decolonial re-worlding of the graphic narratives genre.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON THE SUBJECT

A substantial corpus of literature exists at the international level, with a preponderance, however, towards Euro-American texts; Japanese and a few other South Asian cultures have entered the landscape more recently. Debates range from the pedagogical applications of the comic book to the racial and sexual dynamics of individual comic creations; the market value of particular comic series; the legal – including censorship studies – and intellectual property dimensions of this art form. Interest in comics in various forms has been on the upswing within Western academe, as the medium has gained acceptance as an art form, outgrowing its earlier "low" status. Comics internationally are now treated as an art form and as a significant part of popular culture, besides being seen as an important area of investigation in social studies. David Kunzle's pioneering two-volume *History of the Comic Strip* is a major contribution to historiography, but many lacunae remain even within the Western world's historical narrativisation of the art of comics, particularly for pre-1930s strips. Of late, much work has gone into exploring how print cultures in the nineteenth century have engaged with visual media, and this has permitted new descriptions of content, aesthetics, models, laws governing representation, form and technology to emerge, besides throwing valuable light on cultural and social validation or evaluation of these practices. The presence of the apparatus required for insightful study also advantages Western scholarship of this art form: established journals like the *Journal of Popular Cultural Studies* at a more general level, and more specialised journals like the I*nternational Journal of Comic Art*, to even more specialised ones dealing with specific areas like the "graphic novel," or "black and white art" have all contributed in vital ways to enabling full-fledged engagement.

A brief listing of important works on the medium in the last decade alone will be indicative of the extent of the area of inquiry already available elsewhere. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith's *The Power of Comics: History, Form & Culture* (2009) is a pivotal

account that uses the “appreciation” or “survey course” model to make comic book study a readily accessible discipline, making the case that it is precisely these institutionalized pedagogies within the university that made comic books and graphic novels an important cultural force. Gerard Jones's *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (2004) shows how comic books offer critiques and new models for restructuring society, models that might percolate into society and thereafter produce change however infinitesimally, thereafter, attesting to the power of the “low” art. Jones sees the all-American comic book superhero as constituted by the immigrant experience and his status as outsider, which has continued to occupy the imaginative space even today. Similarly, Bradford Wright's *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2003) argues that the American comic strip/book has always reflected the mood of the nation and imaginatively supplied it with a hero to fight each big war, be it the Great Depression or Vietnam, injustice or oppression; at the same time, comics made consumers out of children, thus attracting the attention of those who want to police youth and youth cultures.

David Hajdu's T*en-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (2008) documents America's early resistance to the phenomenon of the comic-book and valuably comments on the subversive potentials inherent in the medium despite its apparent mass-market origins. As comics started depicting extreme violence and using slurs, a committee for monitoring the content and regulating the supply of comic materials was formed, with only those comics that got a stamp from this committee being allowed to circulate. This censorship led to a huge underground comic book medium that would challenge the moral codes and conventions that this committee was trying to promote. As a result, both the kinds of texts existed; the ones that were not censored, and the other that were part of the alternate comic book industry. Examining the consumption of these texts from the reader's perspective, Matthew Pustz's *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*

(1999) is a pioneering account of fan-cultures and subcultures with vital inputs to offer for the study of new media subcultures such as e-zines, while Scott McCloud's *Reinventing Comics* (2000) is already self-reflexively considering how technologies in use in the production of comics today have led and will lead to reinventions to the form itself. Important studies that try to account for the marriage of word and image in the medium include Douglas Wolk's *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean; The Language of Comics: Word and Image* (2002, edited by Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons), and Rocco Versaci's *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* (2007). There are also books that examine histories and legacies of scholarship and criticism into the form: *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium* (edited by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester) looks at the critical history of scholarship on comics in the pre-cultural studies era in the USA, while Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics (2007)* is a less Euro-centric exploration of this terrain. *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (2016) by Mike Madrid and *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* by Jeffrey A. Brown (2011) are only two instances of work that inflects this medium with nuanced feminist, gender-sensitive theorisations. As evident from the above, a veritable treasure trove of explorations on the vital area of popular comics exists on various Western cultures.

In contrast, however, comics and other popular visual arts have only recently attained any visibility within the realm of academic inquiry in India. *Amar Chitra Katha* has attracted a wealth of commentary from scholars including Nandini Chandra, *The Classic Popular* (2007), Karline McLain's *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings and Other Heroes* (2009), but the lay-person is often the only source of knowledge about other indigenous comic strips, in addition to the occasional topical newspaper or new-media coverage. Frances Pritchett's study “The World of *Amar Chitra Katha*” invaluably documents the responses of

first-generation American Indian parents and their children to a new cultural environment where the *Amar Chitra Katha* mediated as both source of home-cultural knowledge and as a buffer against loss of cultural identity. Pritchett's study narrativises how the series enabled American Indians to understand a culture they had never had first-hand access to, and which they had to learn about from scratch as a consequence. Her study also shows how mythological stories resonate across time, with Karna's struggle for self-fashioning finding equivalence in the young American Indian subject's efforts to find inclusion in the new homeland. However, some of Pritchett's arguments are contested by Kirin Narayan whose interviews with the recipients of the comic-books, the diasporic children, for her article "Haunting Stores: Narrative Transmissions of South Asian Identities in Diaspora" shows how *Amar Chitra Katha* could also function as a didactic burden imposed upon the child by the unhoused parent rather than serving as a reservoir of strength or self-affirmation. The child's resistance in such cases would be manifested by using the Indian comic-book as a front under which to read prohibited adult American mass-market pornography and the like. *The Classic Popular* argues that *Amar Chitra Katha* stereotyped from Hindu mythology even as it ignored the heterogeneities of this diverse nation.

Both McLain and Chandra agree in their individual works that the series uses a number of typical strategies to represent women, ethnic and religious minorities, masculinity, the Indian nation and its great leaders, and that these strategies can impact strongly upon the young reader to "normalise" or routinise positions, conventions and narratives. Both authors also trace the historical and textual sources the various comic books drew from, and provide details on the construction and conceptualisation of individual titles, plus a wealth of biographical detail about the founder of the series, all of which knowledge is sadly lacking vis-a-vis other comic strips produced in India. Ritu G. Khanduri's *Caricaturing Culture in India: Cartoons and History in the Modern World* (Cambridge 2016) examines aspects of

comic culture, especially the political cartoon and caricature, in India through the colonial period, arguing that the form continues to be relevant.

McLain's *India's Immortal Comic book* (2009) draws from a number of resources like personal interviews with the readers and the staff members at ACK, browsing through the ACK libraries and archives, exploring markets of Delhi to theorize the characteristic ACK audience: urban in sensibilities, middle class, and Hindu typically. Developed after the coming of American comics like Maverick, Superman, Phantom in India, ACK significantly distinguishes itself from them through focusing on these attributes of the audience and engineering the affective process accordingly. ACK used immense scholarship in a vast range of visual and literary cultures, as Nandini Chandra notes in *The Classic Popular*, as part of the scripting process but earlier issues made this process explicit whereas current issues do not highlight this information to the audience. McLain observes that ACK focuses on the periods of nationalistic fervor in the late 19th and 20th century as a bank early on for creating characters: during this period, images and texts related to the independence of India emerged, and their hold on popular imagination continues. As Chandra notes, the realistic style of Raja Ravi Varma's art was favoured; ACK's visual content presented images that appeared close to life, yet idealized and normalizing upper-class/caste physicalities and practices. At the same time, this style played its part in indigenising the comic book medium as ACK's idea of superheroes emerged from the shadow of American comics.

ACK's "superheroes" were from mythology, history and moral stories, and over time, the forms of heroes kept changing, from Rama to Maharana Pratap to Bhagat Singh. However, like the American comics, the popular narrative remained organized around a hero who challenged and defeated their enemy. While the hero possessed extraordinary powers, enemies, a strong moral code, a secret identity, a costume and an origin story, in contrast, the enemy was often not just a person, but also a community or attribute: demons, Muslim rulers,

British officials etc. In its attempt to create a national canon of immortal superheroes, a string of Indian heroes, mostly male, was created. Either these heroes emerged victorious against their enemies or they died in the process, but the idea of centering masculine narratives was thus implicitly normalized.

McLain notes that the readers of ACK cultivate a reverence of the text, not seeing it as a throwaway comic book but as an artifact to be preserved for a long time as it is seen as a means for reconnecting with one's own glorious past, from mythology through the independence struggle. McLain analyses information as received in fan mail, subscription letters, and interviews with the fan club members, analyzing this qualitative data set to outline the reasons readers had for reading ACK. She found ACK is a source that has helped readers to learn and take pride in their Indian identity, and religious forces in their lives. Often revered as foundational texts, these are not just for entertainment, rather sources of religious and national education. Their introduction to the readers at a very young age, and with parental approval, especially in diasporic contexts, leads to these texts being treated as sourcebooks of objective information rather than fictionalized or interpretative materials, in the attempt to connect back with their cultural roots. Early readers acknowledge themselves as the 'new generation' that has read American comics and gradually moved towards ACK. They mostly came from urban middle-class homes of the country; comics were given to children as gifts, exchanged between friends.

With ACK however, the participation of parents in supplying this content can be clearly seen. The young readers did not have proficiency in Sanskrit, like their parents. So, ACK played a critical role in introducing them back to mythologies, folk tales and moral stories, and maintaining their interest in these. In the context of a post-colonial nation dealing with the aftershocks of political decolonization, such as Partition, the connection between family and nation is perceived as immediate and very material: "those who grew up in the aftermath

of Partition felt its impact on the familial level, through stories of loved ones who were lost or killed or became impoverished…on a national level, through lasting legacy of Hindu-Muslim communal tensions…on an International level, through the ongoing dispute over Kashmir, and the wars waged between Indian and Pakistan" as McLain notes. The narrative of national integration, unifying the vast diversity in the population, languages and festivities, acquired a significant champion in the materials put out by the ACK which helped put together a national past to preserve towards the future, helping readers in imagining the national canvas and their local traditions within it. A reader tells McLain that "ACK brought the nation to her doorstep." It was strongly felt amongst the readers that ACK represented "all" of India, therefore, it supplied quick and important information, a "union of integration and culture". ACK's value-systems as we understand with much more clarity today have been hegemonical, upper-caste, upper-class as well as misogynistic and ableist, and considerable space has already been given to reexamining these texts in view of these findings.

Finally, ACK's role in familiarizing a new generation of school-age learners with the English language, which was only a second language to them, must not be under-estimated; ACK's were also thus seen as an invaluable pedagogical assist in the acquisition of English-skills by a "new generation" of urban Indians, learning English outside the classroom but also gaining knowledge about "Indian culture" simultaneously. The anxieties of global homogenization, industrial progress, technology, development in postcolonial India are for these readers addressed at least partly through texts like ACK wherein Indian value systems were revived or conserved even as an outward technological modernity was submitted to. In the face of growing modernity, ACK provided abundant information and value for money, at the same time, giving access to several tales that shaped the long Indian heritage, while focusing on the agenda of national integration. Subsequent comic book and graphic novel

traditions are characterized by less anxiety about "culture," very often confidently exploring constituent constructs and processes that shape cultural normatives.

Challenging the perceptions of low art that is associated with the medium yet remains an important task for the scholar despite a very digital lifestyle. Stereotypes and popular values continue to be encoded both inside as well as on cover pages of graphic narratives produced. To take one, American mass market example, if we review the introductory pages of *Batman*, *Superman*, and *Wonder Woman* to critically analyse the ideas that the medium was circulating, images of *Batman* as an angry young man with a bat-masked face, his upper body clad in black spandex and wearing a cape but his strength and power mitigate any disgust despite the connotations attached to bat, with the dialogues and information in the panels allowing for further positive meaning-making as the messiah of the people who stays away from light, but fights crime in the dark. On the contrary, Wonder Woman is introduced as if she is running towards the readers. Three quarters of her body is shown in a skimpy dress; she does not wear a spandex or cape or mask. Immediately the eye of reader is drawn to her slim physique - lean arms, curved waist and tight thighs and her image suggests something intensely and immediately erotic and sexual rather than autonomous. The shape of the body can also serve to indicate moral values and dispositions in superhero comics, wherein fatness, disabilities, dark skin, etc. are easy proxies for villainy. Only the petite, fair women made it to the class of desirable even in ACKs.

In the early days of Entertainment Comics in the USA, there were advertisements for pills and exercises that promoted masculinity ideals, as well as advertisements targeted at women for achieving curvaceous bodies, like weight monitoring devices, appetite curbing pills, body shapers. This "good looking" woman alone could complement a perfect man, the advertisements suggested. Of course, these advertisements did not exist in isolation. They were rather the continuity of the ideas that the comic books suggested through the images of

superhero, their sidekicks, villains and common citizens. The superhero's well sculpted, perfectly proportioned body was highlighted using the complementary characters who were saved by the superhero's might. Villainy was usually applied to black men characters, while large women and black and coloured women were not part of this narrative, just as non-normative sexualities and disability did not make appearance either. Disability and non-binary or non-normative sexualities were used as metonyms for deviancy, distinguishing themselves immediately from the superheroes whose wholeness was a promotion for their absolute difference from disability. Occasionally, a female superhero like the Batgirl is shown with, a disability - working using a wheelchair for Batgirl but the disability is shown to be more than compensated by other attributed like a photographic memory, being exceptionally good at calculations and scientific experimentation, and the like, to make up for not being able to fly. Parallels with these American superhero comics can be seen in popular Hindi comics as well as in other languages, with often uncanny misogyny and casteism making itself visible in a variety of popular instances.

METHODOLOGY

One of the main problems with comics research and bibliography for most of the twentieth century is the ephemeral nature of the source material. Comic strips and books are not taken seriously and kept, or collected annually like editorial cartoons are, in national or state libraries and archives. Instead, dismissed as a form for "kids" alone, comics are read and die away, only to be found in the second-hand and scrap recycling markets where their hermeneutic value is not primary. One objective of this project will be to put together a comprehensive annotated bibliography of extant publications to enable further enquiry. Where in the West, it was academic attention paid to comic books in France that catalysed growth in American fan culture, which in turn enabled the process of compiling original and

secondary material, such a catalytic process is yet to get underway in public institutions in India. In addition to the creation of a comprehensive bibliography of works in this medium, this project proposes to study representations as they emerge in this medium in as nuanced a form as possible. An eclectic methodology drawing on cultural studies, visual arts scholarship and literary theory, besides media studies, will be employed for this purpose. Reader-response to comic strips and how rubrics such as gender, nation, caste and other problematics are perceived, consumed and recreated or constructed by the reader are pertinent considerations. In sum, the project studies the circulation of ideas of nation, gender, caste and modernity in the visual archives of the comic book/graphic novel in contemporary Hindi, English, Bangla and Malayalam and examines how these ideas dialogue with public cultures in these languages.

FINDINGS

The primary objective of the project was to review and to theorize the corpus of comic books and graphic novels available to Indian audiences primarily in English and by extension in three connected Indian languages, namely Hindi, Bangla and Malayalam. We have sought to examine what "public cultures" emerge through the medium of the Indian graphic narrative and the comic book. Visuality is often under-explored in many forms of literary scholarship and this project has sought to correct the overprivileging of textual art. What are the subject areas of importance and how are they mediated and created through the form of the graphic narrative, what practices of visuality and textuality accompany them and how they function to create meaning is explored across mass-market print as well as digital format comics. This project aimed at interdisciplinary study of how the comic strip intersects with narratives of nation, transnationality, cosmopolitanism, modernity, tradition and individual self-fashioning. Secondary objectives included enhancing the extent of academic engagement with the field

through creation of opportunities for formal study of the medium. The project has been able to comprehensively survey the field and outline a number of areas wherein research can be conducted and meaningful outcomes derived. Key subject areas that emerged through the project's examination of a wide corpus of comic books and graphic novels include issues regarding the representation of gender, caste and mythological subjects, as well as the nature of personhood. Over the duration of the project, the importance of examining digital cultures was felt as many artists started to work on comics that were often never published in conventional print, and thus this objective was additionally pursued. One difficulty experienced is that of the lack of available good quality translations of comic books published in Indian languages. Another has been the availability of published comic books in the market; editions often disappear with little archival trace remaining and this will be an impediment for future scholars too.

One of the most understudied aspects of graphic novels is the use of colours that give meaning to the text, which we will speak about at length here. Due to a heavy dependence on literary studies, graphic novels are rarely studied in juxtaposition with photography where colours and monochromatic approaches imply significant meanings. While there have been attempts to study black and white graphic narratives separately from the coloured ones, Jan Beatens discusses the fusions of colours with lines, how joint meaning develops with the use of line and colour. Authors make colour choices in a variety of ways not least being that colour is expensive, despite the advancement in technology, more expensive that the black and white comic strips. Artists have also used black and white colours as opposed to multi-colour to prevent chaotic printing output, a fairly common problem where, often, coloured graphics would not come out in the same shade template that the author had designed, thus compromising the final output.

Within the Indian context, such discrepancies can be seen in mass culture comics like *Amar Chitra Katha* where, across the mythology section, the colours can often be found spilling from the outlines of the images and shades are also not always consistent. In contrast, graphic novels are often much more expensively produced and feature a greater integrity with regard to intended and actual colour effects. Beatens notes that black and white are not that clearly compartmentalised in the contemporary art work: there are different colour choices that give an impression of black and white such as brown and off white, patterned greys, and use of single filled colours like blue. Thus, he suggests that the reading of colour politics should be between chromatic monochromatic and poly/multichromatic as opposed to black and white and coloured (114).

In Spiegelman's *Maus*, there are clear blacks and whites, and different patterns of grey that add details to the backgrounds. Similarly, *Persepolis* by Marjane Strape is not black and white, but rather black on off white. Amongst Indian narratives, many non-fictional graphic narratives use the black/brown and white/off white, such as *Munnu* by Malik Sajad. The *First Hand* anthology goes a step further; across its stories, there is changing use of blacks, whites and patterned greys. Unlike the other forms of cultural tools, that have moved from black and white to a coloured template, this linearity is not obvious in the comic medium. While colour has been associated with mass culture and graphic novels generally represent the intellectual engagement, therefore, the dichotomy between the high art and the low art is maintained within the graphic narratives as well.

This "color blindness" is the distinction between the "bad" comics and "good" graphic novels. (113). The "direct colour" movement in the 1980s and early 90s gave a lot of autonomy to the comic book makers who could now transfer their original drawings to graphic novels. This result of technology upgradation facilitated the revolt against the assembly line production and division of labour within the comic book industry and blurred

the boundaries between the studio work–sketching, drawing, inking and colouring–and storytelling and drawing. Authors could now tell their own stories as opposed to the scenarios that were created by others.

Therefore, the movement from monochromatic to polychromatic is not linear, but more often a question of effort, labour, time, finances. So, it may as well become hindrance. Then there are "clear line" aesthetics that foregrounds the character's body lines, thereby avoiding the conflict between line and colour. Here, the colour is subordinate to the line; colour can never blur the always visible black line. And then it always remains monochromatic within the lines. Beatens writes that the line therefore becomes the carrier of the narrative. As in Tintin, the usefulness of drawing is entirely exploited, and colour becomes an additive detail here that helps to identify the characters. Each panel tells the reader where to look and what meanings to draw. These colours are maintained across the tale helping to maintain synchronicity between visuals. Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* interestingly show two ends of line aesthetics. While *Corridor* shows characters with and their surroundings using contour lines only, *Vikaspuri* uses minimal colours within the lines. Both the stories are mostly situated against a monochromatic background that maintains the focus on the lines on the page.

The role of the colour goes a step further; the specificity in the colour template adds details within the narrative. This specificity too is maintained across the text. For example, in *Gandhari* by *Amar Chitra Katha*, the main lead, Gandhari, wears a red saree throughout. She ages as well from an unmarried young girl to a mother of a hundred children, but the red saree becomes a singular identifying marker. Similarly, the royalty of Kauravas is shown through golden architecture. However, within ACK's 26 colour palette, this golden colour is replaced with a bright yellow. The study of colour and printing is an important component in the analysis of the visual cultures of this graphic form.

Our major finding is that intersectional understandings of Indian comic book and graphic narrative texts are necessary to examine the complex connections between various markers of identity such as gender, caste, regionality or religion, class, ability and personhood. The project analyses a variety of contemporary productions using an intersectional framework so that a nuanced reading of contexts emerges.

Digital and visual cultures in contemporary South Asia are no longer local, they are instead very transnational and cosmopolitan, ranging over spatial as well as temporal formations. One example of texts with such a large footprint is the digital comic *Priya's Shakti*, which is today regarded by the UN as a vehicle for women's empowerment and social transformation in South Asia. This project has analysed the meanings of feminism/feminist work and social transformation presented through and of such globally circulated texts and found that mythological and fantastic tropes can be interwoven and overlay one another to produce a new lexicon of the superheroine who is quintessentially "Indian" but whose Indian-ness is limited and contained by variables drawn from only one religion and through selectively highlighting only some parts of Indian women's struggles for equality and freedom from gender-based discrimination. Thus, digital texts that present themselves as universal can pose special challenges when decontextualized and consumed free of substantive referential pedagogical frameworks. At the same time, the digital cultures of the Internet are also not favourable for literary audiences in India that lack the literacy necessary to navigate the Internet successfully, and thus, one key finding of our work is that the graphic novel medium is not as democratic as its use of images may initially suggest.

Mythological texts are a staple in the Indian comic book market, with a continuous flow of new interpretations and renditions. Our analysis shows that on the one hand many of these representations focus only on some aspects of the narratives they study (such as war in the *Mahabharata*) thus glamorizing and commoditizing that theme, and further reinforcing

normative and hegemonic value systems (such as those of masculinity in this particular example), whereas interpretations that are born of deeper study and scholarly engagement can help break ideological barriers or polarities and contribute to an understanding of what “culture” and “heritage.” Religiosity is a terrain of contest today in India, with "liberal" and "religious" (conservative) mindsets seeking to fix ways of seeing religion against a polarized political context.

Through the work of Indian graphic novel and comic book authors and artists, this project has been able to explore the contemporary processes whereby religions are updating themselves even as they stabilize its meanings in the present. Engaging via their art with what presents as progressive/regressive, eco-feminist, spiritual, in their rendition of "religious" lives, identities, or stories, the project has explored the contours of what it means to be authentically "Indian" in current contexts. The experience of citizenship further has been mediated differently depending on how characters identify and are perceived in terms of their gender, sexuality, caste, bodily ability or disability, and we find that making visible these risks and secondary citizenships through the graphic narrative serves a pedagogical function, especially when these texts are discussed in classroom contexts, in making visible these differences in a fashion different from the word-text or the cinematic text.

The low artistic value Indian society has placed on art in the comic strip medium often meant that while readers are loyal to particular series or characters, they could hardly ever identify individual writers or illustrators. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that most young Indian readers from urban centers know the creators of Tintin or Asterix more intimately than they know even the creators of the most popular series for urban India, the *Amar Chitra Katha*. However, this has changed dramatically with the arrival of the Indian graphic novel; artists and writers like Amruta Patil, Sarnath Bannerjee and Vishwajyoti Ghosh have a

literary and iconographic recall in the minds of readers that is quite different from the earlier cult of anonymity that greeted the artist/writer of the comic strip/book.

A historiography of modern comic artwork in India will also take into account the experiences of individual writers and illustrators for companies (some work in this direction has already been done for the *Amar Chitra Katha* by Chandra and McLain, but not for any other series), many of who have been contacted or interviewed for this project. A note at this point is necessary about the broad and all-encompassing view of "comic art" that we shall take, following the American comic historiographer John Lent, whose definition includes animation, comic books and strips, humorous art or illustration, caricature, gag cartoons, and political or editorial cartoons.

While cartoonists themselves mostly do not or cannot make hard and fast divisions whilst accepting work, professional standing and rewards might be determined at least to some extent by the rubric that individuals find themselves identified by: for instance, R. K. Laxman's name is indelibly linked now with the political cartoon, which has a rather more niche social cachet in comparison to those who create for Nagraj et al. Many cartoonists today draw for a variety of projects, from the "mainstream" urban comic series like the *Amar Chitra Katha*, to more edgy series like the Virgin comics/Liquid projects, to cartoons for children's literature in addition to working for advertising or other mass media including, very importantly, film and television, animated or otherwise. Interviews with artists like Amruta Patil and Orijit Sen reveal that the various genres in the medium are influenced by the interhatching influences that "cross-genre" artists bring to it, influences that are magnified in light of the achievements in the graphic novel and about how cartoonists can sometimes be "cross-genre," experimenting with a wide variety of genres within the medium.

In his encyclopedic study *The History of the Comic Strip* (1973), David Kunzle proposes that the comic strip be seen as a "sequence of separate images" with a

"preponderance of image over text" that appears (and was originally intended to appear) in a mass medium and tells a story which is "both topical and moral" (qtd. Meskin 369). However, this definition needs to be problematised. That a comic-strip is indeed a "sequence of separate images' ' holds true, but if one assumes a preponderance of image over text, one discounts already the composite nature of the art of the comic-strip. In fact, many comic-books are memorable on account of flashes of verbal wit that accompany and complement and are indeed indistinguishable from their union with the accompanying image. Further, the comic-strip need not necessarily be part of the mass media: in fact, comic strips are often part of radical countercultural investments, as for instance comic-strips used by gay rights and welfare organisations to change majority mindsets about homosexuality – these comic-strips often do not by nature of these investments command a mass market and may instead be intended for a different kind of circulation pattern. And finally, the suggestion that morality is part of the comic-strip is discounted immediately by the medium of, for example, the Manga with its gratuitous violence. Similarly, topicality need not always be constitutive of comic status. As the above discussion shows, the term "comic" is open to engagement at the level of definition, and the wide range of texts in the project will bear out that an enabling and adequate definition in light of its empirical study of the Indian comic strip need not exclude "serious".

Next, this project is underwritten by the idea that the comic-strip permits a cognitive democratisation that enables even readers who are not "mainstream" to engage with the larger culture of their times in creative and playful ways. Where more highly-rated scribal and visual arts have their own hierarchies of access – in the form of complex hermeneutic or narratival codes and technologies, the sequential form of the comic-strip is more demotic in that its form allows easy access to the otherwise marginal "child reader" or neophyte, besides being a form in which the relative spareness of textual content also means that the reader is

forced to “read between the blanks" by interpreting what line drawings and colour blocks mean in terms of character, plot and the like. This cognitive enablement the comic-strip permits will be interrogated to see how, for instance, the child and/or adolescent reader of Chandamama or Tinkle is socialised into “good behaviour” even as she learns to recognise and avoid “bad” patterns: a recent issue of Tinkle has a story that depicts the father of an adolescent girl suddenly following his daughter around on the suspicion that she is involved in bad company and worse, a romance, only to find that she was merely working hard for a school play. Depicting the daughter as morally sound and disciplined, this comic-strip is indeed didactic, but its pedagogy is quite sophisticated in its characterisation of the father as coming to grips with his daughter's good behaviour as opposed to the more commonly supposed delinquency of the young female teenager being unmasked: the comic strip has modernised itself to allow the insecurity of the male parent of an adolescent female ward to emerge even as the female character's willing compliance to the norms of sexual morality present a model to the presumably receptive adolescent reader of the strip.

Other strips are in fact used with more explicit pedagogic ends in many schools, particularly in urban Indian centers: the *Amar Chitra Katha* Makers of Modern India series is used as background reading to train students for their school-leaving modern Indian history examination; there are also strips like the Bible Society of India's and the Diwakar Chitrakathas which are comic-style expositions of Christian and Jain precepts and figures. The corollary is that the comic strip can stimulate powerfully enabling misreadings, such as Chitra Ganesh's use of images from the *Amar Chitra Katha*'s rendition of Hanuman in her artwork in *Tales of Amnesia* (2002) to force the reader to reconsider normative sex/gender assumptions in addition to anthropomorphic ones.

Comic-strips are also repositories of received cultural wisdom on masculinity and femininity: Chacha Chaudhary's wife cannot ever be as smart as the good chacha, nor has a

feminine equivalent to the supremacy of the heroic Nagraj evolved yet. Interestingly, in the Super Commando Dhruv series, Dhruv is often assisted out of peculiarly tight spots by his sister. However, there is a caveat – Dhruv's sister attains a persona whom Dhruv cannot identify as his sister when she helps out. Dhruv therefore gets help from an unknown fierce female persona whose being disconnected from the world of the familial ties, never stimulates a recalibration of these ties within which Dhruv goes unchallenged as the center of power, skill and public heroism. At the same time, strips like Manjula Padmanabhan's *Suki* rearrange notions of what it means to be a young woman in urban India – far from marginal, even as coy housewives simper in other comic series. Comics projects like *Suki* are rare even when measured against an international arena. Mainstream comics strips that feature women are unlikely even in the West unless they feature "superheroines," whose representations are often accompanied by extraordinarily regressive gender/sex agendas. In this light, strips like the Indian *Suki* or the American *Cathy*, which run in mainstream newspapers and other mass media are significant in creating a space for women who are neither trendy, nor slim, nor always young.

Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva* (2012), a retelling in graphic novel format of the first book of the *Mahabharata*, both breaks with and continues former traditions of iconography and narrative focus to produce a visually exciting interpretation of the *Mahabharata* that will certainly have an impact on how new generations of young readers approach the great epic. Patil's choice of the format of the graphic novel places the *Mahabharata* within the realm of interpretability and discursive dialogue in a way very few earlier interpretations, including traditional written-word format novels, have; the space of public culture the volume thus enters is an exciting space for the reader/theorist of these texts. A significant theoretical basis for this project is provided by feminist and sex/gender criticism, which we argue, enables understanding of the subversive and the reactionary powers of the comic, an area of

engagement particularly significant for a post-colonial Southern nation like us in whose self-fashioning gender issues are very often shunted to last priority. It is also interesting that where the newer form of the graphic novel has located its narratives in more urban, even urbane locales, the older comic arts locate their milieus in the less sophisticated often no-name small-town. These spatialisations of gender politics in modern India could bear serious study.

Unlike some of the above-mentioned series, the *Boban and Molly* series in Malayalam is resolutely unfanciful, located entirely within the mundane and the domestic. However, it follows protagonists across a huge span of time, permitting perhaps a unique possibility within the comic strip, of seeing characters age. In the course of this span of time, this comic strip also comments implicitly or explicitly on various facets of the India that is growing alongside. In other words, the *Boban and Molly* series is a cartoon-strip bildungsroman of the life and times of this nation while Chacha Chaudhary and the like only tangentially function this way. How the Indian nation is conceived, maintained and transformed is evident through these texts, even as an archive of images about it are simultaneously generated and conceptions of the nation and national self-location and self-fashioning are created and circulated. It is often noted that many mainstream non-urban North Indian comics like *Chacha Chaudhary* do not have a strong presence in South Indian markets, with the result that globalised products like *Archies*, *Tarzan*, etc are able to hold on to significant market shares in India. In sum, important visualizations of structures of power and engagement, questions of how national, local, caste-based and gendered subjectivities are produced, understood and transmitted and if and how transgressions are permitted and managed are evident in a variety of graphic novels.

SECTION I: SUPERHERO COMICS AND HETEROPATRIARCHIES[1]

The coming of *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) in 1967 captured the reader's imaginations by breaking down complex Sanskritised epics into panelled visual media. This retelling helped in the quicker transmission of popular Hindu epics to an amorphous urban readership. From 1967 to later 80s there were hardly any comic book series in Hindi and/or English that could match the popularity of ACK but once television took root in common households all over the country, ACK's popularity waned with the arrival of televised mythological serials. On TV, the comic book's effects were now supplemented by sound and motion, as well as the human presence of actors as well as three-dimensional visualizations of mythological artefacts as it were, in costume, architecture, diversity of characters, and different responses to narrative events, while also banking on the information gathered from ACKs.

In response to this phenomenon, from the early 1990s, ACK struggled with bringing out new kinds of mythological retellings soon shifting focus instead to heroes from important popular contemporary phenomena, like Kalpana Chawla, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Nehru, in keeping with the goal of keeping readers motivated and inspired from lives around them. Just preceding this, in the late 1980s, emerged the indigenous Indian comic superheroes, deeply connected to mythologies, yet aligned with the contemporary state and seeing it both as a defender as well as something to defend. The battlegrounds of these comic book superheroes was immediate, the crises they responded to born of modern problems, and their interventions, weaponry etc. reflected modern technological and scientific aspirations, all overlaid by inspiration and fascination for American Superheroes like Batman, Spiderman, and Superman all of who were tapped by Raj Comics, whose "Indian" superheroes also

[1] A version of this was presented as "Heroes, Citizens and Villains: Recognising the Stigma" at Indian Institute of Technology-Delhi, Humanities and Social Sciences' Graduate Students' Conference, April 21-22, 2017

operated mostly in urban areas and mirrored the national elite, with whom it was linked through maleness, North Indianness as well as other forms of hegemonic cultural capital. At the same time, the American monomyth is carried in the local setting as well. Jason Dittner writes in *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero* that the state is a feminized community across the superhero narratives that needs to be protected by the masculine rogue: "A nomadic hero arrives on the scene and, noting the exploitation, remedies the situation through equally masculine intervention." (11), an observation that can be extrapolated to the Indian landscape of the new superhero.

Misogynistic violence attacks the state and women equally: women often become the sites for rape, kidnapping, torture to show the degradation of the society. These characters had different jurisdictions for their operations, based on their weaponry, skillsets and engagement with the state - local, global and extra-terrestrial challenges. In some issues, they were shown as a unified team that dealt with multiple challenges in one go, their autonomous functioning also extending to the team unit. On the land and under the ground, many crime-perpetuating spaces were tackled by these superheroes. These superheroes were often distinct in several ways from American superheroes: the representations of real and fictional cities matched Indian sensibilities, as did the proximity of superpowers with real life; colouring and political issues also mirrored local realities. These superheroes, such as Super Commando Dhruv, Nagraj, Doga, received an overwhelmingly positive response: Raj Comics had brought home their own set of superheroes with whom the readers could identify.

Typical to the genre of superhero narratives, the origins of Raj Comics superheroes are often vague and/or filled with trauma, most of them are orphaned at an early age like Dhruv. While they manage to find a foster family, there are others like Doga who were found in the dumpster after having lost their parents to crime. This foundational crime adds a bundle of emotions – revenge, trauma and obsession – that provide the affective energy that is

harnessed to fight off crime thereafter, with a desire for safety (very often the city's safety is desired; it is the city that is sought to be protected and defended as the "nation"). Orrin E. Klapp writes in "Heroes, Villains and Fools, as Agents of Social Control" that the hero, villain and the fool are a departure from ordinary life, and they are counter-normal and superhuman-like (57). These roles are assigned for the collective purpose; the superhero takes many roles like that of the preserver of the social order, conquerer against "evils" planned by various malign forces or individuals, deliverer of justice, and a vigilante who functions as the extra-legal arm of the state. He is a cherished collective symbol who must repeatedly prove that he is extraordinary (and he does, without fail). He must have extra merit and attainments so that he can set an example for the citizens, showing them their better selves. As opposed to the superhero, the villain and the fool are deviants. Their pranks are ridiculed and then, severely penalised. In this section, we will look at Super Commando Dhruv and Doga, the superheroes of Raj Comics, to establish how the superhero becomes a vehicle for heteropatriarchal nationalisms.

Both superheroes are vigilantes though they function with entirely contrasting methods and over different geographies facing starkly different kinds of adversaries. Yet there are several similarities between the narratives of the two series. Starting out in 1987, *Super Commando Dhruv* centres itself around the life and struggle of Dhruv, a teenage boy who grows up to become the protector of Rajnagar, a fictitious town in Mumbai. In *Pratishod ki Jwala,* the first issue of the series, readers are introduced to Dhruv's past. His biological parents, Shyam and Radha, were trapeze artists in Jupiter Circus. Dhruv's extraordinariness develops as he stays within the circus community. Unlike ordinary citizens, he can talk to animals, ride a motorcycle with exceptional control, wield swords and knives, and perform martial arts. The popularity of Jupiter Circus becomes an eyesore for the competitors, Globe Circus. Shyam and Radha are killed in a fire that engulfs the entire circus set up. This fire

was not accidental; it was an attack planned by the Boss of the Globe Circus. Boss sends Jubiska and Bond to attack the circus; in this fire, Shyam, Radha and most of the other members of the circus are killed. 14-year old Dhruv is the only survivor. The witnessing of this incident leaves Dhruv with a traumatic memory, the obsession to solve crimes and take revenge against all the criminals. It also creates a base for his future actions to take place and the methods to curb crime. His obsession is to the point that any minor transgressions, like in *Robinhood*, are similar to crimes that may need extrajudicial intervention and then penalizing by the state. It is his no-holds-barred approach which is shown to be keeping the people of Rajnagar safe at all times. Anupam Sinha, the creator of Dhruv, emphasises on the fact that as opposed to other popular Western superheroes, Dhruv does not have an alter ego. He does not lead a secret life. At the same time, he does not have fantastical powers like Superman or Spiderman like cape or web released from the body. In that sense, Dhruv becomes the character that every reader may aspire to become. He is "an ordinary person" who has a deep sense of right and wrong; all his actions are directed towards that. However, this ordinary person has a special bike that helps in traversing different terrains. He wears a commando belt; this has a navigation system and tools that come handy in the battleground. He can communicate with animals; Dhruv's army, therefore, extends beyond humans. He has a surveillance system where he taps the information as possessed by birds and animals. At the same time, he has unsurmounted strength that allows him to fight off a number of villains at one time. He is an adept at the laws of science and general functioning of the things; it helps him resolve things better in times of crisis. So, while he may not have superpowers that are ordinarily expected in superheroes, his seemingly realistic skills puts him above the ordinary person/criminal.

Besides, his origin and skills, Dhruv's foster family further functions to enhance his role as the preserver of the social and bureaucratic order. Immediately after the fire at the circus,

Dhruv is adopted by Rajan Mehra, the commissioner of police. With this, he enters the league of powerful elites in terms of his class, caste and social capital, his social location – caste and class – prior to this are not shared though we assume that as circus labourers/workers, Dhruv's family's origins are humbler than the average Indian elite person's. At the same time, the readers must note that Dhruv's biological and foster family are Hindus as well as elites in terms of the nation/state. In contrast, multiple times, his villains will be located as from socially lower classes, living in slums, or even more distinctly as Muslim terrorists. Dhruv's emotions are harnessed by Rajan, his foster parent, who extends Dhruv's networks by connecting him with the state machinery with the Rashtrapati Bhawan giving Dhruv special permission to carry out his extra-judicial operations. As an agent of the state, he has access the state's resources – army, police, law and intelligence. To understand the range of Dhruv's operations, we consider the number *Commando Force* where a prolonged gang war rages.

The opening of the text sets the tone: Dhruv, it is understood, will be working against the criminal and corrupt politicians who use the resources of the state and even then impede delivery of services and smooth functioning to the ordinary public. We learn that Rajan wants to catch hold of all the small gangs that are coming up in Raj Nagar but disagreeing with his attack strategy, is a Mayor Sawariya who has a reformative approach. In two big panels, Mayor Sawariya is shown sitting comfortably in her chair, putting her point across as she tackles the big commissioner, Rajan. This page is filled with text, both as dialogues and the panel information, words covering more than half of the pages, the images insufficient to take the reader along with the dialogues but making clear that Mayor Sawariya also symbolizes the lousy politicians that the text opens with. She impedes Rajan's strategy by preventing arrests of the gangs until there is no crime to be noticed; her resistance brings Sawariya under the radar of the police and Dhruv who both think on different occasions that the mayor is

guilty of protecting the criminals, or even supports them. The following page shows Rajan stomping out of the room, his uniform and its colour sharply distinct from the other policemen in the panel, asserting his position of importance while in contrast to his uniform, Mayor Sawairya is draped in a heavy saree, and jewellery (Commando Force, 3). Her opulence and his austere uniform become a contrastive pair, corrupt politician versus upright administrator, untrustworthy democracy versus careful bureaucracy, criminal woman versus hardworking man, and so on. The drama of these oppositions is so strong that the reader forgets South Asian womens' political representation is barely in the double digits and thus a representative corrupt politican is much more likely to be a male person than a female one, yet the series aggressively allows these contrasts to take the shape of stereotypes.

Meanwhile, like many other superheroes of the genre, Dhruv has a muscular, chiseled body, V-shaped, with broad shoulders that separate his appearance from the rest of the crowd. In the early issues of the series, specific details about Dhruv's body are shared: 6ft, 78 kgs and fair. He remains a 23-year old man across the series. His large body frame is taller than average Indian height, which contributes to his distinct identification. Unlike the popular American superheroes who lead a public and a private life, Dhruv wears his yellow and blue spandex like a uniform both within the house and outside. His uniform becomes a way of identifying him – as opposed to his sister Shweta, who appears in the text as superheroine Chandika, who uses an alternate identity to participate in Dhruv's vigilantism. She is doing her part while hiding her identity from Dhruv as well, till he concludes her identity after connecting several episodes.

Another Raj Comics superhero, Doga dresses in his spandex and machinated uniform with a repulsive dog mask by night and during his role as a superhero. On other ordinary days, he is a college student who trains with Adrak Chacha at his gym. The two personalities help them to navigate the lives of ordinary people, detect crises and then act on them. Doga's

social location has not been mentioned, but he looks like a reject from the society that he is serving. As opposed to Shweta, who only behaves like a superhuman in her Chandika costume/avatar, Doga saves people as Suraj also. The introduction to Doga, the character, as given in the digests that present four stories to the readers make frequent allusions to the dog, Doga's qualities are also stereotypically similar – he is loyal, brave and alert. The language for introducing Doga is in stark contrast to Dhruv. With Dhruv, there are clear codes of language and conduct that are practised by him and those around him. With Doga, there is an element of "low" language; "uska naam sunte hi apradhiyo ki pantein geeli ho jaati hai" (trans. "Hearing his name, the criminals wet their pants"). Similarly, because Doga is associated with stray dogs, an element of filth and disgust is attached to him. This filth is linked to other aspects of his life: he was an abandoned child till he was found in a dustbin – "kutto ke beech pala aur kutta naam mila" (trans. Grew between dogs and he got the name of a dog). This exposure seemingly remains in him as a special power making him aware of the shadier areas of town where crime breeds. Doga has also witnessed the trauma of the loss of his friend, Sonu, who was killed by Halkaan Singh, a dacoit from Chambal. In that sense, Doga's story functions contrary to Dhruv: he was born with a different set of skills but needed interaction with humans to finally gain a sense of his own humanity.

Both Dhruv and Doga function as vigilantes, though there are extreme differences in the way they operate. Dhruv has a clarity and appreciation for the state and social order. To preserve the order in Rajnagar, he has to immediately deal with the crises; he uses devices on his body – his automated belt, starline, compass etc to impede the process for criminals. He is violent and often there is collateral damage in the process. Despite being violent, Dhruv tries to not take the power of law, handing over all the criminals to the police for due process to follow. Completely contrary to this approach, Doga runs his own extra-legal set up. He has no faith in the slow process of judiciary and police and takes matter into his own hands.

Across the episodes, he kills criminals in heinous ways – throwing them to crocodiles, stabbing, breaking bones. Doga has a deterrent approach that aims at creating terror in the hearts of the criminals, who feel a threat to their lives when Doga appears on the crime scene. Across the panels of this series, Doga's entry shows their unpreparedness for his attacks – "Doga ke haath chadhkar shayad apni darindagi bhool gaye the ve dono" (*Nishana Dil Par,* 12). As a result, Doga himself is a criminal who is running away from the clutches of the police. Episode after episode the police fail to arrest him; visibly, they are dependent on him for keeping the crime level low, yet, successive killings and destruction of the public property make him a wanted criminal. Dhruv on the other hand is quick-thinking, and this aligns with the larger popular moral opinion, therefore, Dhruv is celebrated by his followers. He deals with difficult criminals in their dens and saves the time of the police and the army. Dhruv uses his technologically upgraded lab and a team of experts to trap and defeat the criminals. He has his commando force that employs younger citizens to fight the crime; they release yearly advertisements (*Commando Force,* 6*)*. In this fight between the gangs and with the police, Dhruv manages to find the better-hearted people of Alligator Gang; he makes them part of the Commando Force. They comply with Dhruv's idea of not using arms and ammunition as their prime objective is to provide security to the people of their area. In this regard, there is little difference between Dhruv and gang members. Mayor Sawariya repeats this similarity to Rajan as she compares Dhruv and Gangs: "koi farak nahi hai! Dono hi apne samaaj ki suraksha apne tareeke se karte hain" (2). This vagueness of distinction might also add to the reason behind integrating these gang members with the Commando force but most certainly, this inflames Rajan who sees Dhruv as an extension of himself and the state apparatus. He asserts the distinction by mentioning Dhruv's promotion by the bureaucratic forces: "vaise bhi Commando Force ko Rashtrapati Bhawan se seedhi anumati mili hai" (3).

However, the gang conflict continues because an external power called Guardian is providing automated weapons to the gangs and consolidating smaller gangs into one larger criminal force to finally attack and finish Dhruv. When Guardian appears with the weapons, the Alligator gang can be seen is targeting Dhruv, their captain, making Dhruv recognize he was at fault in inducting gang members to the Commando Force, "Oh! Yaani is shadyantra main Alligator Gang bhi Smaamhil hai" (53). The gang seems to be going back to its old ways when they continue to attack Dhruv, taking the reader by surprise as well. Only later do they reveal their plan of misleading Guardian by misleading Dhruv: almost hypnotically, when Dhruv asks them to put down their weapon and not submit to the plan of Guardian, they all fall down to the ground, feeling guilty about their actions (56). These gang members are now the good people under the influence of Dhruv, with the series modeling one way of achieving the collective desire for a safe society: submission to a good (and young too) patriarch.

Contrary to this, Doga faces protests and opposition from the local public. He unleashes threats on the threat, using the methods of the criminal to kill them. The line between the criminal and superhero, here, particularly blurs. As shown in *Tandoor*, where a huge protest is carriedout by female protestors and Monika, sister of Inspector Cheetah (17), requesting the arrest of Doga, who was found in the warehouse where a female reporter was killed in a tandoor. Doga's criminal-adjacent behavior means very little trust in him exists, but at the same time, Doga himself expects little in return, casting his service at the world freely, proud of his methods and the quicker delivery of justice as he does not involve bureaucratic powerholders. In fact, Doga repeatedly shows the police their flaws: inefficiency in the power hierarchies and technologically challenged. Doga is also relatively flexible, able to operate from over and under the ground because of a large army of his own – dogs – who can smell

the criminal from whatever remains of their bodies, clothes, weapons, and then communicate to Doga.

SuperCommando Dhruv has two superheroines – Chandika and Natasha – who are completely subsidiary or secondary and who work as Dhruv's support; these two are separate from the ordinary citizens in terms of their access to resources: some scientific lab where they carry out their projects and learn new skills. At the same time, they are never powerful enough to salvage the mission without Dhruv. Chandika is agile and strong, though she is not as equipped as Dhruv; she is his foster-sister, but Commando Force also does not recognize her, though Chandika is found in critical situations helping save Dhruv's life, completing the missions and distracting the villains. It is ambiguous if she is part of the eponynmous Commando Force, or if she carries out her share of the mission because she is related to Dhruv. As Shweta, she is a software engineer, connected like Dhruv with the state's offices, working on state projects from where she accesses confidential information that she passes on to Dhruv and Commando Force, which is also sponsored by the state, to avert the crises and deal with the villain. Shweta makes use of her own gadgets and the gadgets provided by Commando Force to deal with day to day action-hero challenges**.** The number *Mummy ka Keher* shows Shweta with equipment on her body that helps her to communicate with Kabir at the headquarters of Commando Force. She is finding it difficult to remember all the facts pertaining to the relics of Gazbal Dauri's palace and mummified body, so Kabir is supplying her, at Dhruv's request, with information that adds to the information that she has memorized. It is suggested that Shweta may not be very good at her job: by her own admission, "iss transmitter ki zarurat mujhe har do minute main padegi" (3). Shweta also needs Dhruv's support in day to day life as well, like the ordinary citizens of Rajnagar, but here, it goes beyond the vigilante role and extending the support from the state for "helping" Shweta. The legend behind Dauri's palace is shared with the readers – before the advent of

mummifying the bodies in Egypt, the technology was already popular in India. Similar to the Egyptian mummies, Dauri had treasures hidden with his body (*Mummy ka Keher*, 23). There are distinctly Muslim-looking terrorists who attack the tourists to rob the treasures. They all have beards and turbans, they invoke Allah and frequently talk in Urdu, distinctions that mark them as separate from Dhruv. When they attack, Shweta is present on the scene, which she then re-enters as Chandika, kicking one of the terrorists in the face (5). In the following pages, a face-off takes place between Chandika and the terrorists; they occupy bigger parts of the panel, writhing in pain amidst the attacks: Chandika's prowess is thus minimized in contrast to the privileging of the iconography of making the muslim other suffer or be punished. Chandika's presence thus is hardly ever celebrated in and of itself but only a subsidiary that helps prove Dhruv's patriarchal benevolence and representative strength. When among ordinary people, Shweta is shown as depending on Vikram, part of the guided tour group that she is heading: no men across the series are shown to be in situations of such continuing dependence with one another. Vikram is a scientist from Italy; he invents his own gadgets. His gadgets come handy when the tourists are attacked by the terrorists – it gives the precise location of the human bodies based on the difference in their density, a gadget better than what Dhruv owns. Shweta plans to learn about these inventions and the algorithms that Vikram uses but we later learn that since Vikram is too occupied in his work to make time for her, she abandons the project. The text also, in a convoluted way puts women in opposing positions. In *Dhurv Khatm*¸ there is a group of sadhus in the town who have called Death to deal with the growing crime level in town. Quite literally Death appears racing around the town on an angry looking horse. It is a skeleton itself that furthers fear in the community (12). Death is bigger than Dhruv both in size and impact. However, not blindly following the rumours and living under the constant fear of Death, Shweta questions her angry mother. In

response to Professor Thaka's reading of the incident, the following dialogue takes place between the two:

> Mother: Swamiji ka mazaak uda raha hai! Iska phal isko bhugatna padega! Abhi ye swami ji ki shaktiyon ko jaanta nahi.
>
> Shweta: Woh toh theek hai, mummy! Lekin tumne TV kyon band kar diya? Kam se kam Thakaji ke vichaar toh sunne do
>
> Mother: Koi zarurat nahi hai Shweta aise naastiko ke vichaar sunne ki, waise bhi ise jald hi maafi maangni padegi

(*Dhruv Khatm*, 10)

This disagreement between the two women, wherein Shweta is young and rational and the mother older and superstititious and unscientific, is contrasted with the agreement that is shared between Rajan and Dhruv, both are shown as rational people. The mother stands in contrast to Shweta; she is the carrier of older beliefs, social fear and a challenge of dealing with rational kids, suggesting thus that the burden of societal conservatism and traditionalism is the result of women's poor attitudes, whereas modernity and scientific secular behaviour, shared by young and old men alike, from Thaka to Rajan to Dhruv, are a masculine responsibility and acheivement. For the two men who are committed to crime fighting, Death is a mere imposter – as it is learnt later, Death was actually a scamster sadhu who was trying to fill fear in the people and Dhruv, and in the process establish his supremacy. Thus, where women are viewed as normatively emotional, with Shweta being a unique exception in her race, men are viewed as normatively rational, with Dhruv simply being the best of an already good kind.

On different occasions, Shweta tries to help Dhruv both as a sister at home, and as Chandika in the battle field. As opposed to her day to day non sexualized dressing, as

Chandika, Shweta is also found in spandex, with an impossibly curvaceous body and muscles bulging on the petite frame, an identity that functions addiditively, as now she is now physically competent as well to deal with villains. However, this angers Dhruv: in a twisted way, he feels guilty for Shweta resorting to the life of a superhero, putting herself in danger. He says that Shweta should feel safe because she is his sister, and it is also his responsibility to ensure her safety; Dhruv puts himself in the mould of a super-brother with this conversation. This makes the reader wonder if Shweta is a valuable addition to Dhruv's team or a distraction on the scene of crime. In the beginning, Dhruv is not even certain if she is on her side, and if she is, then what is she looking for. When muscles and a reduced femininity are presented as a defence that enhances safety, once again the normative masculine is hegemonized and the feminine is presented as essentially both unsafe and in need of defence constantly. Chandika never carries out any mission alone and the final glory to accomplishing the task always goes Dhruv's way, similar to how Mayor Sawariya is seen in the narrative: as an object of suspicion because female. It should be interesting to explore what her thought-processes are like, and how she could become or act as a superheroine if her narrative had not been restricted by Dhruv's paternalistic tones. When we wonder along with the plot why Mayor Sawariya is doing what she is doing or if Shweta will get into trouble again, we as readers certainly believe Dhruv's line of thought, and ignore the gender dimension within the narrative.

Natasha, daughter of CrimeMaster Lobo and Dhruv's romantic interest, is an interesting character that enters the gray zone. While she does not entirely agree with her father's methods violent methods of occupying power; at the same time she does not agree with Dhruv's approach of seeing the wrongs in a black and white manner even as she ignores Dhruv's connections with state institutions, despite his violent and extra-legal methods. Natasha sees villainy contextually as coming from an individual's compulsions while her

romantic liaison with Dhruv sees her aliented from her father whose withdrawal of support is understandable when she wants to go closer to Dhruv: both men mistrust her. Lobo does. not trust her with the end results, nor does. Even as both refuse to budge from their positions, Natasha uses these moments to achieve quick justice, as she deems suitable, an assertion of identity shown through her private lab, where she performs experiments but Natasha's romantic fulfillment depends on her siding with Dhruv, compromising on her thought process and operations. From the above, we know that Natasha too would work under Dhruv, under the homogenizing moral code, a change of heart that is a common thread across a number of issues and establishes Dhruv's righteous superiority (as did the conversion of the Alligator Gang) and validate her desire to be on his side.

A transgressive character in *Robinhood,* Lyngdoh, wants to help the poor and wields a bow and arrow-like Robinhood, but Dhruv assumes Lyngdoh to be the criminal, smashing him down right in the middle of the street. Later Lyngdoh and his coach are found locked in the factory. It is revealed here that this coach is the real Robinhood (*Robinhood,* 48). Robinhood uses the hoarded money to redistribute it amongst the poor. Dhanwantary, the owner of the factory that supplies fake drugs has impersonated this coach and has unleashed terror. As the situation is later managed by both Dhruv and the two ordinary citizens, a change in the hearts of the poor people can be seen, with them rejecting the wealth thus procured saying, "iss dhokebaaz ki baat main aakar hum apne asli superhero Dhruv ko maarne jaa rahe the! Chhee!" (52). This articulation immediately rejects the efforts that Robinhood was making; it also shows poor as fickle minded people who allowed another superhero to come up in the town. After accepting their "mistake" they all hailed, "zindabad Dhruv!" In this scene, there are no women at all, almost eliminating them from the population of the city and certainly from a site of public display of protest though, however, women appear in other public scene as sites to manifest the crime and degradation of the

society. For instance, Doga is repeatedly found saving Monika, sister of Inspector Cheetah. *Nishana Dil Par* shows her dropping from the roof, but Doga manages to hold the rope with his teeth preventing her death while she is helplessly shrieking because her brother has also not appeared on the scene yet. Similarly in *Bubo-bubo*, she is bound with rope and hanging down. *Tandoor* tells about a female journalist who was killed, and her dead body roasted in the Tandoor of the title. *Magarmachch* shows a desperately pleading woman whose child has been kidnapped. Though Monika and other women in the city see Doga as a criminal, the reader knows that Doga is a free associate of the police, and it is because of him that the crime rate in Mumbai is low.

Yet, these protests by women on the street, a symbol deeply associated with women claiming their space and speaking out their demands, are also mocked at in *Doga*. *Tandoor* sees women demanding support from Monika against Doga (17). This also becomes a test for Monika to question her brother and the police force in the public space. They become the laughing stock for attacking the only man who has saved the leader of this protest, Monika, a number of times. As is evident from this analysis of the visuals and narrative of Dhruv and Doga above, the feminine is altogether cast in secondary roles and emotions of stupidity, irrationality, affective susceptibility, weakness, learned helplessness, willing submission and lack of initiative are continually presented in explicity and implicit ways through the narrative. The majority of the narrative is "free" of women, thus implicitly normalizing the lack of public sphere positions and places for women; at the same time the affective representations of women when they appear is such that subservience is again implicitly taught and manifested willingly. In terms of public ideas of gender roles, these mass-market comic books ruthlessly endorse masculine hegemony and patriarchal conditioning while appearing to be speaking to nationalist values. Thus, the combination of the two kinds of behaviour supports heteropatriarchal nationalisms that are exclusionary for feminine persons.

Legitimizing gender-inequities in this fashion has sharp public cultural consequences given the young, primarily male, readership of these comics. The repetitive reinforcement of the idea of feminine inferiority and male superiority couched inside a fast moving plot make for a powerful cocktail wherein reflective thinking is short-circuited for the common reader, but precisely for this reason, a critical gender literacies based approach needs to be applied to these narratives as a constant corrective in the absence of more equitable comic books for young children and adolescents of this age group.

SECTION II: THEORIZING SPACE AND BELONGING

Through cities and the fictive regions within them, urban spaces have been explored in the comics and graphic novels from multiple perspectives: as a superhero's mission zone, as opposed to rural, as a simultaneity of varying opinions, and as a destination of opportunity, struggle, and hierarchies. Within these broader themes, there are sub themes like crime and their sites, violence in the public and private, migration and struggle for survival, parallel interactions with dominating class and their discourse, and manifestation of diverse ideologies. The urban space has been studied using many genres like fiction, non-fiction, fantastical, and life stories. Often, the city is represented in the microcosm of the individual, at the same time; the individual may also magnify themselves as the city; for example in *Super Commando Dhruv* series by Raj Comics. At one moment, Dhruv manages to show the vast range of the crimes that plague Rajnagar, a fictive space near Mumbai; next moment, this establishes a relationship of dependence where Rajnagar citizens cannot survive if Dhruv is missing.

Anthony Enns in "The City as Archive in Jason Lute's Berlin" writes about the comic medium and its suitability for the urban space. As mentioned, the city contains within itself diverse experiences; the dissimilarity between them produces a myriad of emotions- shock, surprise, amuse. The comic media uses a fragmented, yet, a sequential narrative that is knit to show the movement of time. The static grid structure allows the reader to apprehend time at their own pace while the plot is broken down and rearranged. Enns uses Walter Benjamin's term "monadological"- selectively choosing the elements of history and arranging them to form a narrative- to make an assortment of episodes and use the details within them to build a coherent, but different storyline. This is very characteristic to superhero plots where the bird-eye and worm-eye view work together to build the meaning- Dhruv shows the image of Mumbai and then focuses in on Rajnagar to show the field of his work, and then shifts to

specific crime ridden areas which suggest Rajnagar to be replete with crimes and transgressions. Such a movement creates its own version of fore history and after history of the incident (Enns, 47) linking terror and rescue emotions. This is taken a step further by Doga, a Raj Comic superhero, who solves crime terminally using the criminals' methods. Doga operates from the gutters, his surveillance army is built of dogs with whom he exclusively communicates. This gutter becomes the sound board for all the violence happening above and creates the image of shaking up from under quite literally.

Within the urban, particularly in the semi-fictive stories, contesting lives collide and coexist. For example, in *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* by Sarnath Banerjee, Girish, the plumber who has migrated from Chhattisgarh after losing job, cannot help but compulsively keep digging to find a political nexus that sustains opposing lives in the fictive town of Vikaspuri. The shift from above the ground to under is disorienting, but dialectic – a newer sense of the power dynamics is revealed as the two levels are juxtaposed. Besides these texts that operate in the public spaces, there are graphic narratives that emphasise the private lives – the violence that happens within the household space and its impact on the lives outside like in the mini comics by Manta Ray – *Hush* and *Twelve*.

The question of public cultures immediately throws us into the question of the nation. Are cosmopolitan cultural spaces necessarily inimical to the spaces of the nation or can the two mutually coexist. Would multiple public cultures, with their different fashionings of the idea of the "public" be an undoing of the idea of the normative "one" national state? Or would their very co-existence make the notion of many publics futile? The mono-cult of the nation that holds together all its regions without strife within a "mythical" tireless unity has been rightly contested; it is indeed impossible to consider the nation as a seamless entity within the realities of the post-modern, post-colonial world. Graphic novels have meditated on the very concept of boundaries and their stability through a variety of devices.

Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* looks at the Emergency (which is very little studied in terms of formal scholarship) as a rupture in the nation's concept of itself while *Munnu* makes antelopes (Hanguls) out of all Kashmiris (Muslim or Pandit) in its depiction of Kashmir's anomalous presence within the nation's boundaries. The animalization of the Kashmiri populates the page of *Munnu* with resonances for the concept of nation: homogeneous, speciesist, racist, anchored in notions of purity that contradict the modern Indian state's secular promise. If this country, as we know, is only a very recent post-colonial intervention, it adheres yet to primeval concepts of authenticity. The human being as Hangul (with or without horns depending on gender) standing upright makes visible the various tactics of othering that goes into keeping Kashmir where it is. Using the contemporary graphic novel to meditate on multiple historical possibilities, it is the drawing, the form, homo sapiens as antelope, that allows Sajad to access the layered pasts of different communities, and the shifting boundaries between nations that are misrepresented as stable, universal and continuous. In this representation, discussion about development, unequal citizenship, rights and freedoms all are thrown into sharp relief because the fate of the animal within the homo sapiens' world is well known to us. The quest for dominance over nature that leads to the destruction of biological life different from ourselves even physically suggests a bleak end for Kashmir; the book does end grimly, suggesting that the discrimination and violence that positions Kashmiris as lesser citizens within a democracy will continue because othering as a practice is allowed and accepted by us when it comes to other species, for example.

The challenges of Independence were indeed met in India through the Nehruvian model of high-scale technological intervention, including the massive green and white revolutions that transformed the agrarian landscapes of many regions and replaced agriculture forever with agribusiness. The resultant accelerated development that followed many of these newly introduced practices does not translate to equal access to the fruits of development.

The Hangul or the humble milch cattle on whose bodies the white revolution plays out, or the desperate bodies of the hens who must keep on hatching, are certainly not beneficiaries of the idea of development. In fact, many areas where development never did arrive already had a sustainable method of living which was completely disrecognized and disavowed. This construct can be seen in *Delhi Calm*, *River of Stories* and *Munnu*, which are respectively about urban India, rural Madhya Pradesh and Kashmir, three locations completely apart which found that a model of development was forced on them.

The first Prime Minister of India called dams the "temples of modern India," and these temples erupted in an intrusive manner, barging into the cultural and ritual spaces of the communities that heavily depend on river and forest spaces. With the advent of independence, a number of challenges like technological development, agrarian crises and employment generation were understood as best dealt with by accelerating the speed of development in many departments such as electricity production, crop output, clothing, milk industry, in order to meet the demands of a growing population. However, within the country, there were a number of regions where these plans for development were not entirely embraced. In fact, they already had a sustainable method of living, using and replenishing the natural resources. Therefore, development was forced on these segments of the population. These “temples of modern India” have become a significant symbol in discussing “development” issues. Taking the readers back to Narmada River Dam, Orijit Sen reminds us about the encroaching, intrusive practice that development usually is. In his seminal graphic text, River of Stories (1994), Sen shares the Bhili creation myth of Kujum Chantu, the goddess of Earth. Without moving, Chantu creates an ecologically balanced system where each creature can support the other in a non-exploitative fashion; where the sharing of natural resources and creation of an economy is non-capitalistic. In such a system, one finds resistance in the methods and a model of self-sufficiency and sustainability.

This is the backdrop to the story of Relku, a maid in an urban household of Vishnu, a journalist working on a story about the adivasis and the dam being built on the Rewa River. Vishnu uses Relku, the tribal woman's story, for his own. The power relationship between the two can also be seen in the way Relku is relegated to certain fixed coordinates of her identity; she is cleaning the house, sitting on floor while Vishnu jots down his notes, sitting comfortably on a couch. She becomes his source of information on her migrant status in the city while also learning of the chaos arising out of the development around the river in her village. A stark opposition is created in the frames of River of Stories, as adivasis and the "civilised" government officials who visit the village are juxtaposed. Bureaucratic power relations become glaring here because despite residing in the forests for multiple generations, these adivasis do not have any claim to their land; their land belongs to the state. They neither understand the vocabulary of development, nor comprehend why they will have to be displaced in the process. Relku's status in the city is a sharp contrast to the picture of development the officials paint to native inhabitants of the tribal lands. In the modern developed city, they become little more than dispensable cheap labour, perpetually rendered informal, unorganized but in employment, because people of her village are not able to stake claims to their ancestral lands. Within representations of the national culture is a space for its critique and its reinvention; however, there is no utopian easy critique. Though the graphic novel might be thought of as naturally an upwardly mobile genre, we could argue that it generates a pedagogy of/for the oppressed in this instance, allowing readers to engage with the question of fashioning a national future that includes Relku too. The officials on the other hand start from inaccessibility, stating that only by using roads and modern communication systems can the development process be initiated. For these officials, the adivasis are a lesser/lower epistemology; they believe that adivasis are primitive because they prioritise community rituals over development, creating an "obstacle" for the whole plan of the nation.

For the reader, it is an appalling situation because most of the community people seem unhappy about what they are told, yet the uniforms terrify them.

This novel is able to show the systemic nature of internal colonization practices which cause suppression of some groups within the mainstream. The officials inform the adivasis that hills and forests have been classified as "protected area," thereby restricting their usage which for communities that are entirely dependent on forests is a total loss of their sources of livelihood, shelter and equally importantly, of narrative, story and memory. Labelling their way of living pursuing ancestral practices as "nonsense", the government officials assert that for the way of development to smoothen out, each citizen must cooperate. Stark irony resonates on the page; the reading public is exposed to a way of life that is dramatically different from its own. Thus, the pedagogy of the book creates a counterpublic, one that is in a sense, arguing with its own (late capitalist people/clan). Thus, the readership becomes a kind of transnational counterpublic, including both Relku and activist-intellectuals like Vandana Shiva whose writing about eco-feminist practices is now part of the academic canon. The community, as well as the readers, can see at this moment that the race to development never had the same starting line. More importantly, it is clear that these officials have more power, since they can displace these adivasis any day, irrespective of whether the adivasi agrees on the question of development. Thus, paradoxically, within the book the adivasi is completely silenced, while s/he speaks to a larger public through the medium of the graphic novel. At this poignant moment, the forest dwellers seem to have made peace with their gloomy, powerless future, thinking sceptically "we will have to go somewhere else and live there." Similar themes are advanced in other directions by later works like Amruta Patil's *Aranyaka* (2019), but here the protagonist is not marked as "adivasi," only as "female", thus creating a very different paradigm of subjectivity and political context. *River of Stories* as

India’s first graphic novel breaks new ground in its presentation of an intersectional medium for India’s diverse needs.

ANIMALITY AND PERSONHOOD

Is the adivasi occupying a spot similar to the hangul from *Munnu* (2015), however? Munnu's creator Malik Sajad says that he wanted to keep his individual opinions far away from the book, quite unlike Orijit Sen's very activist agenda. Sajad tries to show Kashmir as is, leaving it to the reader's discretion to decide whether they are completely aware of what happens in the valley. Modelled on Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*, but less focused on public issues and more on personal, intimate and individualized narrative and subjectivity, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* is Sajad’s effort to use the graphic novel medium to make readers connect with ordinary human experiences of violence. Sajad says he wanted to write a story about Kashmir that had both happy and sad moments, to refrain from showing Kashmir as the land of sorrow and grief only. In 2010, Sajad created an animation called *Father and Sons* which was published on *Hopscotch,* to show the constant surveillance and violence that wrap the Kashmiri lives. While making this animation, Sajad found himself healing, he was able to put his experiences and emotions on paper, and see graphics have a life of their own. After this was when he created his dream project, a graphic strip around Kashmir, where the story was to not be romanticised with, but rather show things as they are and in this process, to preserve the humanity, innocence of the people as well as the specificity and originality of the location. Material objects like an incomplete piece of wood partially carved, a block his father started before marriage feature in Munnu as a reminder of Kashmir and of Kashmiri artefacts, skills and the changes that came about post the conflict: the tourist and cultural economy of Kashmir was drastically affected as armed exchange became frequent.

Born in 1987, Sajad witnessed the phase of armed uprising in Kashmir that started in the 1990s. In the midst of such violence, how can one escape political opinions, but at the same time, it is too unsafe to venture any, Sajad seems to suggest. *Munnu* centers on a young boy Munnu, youngest and therefore, most mischievous and best-loved in his family. From the beginning, this graphic novel shows the readers that childhoods in Kashmir are vastly different from childhoods elsewhere because of the circumstances prevailing: these children witness death, brutal violence, crackdowns and protests as a daily reality. Rather than watching films for fun as Munnu's father's generation did in their childhood, the children of current day Kashmir start making protest placards, remaining involved in the political scenario, asking for their rights from the very beginning but also marked by having to deal constantly with news of irreparable loss through death or disappearances immediately originating from the political situation. Munnu's fears and panics symbolize the valley, and Munnu is represented as a hangul, the deer that inhabit the valley as an “animal”. Within the little frame of Munnu's (animalized) body, Sajad tries to create a macrocosm of Kashmir. The little antelope Munnu sees the army “picks up” and “disappears” individuals all the time; after, based on the information supplied, and the affirming of suspicion, some people come back home and some don't. Of those who don't, some come back as corpses, and some as informers. As a child, his first encounter with loss is when he hears about the killing of Mustafa, a neighbourhood uncle, whose burial process is what shatters Munnu more than the actual death: Munnu worries as small children do that the dead man will be buried so deep that he will be unable to ask for help, a metaphor for many buried lives that will never be able to speak, an expression of the unequal citizenship experienced by those living in violent places and through violent events. When Munnu goes to his new school, he is fascinated by its beautiful architecture, which soon reveals itself to be a patchwork of newspapers covering bullet marks; large blackboards stating moral values that have been skillfully used to cover

the walls. Curious as he is, he pulls down all these blackboards to find the photographs of Kashmiri Pandits covering the whole space, showing a history of violence that is complex and all-pervasive. Sajad has spoken in public lectures of how the killing of his neighbour, Samir Rah who was merely 8 years old, was an important influence on him: Rah had wanted to fetch something from the market, after curfew time; he had shouted “Azaadi” at the soldiers standing close by, which angered the military men so badly that they hit the boy till he died. Another brush with violence Sajad describes is the death of a bride shot in the shoulder, near his house, who died due to massive blood loss. His location as a Kashmiri has brought him upfront close to the systemic flaw that has reduced the value of Kashmiri life.

Around the age of 16, Sajad drew an accidental cartoon showing the precarious state of Kashmiris and the hanguls, a regional endangered species of deer. Hanguls have slowly moved towards disappearing as a result of the war, armed conflict and modernisation that affect their need for quiet and peace. The autobiographical choice of the hangul made by Munnu too who as an an evolving cartoonist, decides that he would not spend his artistic capital on frivolities, and thus decides to draw and critique the Kashmir situation. He finds a readership in the popular Kashmir daily, *Greater Kashmir*, where he draws about the political impediments in day to day life, especially about the children of Kashmir, cut off from because violence leads to schools remaining shut for long periods of time. One drawing questions the Hurriyat, Munnu's critique being that the gap between their actions and speeches gives false hopes to the people of Kashmir, who remain in their power thus. The lack of an alternative makes Kashmiris quietly concede to the Hurriyat too, as Munnu learns when his cartoon is published and he receives threats. Sajad's clear-eyed critique of Kashmiri desire to be free from occupation is painful in the clarity with which he shows the underlying lack of democracy.

At one point, the graphic novel starts seeming autobiographical, when Munnu draws a hangul screaming that the level and impunity with which violence is performed will surely make Kashmiris similar to their regional, endangered animal, the hangul. No one has full information about what is happening in the land; twisted facts are circulated in the rest of India, which then proceeds to hate the animalized other, the Kashmiri as Hangul thus signifies dehumanisation of a people. The ease, detachment and insensitivity with which the people are killed affects Munnu, who is also a hangul; yet the deer is a political proxy, the hangul as antelope will remain subaltern even when the Kashmiri as human person doesn't, as this othering signified by who is given personhood versus who will be marked as animal will continue in some other name and form. In *Maus 1*, the readers already know about the Holocaust, but intimately encounter through private testimonies in this memoir both the first generation survivor and the Jew who has not survived Holocaust. The readers are compelled to break away from public narrative while looking at the private longevity of grief. Spiegelman uses all the characters to reinforce and subvert the connotations that were attached to the community. For instance, the use of the mouse developed from the Nazi image of Jews as filthy, diseased people. These mice are perpetually put in line and threatened by the cats, the Germans. The subversion of a scurrilous image to create something critical and hopeful is similar to what *Munnu* attempts, though the hangul is less intimate pest and more exotic creature; yet, Kashmir itself, and the stray dogs of Srinagar communicate the fact of otherness and exclusion concretely even as the presence of the hangul shows how sustained destruction means many of us will not get to know this antelope. In contemporary graphic novels like *Munnu*, questions about what citizenship means are anchored using multiple perspectives of history, layered pasts of different communities, and shifting boundaries which allow us to glimpse new ways of thinking about mal/development, unequal citizenship, rights and freedoms in different capacities.

DYSTOPIA IN ORDINARY PLACES

Whereas conflict zones like Kashmir are expected to be violent and theorizing violence is thus relatively possible, there is a tendency for other spatial locations to invisibilize their own histories of conflict and violence as Vishwajyoti Ghosh shows of Delhi in *Delhi Calm* (2010), where in the 1970s, during the Emergency the national capital was itself in the thick of immediate daily violence, and confrontations against political impositions. The common man (and woman) is immersed in a dystopia where ordinary life seems to prevail and under whose veneer, a mighty state apparatus scapegoats those who dissent, those who are "other" and those who are unlucky enough to be subaltern. Ghosh shows how ideology percolates through the society, how easy it is to take minds over with no alternative sources of information once all the walls, skies and sights are filled with propaganda-based information. Alternative thought processes cannot be created, and specific actions such as clearing of slums and sterilisation are rampantly performed once authoritarianism gets a free hand. There are questioning minds as well, who express their faith in the constitution, especially its right to equality. VP, Parvez and Master, the three prime characters of the text, are aware of the power vested in them by their geo-social location and education and seek to use it to create an anti-authoritarian movement, planning to use music as their medium. Their band, "Naya savera" or new day, poignantly expresses the hope for change with time, a hope that appeals to a vast audience. In their movement from urban to less central, less accessible locales, these young men bring the assurance that someone from a metropolitan urban space is interested in the rural plight, but differences are not so easily bridged: taboos about class, food and caste surface, along with the question of why the rural poor should support such urban "revolutionaries" after all. With the imposition of Emergency, clamping down of civil liberties comes as a shock, with the powerlessness of those in the Powerpolis being more emphatic, since they are more swiftly deprived of their rights and jailed or tortured. In this

moment, Parvez figures for himself that by remaining closer to the government officials he can achieve keep himself out of the jail, and therefore, stay free of government's surveillance, and second, observe the operations of government and develop closer insight. The art shows that contrary to other fully masked folks in the Powerpolis who have surrendered to the system of the state, Parvez can peep from his mask. He does not entirely become a part of the herd. Instead, his choice is a conscious self-preservatory one, where he is aware of the consequences.

Parvez thus is not a full-fledged textbook “revolutionary”, and *Delhi Calm* instead shows the web of power at work. Some, like Parvez, choose to mask their own thoughts to go undercover, pretending to be one with the establishment, hoping to undermine it from within. Yet, they are aware of the impact of their choices in context of the overarching dominance by a democratic state, its lack of accountability and yet the impunity with which it performs violence. *Delhi Calm* thus disrupts the superheroic with these ordinary unheroic men, who unlike say, Captain America, do not use tye superhero image to further the nationalistic agendas as Captain America does for the USA, particularly after WWI. As the superhero out to save the world, his uniform carries the symbols from the American flag, even as other parts of the comic series show that "progress" in the USA can come at a very high cost, such as for example a number of experiments are shown to be carried out on human bodies, who were not seen as lab rats, but instead, as markers of scientific progress. Captain America, the character and the text used these ideations of nation in a celebratory way while *Delhi Calm* with its disruption of the utopic shows that aspirations like these can destroy citizens through their investment in authoritarianism.

What ties these three texts together is the overarching theme of dominance by a democratic state, its lack of accountability and yet the impunity with which it performs violence. It is by this method of working that the state creates a possibility of becoming a

conflict zone. In a very simplistic understanding, therefore, a potential conflict zone becomes so because the state uses its apparatus to restrain the rights of its own population, rather than having a dialogue. Functioning in the interest of the majority, it not only oppresses the minority but also acts hypocritically, depending as it does heavily on the resources of the minority, even as it others these minorities as impediments to the desired “development” narrative of the era, whatever it be. The caging of citizens within their lands where they cannot seek rescue but are rather forced to follow the "orders" that have been imposed on them has given rise to multiple resistances in various forms that express both the sustained nature of the grievances as well as continued lack of redressal which persists in the absence of an inclusive system of living with its economically divisive, authoritarian, anti-minority practices. Yet, these texts want not the traditional breakdown of the national ideal; they want something far better to replace it first, articulating their reformist aspirations in terms of waiting for better days.

LOCATING WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY HISTORIES

While Ghosh's narrative sticks with a universalized “male” as a disillusioned citizen, just as Sajad's narrative used the hangul as proxy for Kashmiris. The actual missing hangul or woman is never supplied to us; thus within the cosmopolitan spaces of critique of the state in late capitalism, there is still the subaltern who cannot speak. Very few people in the novel are from these slums; very few women (who are continuing victims of state sponsored sterilization before and after the Emergency) are shown to be experiencing the emergency. The non-fictional graphic narrative is where we will find some voices of women enmeshed in contemporary tragedies and conflicts. Graphic non-fiction narratives are a more niche market, engaging with news that mass media like television, newspapers, and magazines may not have covered, using the graphic format to provide commentary on momentous issues. In the

preface to “There Is No Place Like Home,” Basumatary notes that despite a majority of women survivors from the Bodo-Santhal riots, their stories were completely missing from the historical accounts of the these riots- the three short stories written by Amrapali Basumatary and illustrated by Vipin Yadav, from “There’s No Place Like Home” in *First Hand 2: Graphic Narratives from India*: “A Lonely Courtyard”, “My Name is Jahanara" and “Aapki Sewa Main” serve to illustrate how the female body and feminine personhood are affected and changed by processes whereby nationalism, territorialisation and citizenship are enacted through violence, othering and exclusion, here in relation to Bodoland which has remained a conflict zone because of the sustained communal and inter-community riots since the 1990s.

Of the 220 ethnic groups in Assam, the Bodos are the largest with a population of about three million, forming five per cent of the total Assamese tribal population. The protection of the land rights of indigenous communities has been at issue due to heavy inflow of migrants from Bangladesh who entered Assamese territory and now own private land. The term “illegal migrants” is historically contextual -- until 1971, Bangladesh was part of India and the question of legality of movement hardly existed because people, as citizens, moved freely between regions. However, since 1971, after Bangladesh became independent, this free movement became a thorny issue. All migrants did not follow the legal process of entering the Indian territory, therefore, they were viewed with suspicion. Further the Indian Muslim population also began to be viewed with doubt even when they had been living within the Assam boundaries before 1971. The Bodos who were once in the majority, now faced a severe economic and social threat from these populations. Since the late 1980s, Bodos have been asking for a separate land Bodoland carved out of Assam. Basumatry’s own social location as a Bodo enabled access to the community, their shifting geographies and testimonies, despite no first-hand experience with the violence. “There’s No Place Like Home” is semi-fictional, compositing several women’s narratives into a few characters to tell

the story, and thus crossing the boundary between fiction and non-fiction to protect identities in a continuing conflict situation. "There is no place like home" shows how riots were perpetrated by men from different religious and tribal groups. In contrast, the women's narratives concentrate on survival, on memory and witnessing, and on moving forward. Across the three stories, the theme of collecting oneself and "moving on" from the losses and memories of violence can be found. Questions of citizenship and belongingness become harshly material when displaced groups face hardships as refugees and migrants; and internally displaced persons shifting between temporary resettlements for more than a decade and continually viewed as threats to the livelihoods and resources of the locals despite their own bare lives. The state eschews responsibility at the micro level, and therein local communities become dominant players in the rehabilitation process, and religious and tribal identities add to the precarity experienced.

Choices such as portraying the entire narrative through images only, keeping the story entirely wordless has sometimes been made so as to prevent un-voicing already marginalized communities, such as the Jarawa, who are drawn in one story in the volume. In other instances, orality through poetry is introduced. Unlike comics, where movement on the page is shown through panels and grid, this graphic narrative assembles diegetic and extradiegetic spaces, as Pascal Lefevre posits, by playing with the reader's gaze angle. The written word, on the other hand often, disrupts the continuity of the image, while also remaining a part of it. The graphic art helps deal with the challenge of accommodating Bodo and Santhali oral culture and family stories in and through the English language. As opposed to the women of Bodoland who were forthright in sharing their journey, Santhali women only shared minimal information with the writer possibly because the writer is a Bodo and thus viewed through a critical lens. Similar to the impact Amruta Patil's choice of creating a female sutradhaar in *Adi Parva* has on that epic, Basumatary's choice of exclusive female narratives revealed the

social violence that women suffered. Female activists had left behind their marriages and children to be a part of the movement, but the centre stage was mostly occupied by men, leaving the women activists labeled as social outcastes, spinsters and evil ones for they dared and continued to live outside the institution of marriage. Basumatary's text shows humour and nostalgia: when talking to the women of Bodoland, several respondents recollected the time when they escaped from the violence. In retrospect they found it hard to believe that they walked from dusk to dawn while carrying children and sundry items on their person. In this homosocial feminine space of women's community, mutual support and care for survival was visible and not violence or retaliation, an emotion markedly different from the masculine self-representation of selfhood through aggression whereas the women's stories focus on preserving what's left of the person and community; conflict shifts to the background, and survival takes the fore.

"There is No Place Like Home," a subsection of *Firsthand Exclusion*, contains three stories each addressing a different aspect of the riots in the Bodoland. The first two stories—"The Lonely Courtyard" and "My Name is Jahanara" look at the two sets of violence affected population—the Bodos and the Muslims. "The Lonely Courtyard" is a story of four Bodo women survivors who fled from their homelands, which were burnt down by Santhals, to the neighboring village-Saraipur. For more than two decades, these women have been temporarily living in Saraipur even when the possibility of ever returning to their native village turns bleaker with each passing day. On the other end, "My Name is Jahanara" deals with the more recent 2012 riot where Muslims were targeted by Bodos through the story of one Muslim woman, Jahanara, who escaped her village along with her children. Like the Bodo women, Jahanara finds the return to her village extremely unlikely. While there are ample similarities between the gender roles that women perform during and after riots, there are stark differences between the two crises. Besides the social identity of these women, there

are differences in the sociality of their survival. Sociologist and philosopher, Veena Das argues in *Life and Words* that even though there is a pre-existing normative gender sociality, it is distinct from an "event." Das describes an event as a critical, usually violent moment that immensely disrupts the everyday of the community. Even when there are pre-event social roles that may not surface daily, in the times of a riot, the sociality of the community is likely to change drastically. However, even when the new sociality emerges, it manages to pass over the riot by restoring the everyday as much as it can. The story of Bodo women and Jahanara are testimony to the fact that even when the riots turned their otherwise peaceful life upside down, they pick up all strands and rebuild life no matter how bleak the hope. In "My Name is Jahanara", a distinct tonal difference can be seen from "A Lonely Courtyard." There is a burden of sustaining and justifying citizenship - what is the relationship between people from Bangladesh. The hurt, resentment and repeated betrayal are common themes in this narrative. The perpetrators of violence are usually located outside the community; their actions and intents that affect the fabric and reveal the precarity that is elemental. Refugees are seen as economic parasites. Not only are they seen as occupying the territory that is not theirs, but use others' resources as well.

The opening page of "The Lonely Courtyard" shows an expansive grey colored courtyard with scattered hut settlements and tall palm trees. There are fences around the houses that mark their boundaries. The uncomfortable absence of any living creature visually supports the title that the courtyard is indeed lonely. However, the written word, which breaks the continuity of the landscape, quickly informs that there are busy pigs, hens and cows; these livestock cattle and poultry indicate human presence. It is a hot summer afternoon; most people are inside their houses for a siesta. This silence, Basumatary writes, gives an impression that both the Bodo refugees and the villagers of Saraipur live together peacefully-- "…the bright afternoon sun has driven the inhabitants of these huts indoors

and—in doing so—blurred the lines between what are abandoned homes and what are new settlements." As one continues to read, this misleading calm disrupts to reveal the painful story of living as a refugee. From the bird's eye view of the courtyards, an extradiegetic space, the reader is taken straight into an open space where the woman is pounding rice while her husband sleeps. This sudden close up adds an auditory dimension to the quiet- "…The sound of the wooden pounder in the silence of the afternoon…amplifies the feeling of loneliness that hangs over the colony." The presence of the working woman and the sound of pounder breaks the silence to open up the questions of gender roles and labor. Instinctively, as readers, we are expected to critically look at the gender dynamics - while the man gets to rest, there is no relief from domestic duties for the woman. These gender roles are further complicated when the reader is introduced to the four respondents that Tara Basumatary is in conversation with. By drawing herself among the Bodo women, Basumatary neatly makes herself a part of the narrative, like Joe Sacco in Palestine. She complicates the dichotomous distinction between non-fictional and fictional aspects of the narrative. Her loose hair, eyeglasses and clothes mark her distinct from the Bodo women and yet she sits in their community circle, as if one of them. The sound of the wooden pounder is soon replaced with the chatter of women who have returned from the field— "They are mostly thin and of various ages. They have sunburnt faces, in some this is accompanied by the vestiges of a fairer complexion and a healthier disposition. The women are chirpy and somehow un-tired by the hard labor that the paddy field demands." The women are carrying traces of labor from the paddy fields; their clothes and bodies are covered with residual dry mud. They quickly gather around Basumatary, sit on their low stools, and start sharing their recollections of the riots-- "the women…have someone from the larger world to listen to them, perhaps for the first time in months." The women's cathartic sharing, garnished with laughter and humor, converts the lonely courtyard into a lively female space. Their sisterhood -- "the solidarity of

shared stories" -- is further affirmed through their shared experience of surviving in an entirely new space "…there is a bond, but it is one of agony and loss, fear and dislocation." Through the women's recollections, we revisit the past when they too were well resourced. Birola, one of the four respondents, tells Basumatary, "It is not very comfortable here. The local villagers call us 'relief people' and our homes are called relief camps… they think we are parasites, feeding on their share…we used to be well off in our villages and houses." The foundation of this never-ending rehabilitation process is the difference between the past, when the Bodo families had land, money and houses of their own, and the present, where even their labor and meagre earning is doubted.

Caroll Smith Rosenberg writes that gendered bodies take form and assume meanings with shifting contexts. In case of Bodo women, this argument becomes especially relevant. Until Santhals had burnt down their houses, they were unaware of their "known body's" capacity to run for a whole night without stopping while carrying essential belongings and young children (Smith Rosenberg, 26). In the moments of surviving, they found their indomitable spirit that supported the elderly even when their own children were lost to diseases. Upon finding shelter in Saraipur, where they have lived for over twenty years, the Bodo women have gradually accepted temporariness as the only consistent reality of their lives: "Our homes stand on the land of a person from the village (Saraipur). We do not know how long we will be allowed to live here. We haven't built anything solid. It is not our home, not our land." They cannot risk going back to their homelands for there is always the lurking possibility of another riot. Even within Saraipur, they keep relocating to avoid confrontation with the native villagers who see Bodo settlers as "parasites" on their economy and resources. This hostile treatment furthers the feeling of loss and disdain, "…It is demeaning. We have our own land back in our real villages. Cultivation was so much nicer and better there. We were better off than the Santhalis. Look where we are now, worse than them."

In the second section, Basumatary shifts her attention to a different set of targeted population-- the allegedly illegal Muslim immigrants. Having read about the experiences of the Bodo women, the reader will find many similarities in the way Jahanara copes from violence. However, "My Name is Jahanara" is the story of one woman who narrowly escaped her village and took shelter in another. Having left behind a community, Jahanara leads an isolated life in the new village. The opening page of the story shows Jahanara, a dark-skinned thin woman, holding a child in her arms. Next to her, on a rickety bench, is her husband, Badshah. Badshah's forehead has pronounced wrinkles and his arms are folded; this closed posturing tells the reader that unlike Jahanara, Badshah does not talk to the respondents. Then, there are three kids, each of a different age. Looking at the clothes and the condition of the space, we are instantly made aware of Jahanara's precarious economic situation. Badshah and Jahanara are largely supported by public and private relief efforts. Alongside, Badshah runs his tea shop. Even though this tea shop brings some money that keeps the family barely afloat, it is irregular income. The effect of this financial jeopardy can be seen on the bodies of each person in the frame -- they are all emaciated and distressed. In her conversation with Basumatary, Jahanara recalls the day when thick smoke started rising. While the men of the community were quick to perceive the attack, they asked the women to grab essential items and run away with children. Like the Bodo men we see above, the Muslim men performed the aggressive job of inflicting counter-violence on the Bodos. Jahanara keeps asking Badshah about the smoke until they leave the village but gets no clear answer. The dependence on the man for information highlights Jahanara's precarious personal situation; she relies on him for both the meagre income that he brings, and to gather a fuller sense of violence until he finally explains much later. Jahanara picks up signs when she looks at other people escaping. She realizes that "all the Muslim houses were burnt. The Bodo men came chasing and burning down [their] houses." The chaos of the moment is heightened as

Jahanara talks about all the noise that made her "dizzy"— the children were crying, and the men were attacking. However, she still did not fully understand why there was a riot. Jahanara brings back the image of that huge engulfing fire which caused many people to seek shelter in mosque. Being a symbol of communal faith, the mosque was not targeted, hence, the people managed to escape with little damage to their bodies. Jahanara remembers precise details about the atrocities that she and other women encountered in the relief camp which was set up in a school in Hablapur. Many families halted in Hablapur because it was close to their native village. As in the previous story, Jahanara and her villagers wished to go back to their homelands someday. From the local and political leaders who later went to map out the damage, Jahanara learnt that the houses and mosque, in which she had initially taken shelter, were razed to ground. From a dependent wife, she transformed into an information hunting survivor. Jahanara adds that the relief camps were not made in the school buildings, rather in the open spaces around it. The riot victims were doubly affected because Hablapur falls in a heavy rain zone. The old and the elderly frequently fell sick to water borne infections such as cholera, dysentery and dengue. Being in cramped space, the survivors could not contain the infection; eventually, thousands of them fell ill. The government and Muslim religious groups tried to support the affected, but there were too many mouths to feed. It took more than a year for families like Jahanara's to make house like structures in which they could cover themselves from weather and afford some semblance of privacy.

Smith Rosenberg writes that the bodies of women are like contentious sites on which constantly evolving economic, political, social determinants are laid out (27). For the Bodo women who work in the fields and manage the households, the quantum of labor multiplied once they moved to Saraipur. Unlike their male counterparts, who's only depicted action has been attacking or counterattacking, for these women survivors resistance comes through each act that aims to restore normalcy. Smith Rosenberg further writes that the female bodies, as

sites, are not just marked with suffering but also with protest and resistance. From uninformed, dependent partners, the women in the narratives above learn on their feet. As they run to save their lives, they responsibly manage the lives of children and elderly around them. The women are compelled to re-organize this new life around by using their skill set i.e. domestic labor. Many feminist writings have been critical of domestic labor that deprives women of opportunities to step out of the house and become independent; however, from the stories of riot survivors, we learn how domestic labor offers access to familiar life that eventually offers care to thousands of affected others.

Veena Das, additionally, calls this induction of "everyday" practices resistance. She quotes Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* to argue that the sense of familiarity, in times of crisis, is critical to the shared experience of surviving-- "The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language." (ix). By an unknown language, Das implies the strangeness that unpredicted riots bring in the lives of the affected. However, when the need to survive supersedes the panic and fear of the unknown, the familiar intersects. The familiarity that the women survivors feel through domestic chores helps them appreciate other people's precarity. As mentioned above, the Bodo women recollect how many pregnant women gave births in the relief camps, many lost their newborn to unhygienic, cramped living arrangements. Familiarity with maternal labor and feeling of irreparable loss helps these strangers to come together and reorganize a community of their own. Das further argues that an introspective society is to "know[s] its capacity to inflict suffering upon itself." (xi). Through suffering, then, the society recognizes an individual's experience and helps shape the understanding of the collective. Greater the familiarity with one another, higher is the chance to recuperate through shared thinking and feeling. From the memories of both the Bodo women and Jahanara, we learn that the new, emerging sociality of the relief camps is the consequence of the "conditions of [ranging]

experience". As subjects of the social institutions, these women show the "the limit of the world" that they occupy (4)—they are not merely limited by their experiences of the world, rather, their existence in a world of their own shifts the boundary each time a crisis is injected. Each time they re-familiarize with the body and sociality that they have known; they push the limits of "the carnality of the physical body" and form an expressive vocabulary that emerges from their social encounters.

SECTION III: DEPICTING CASTE

Through this exploration of women's narratives in contemporary historical events, it becomes clear that the version of history presented by different representations is marked extensively by gendering. Likewise, caste marks stories in and of India through both its presence as well as its absence. *Bhimayana* and *The Gardener in the Wasteland*, both published by Navayana, revolve respectively around the lives of anti-caste revolutionaries Bhimrao Ramoji Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule. Created by Durga Bai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, *Bhimayana* represents events in Ambedkar's life - the deprivation in the classroom, being refused haircuts, being denied housing etc. The societal locus of Durga Bai and Subhash Vyam as tribal Gond artists adds to this depiction of Ambedkar. As adivasis, they too have faced systematic othering, such as denial of their status as artists; rather than being referred to as artists, discriminatory terms like craftsmen or tribal artists are attributed to them. Systemic exploitative capitalistic structures force them to produce their art at cheap prices, in stark contrast to the works by urban elites.

Jangarh Singh Shyam's death by suicide in penury in Japan is an example of this phenomenon of exploitation and underpayment simply because tribal artists are always regarded as tribals first and artists only secondarily though Jangarh Singh Shyam took the Pradhan Gond art from the confines of his village to a global level. With the opportunities created by him, Gondi art has found a global appreciation, and works have been exhibited all over the globe – France, Germany, Japan. Despite that, adivasi artists continue to face ill treatment in urban spaces like Delhi, as described in *Finding My Way* by Venkat Raman Singh Shyam. Away from their arts, Venkat tells, he performed many kinds of labour like pulling a rickshaw, drawing the billboards, painting the walls. Such tasks also came his way as opposed to elite artists, because he is a Gond. When we examine the visual exposition and meaning-making in *Bhimayana,* a number of differences from the conventions of graphic

novel making – boxed panels, grids, consistency in the images – come up. In fact, there are curved grids, the background of the panels show local symbols of movement like crop growth even as unique other elements in the text create sub-meanings above what is already revealed.

Two types of speech bubbles are used and these vary based on the words and their impact. The bubble shaped like a bird carries softer, nonviolent, maybe submissive, speeches; they show the interaction with the social superior whose speeches are in the scorpion-tail bubble. Speeches resisting the caste order are also shown in bird bubbles. This distinction immediately reveals the political engagement of the artists; they deem the ignorance about caste hierarchy as apathetic. Their hurtful words are stinging. These bubbles emphasise on the oppressive relationship of the brahminical dictates and the exploitation of the sudras and atisudras.

Suraj Yengde writes on the significance of using the word Dalit: it is a word brimming with emotions that are identified with the right to representation, identity and pride. Dalits have been oppressed for a long time, and the word allows the history of that oppression to be glimpsed in the present where the engines of mythology and mainstream history still elide by not representing or not acknowledging Dalits. This word represents a search for self-reliant existence identity that allows the community to look at themselves both as oppressed and outside the caste order. Yengde shares his position saying that Dalit is more appropriate because it gives identity to the community and its struggle. It acknowledges the age-old conflict against the caste system; the emphasis is on to the deep-rootedness and longevity of the problem. Previously also there have been attempts to replace Dalit with alternatives terms like “vanchit,” “pichda.” While such words immediately imply that a particular community is deprived or backward, they conceal the participation of the caste order that sustains this situation. He even objects to commoner terms like “lower” caste and “upper” caste. These replacements do not establish the conflict; rather put back the castes in their hierarchal order-

upper and lower. They do not convey the relationship between the upper and the lower or the role of the upper castes in maintaining their supremacy over the Dalits. Also, the terms acquire a generic sense where the entire caste system is bracketed into two broad categories such that the participation of Kshatriyas and Vaishyas in supporting the caste system, and maintaining it, is significantly removed. More importantly, Yengde says that terms like Scheduled Caste, lower caste, vanchit are not given by the community to itself. In fact, they are at best workable nomenclatures that exclude Dalits from the process of their own naming, while allowing the Brahminical caste order to rename and re-identify them. Instead, any community should have the agency to decide how it shall be named.

This quest to have the right to name, to see, to recognize and to create is embedded in Bhim's story, which is famous enough that we all know it from history lessons, yet, when seen from the prism of what it means to be "Dalit," attains a personal and direct pedagogical significance as readers start asking how they can stop participating in this violence now, in their own turn. The connection between the right to name oneself and the resources that become available to one can be seen on the pages where Ambedkar is giving a speech at Mahad Satyagraha. The loudspeakers at the event acquire an organic timelessness; they transform into gardening vessels that are pouring water. So, from Ambedkar's podium, the words pass through the grid and sprinkle in different panels. This movement shows the importance of Ambedkar's words in the changing times, across different places. It shows the fertile, coherent link between the years' long violence on Dalits, Ambedkar's life and struggle within the system and the methods for resistance, including the final anti-systemic solution of refusing the religious framework that accepts casteism.

Unlike the common boxed panels, *Bhimayana*'s panels are made in Digna, a symbol taken from Gondi wall paintings. The pages are not divided by straight lines, rather the whole page is an illustration with fenced panels in between. It also breaks away the convention of

keeping the content inside or outside the boxes: both the characters and the system are not contained, which as S. Anand notes, was Durgabai Vyam's decision, made as they were contemplating how to frame the narrative: "we shall not force our characters into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount or work in open spaces. Our art is *khulla* where there's space to breathe" (*Bhimayana,* 100). Yet, as many scholars have noted, this very space, freedom, was what the tribal artists would have been able to imagine in ways that were most often not available to the dalit within the caste system. The adivasi, outside the caste system, still thus has tools with which to express liberty but these very dreams may have been unknowable to Dalit persons – this tension of using adivasi artists to draw a Dalit subject is sometimes productive but sometimes misleading as the extent of imaginative and material oppression can be erased or miscognized. Dalits may not have had access for example to the different materials and images used by the Gond artists because the spaces they occupied were different and thus the technologies, artefacts and art that thus emerge would also be different. Yet the idea that Dalits and adivasis may indeed theorize their oppression together is a valuable one.

Discussions in the narrative can be seen on happening in at least two times: the conversation between the young adults, and the life of young Ambedkar as he shapes into a crusader for Dalit's rights. Both the set of speakers are speaking in the first person, the reader speaks with them. The text, therefore, aims to take the reader inside the text via these young adults, while also making them empathetically connect to Ambedkar's deprecated state. Newspaper reports and cutouts are often placed in the background and outside the panels, these reports act as footnotes to the contemporary caste situation. They place Ambedkar, from a close past, and the young speakers in a context: the oblivious approach to systemic caste violence and lynching, mob attacking, deprivation of resources as practices that are still prevalent. Particularly in the urban areas, there is a repeated narrative that in the current times

there is no caste discrimination. These reports from popular dailies show urban areas as the upcoming breeding grounds for the invisibilisation of the Dalit community and the atrocities afflicted on them. The illustrations across the pages are not consistent as is found in the digitally produced graphic narratives. They vary because they are handmade, and the graphic narrative in not in conventional grid and panel.

The first page of the text shows Jangarh Singh Shyam as "the sky that sheltered us". As also shown in *Finding My Way,* Jangarh is the all caring father figure of the community. His legacy and after life are carried forward by other gond artists. Like Venkat's care giving tree, here also, the body is shown in symbols. It contains all essential elements for survival: land, green pastures, water, sky and animals. In one hand, Jangarh holds the paint brushes which are both his tools to sustaining and weapons to resist. His paintings have taken the adivasi out of the geographical as well as social confines. Through his works, he had presented the Gondi worldview and its firm grounding in surrounding; the animals too in this image symbolize the co-dependent relationship between nature, humans and animals.

Shyam had opened an institute for the promotion of Pradhan Gond art form; several Gondi artists have acquired the skills and found an audience careers through its support (*Bhimayana,* 10). The immediately following page (11) uses the body of a peacock to show the city architecture. There are different floors on the neck of this peacock, which also head out to the balconies from where the birds are peeping. The other end of the page shows a building on top of which there is an overcrowded nest of birds. These two distinct habitations show the kinds of living spaces, spacious and cramped, that cities are made of. One's class significantly determines the kind of housing they can aspire for. The proximity between the two types of housings and the dividing road adds a certain permanence and yet ignorance about the divide. It's almost like the road, caste hierarchies are there to never budge. There is a conversation taking place between two young people. The woman who initiates the

conversation sees the unfairness of caste; the other woman finds caste reservations to be a way of taking away "fair" job opportunities. Through these character speeches, relationships between identities are also developed: gender, caste, class privilege. Women as opposed to men; Caste exploitation as opposed to blindness to privilege. For the person who is caste-blind, anti-reservation, pro-merit, a secure job is far more important: hence she blames reservation; in the process she fails to recognize taking away of the opportunities from Dalits at the starting points of life. This selective reading of merit and reservation make her part of the problem. On the following pages, this dialogue is taken forward to highlight the daily casteist vocabulary and the hierarchies which are part of our daily lives.

The use of pointed fingers emphasise daily incidents that escape the eyes of mainstream media, for example the Khairlanji rape incident. This violence is shown as a callous interaction between the cow-bodied women who could not stand to the brutal force of the tiger, symbolizing men, toxic masculinity and rape as a way of suppressing voices. As opposed to their natural state of being, the tiger attacks these bodies using an axe, making it clear that the violence here is not a "natural" predator/prey dialectic but one where the power and force of the tiger on the cow have been appropriated by the axe-maker. The pointed fingers may also remind one of the signature posture of Ambedkar statues where he stands with one finger pointing upward, and the constitution in the other hand. His slogan "educate, organize and agitate" is a reminder to Dalits to continue to be resilient in their fight against violence despite its daily and all-pervasive nature. The female body, besides Ambedkar's aunt and sister, is shown in mixed shapes like a handpump. This creates a link between the feminine and water as an element of nature: all flowing, renewing and generating. Masculine narratives and/or men appear as fishes or anthropomorphic fish. The range of this image can be seen in Ambedkar's famished body who was deprived of water, and his father's anthropomorphic fish body- there are human legs attached to the torso of the fish- where he

makes a tank in the village to deal with the water crises (25). This correlative image of fish and water shows the presence of humans in the elements of nature. However, this image also shows human's engagement with elements of nature. The interaction between fishes also shows how some powerful ones dominate and deprive smaller fishes in the same water. Background space is filled using elements of everyday life. The idea of canvas functions in two ways: one, background on which the panels have been drawn, the segregated panels are tied together using the background that bleeds from one panel to another, and two, through characters' faces and bodies; for example, Ambedkar's face is covered with tightly scattered mustard seeds. He becomes a culturally signifying symbol showing how intimately and universally, like the humble mustard seed, his thoughts permeate the land, the lives of Dalits and even Adivasis.

Often there are big silhouettes of birds and animals that are superimposed on the background to give a second layer of meaning. For example, a dancing peacock when Ambedkar visits Chalisgaon. This background image shows the happiness of the common people upon finding a leader like Ambedkar. As the peacock is dancing in rain, these common people have both a sense of relief and joy. The use of newspaper reports and photos, Marianne Hirsch writes in "family pictures," creates a space for private narratives within a larger public discourse. Similarly, here, newspaper reports bring out the violence from "small", lesser-known places. For an urban audience these places might not be known as well. By linking a larger narrative of invisible violence with Ambedkar's life, a parallel between daily violence on Dalit individuals and the community are built. Similarly, the readers are expected to introspect on how the particular violence perpetuates itself. These news reports also focus on different ways in which the culture of violence breeds itself: question of access, or representation or expression of one's identity or choice of marital partner.

Similar to *Bhimayana,* A *Gardener in the Wasteland* also shows two sets of parallel conversations. Here, two researchers, Vidya and Aparajita, who are also the storytellers and illustrators of this text, are making a graphic novel on Jyotiba and Savitri Phule. As part of their research, they visit several libraries and read multiple books and through this process, the caste-privileged upbringing of the writers becomes part of their critical conversation. Recalling the stories that she read in her childhood, Vidya realises that they were all about upper caste men and women, including for celebration days like Teacher's Day, a hegemonised celebration that has obliterated the contribution of Savitribai Phule in the emancipation of sudras from both caste and gender-based violence. Through Vidya's research, the lives, works and achievements of the Phules are discussed, including Savitri leading the Truth-seeker's Society (Satyashodhak Samaj) or her contribution to Jyotiba's *Gulamgiri.* It dawns on them that despite the historic contributions of Phules, there is very little written about them, and even lesser about Savitribai Phule, the double-edged sword that Savitribai was dealt, being born both woman and Dalit. At several places in the book, there are vast open panels that extend to double pages: the distance between the images gives an illusion of panels, but the explosive nature of the Phule's anti-caste critiques is signaled by the inability of panels to confine them.

Likewise, time travel is suggested through critical arguments that reveal the nature of casteism travelling from then to the present without boundary. Meanings are also added as pages are turned, as for instance, Savitri's poster-like image bears a stop sign which suggests danger, depicting Savitri as a "dangerous" woman while also showing multiple ways in which she was in danger through her disadvantaged position in terms of caste and gender, which prevented her from educating herself and others of her caste. Page18-19 for example show a panel spread across two pages, taking this image and its tearing apart, emphasizing on her tenacity and grit to educate herself. The turning of the page here shows the movement of

time and effort required. Within the panels also there is a movement that shows the immensity of the effort; Savitri Bai uses her nose, also a common metaphor for pride, to break the sign put on her, and she finally breaks through, her stretched arm and the fist showing her resistance and protest against the caste and gender discrimination. Like the newspaper reports in *Bhimayana,* here books are repeatedly shown as a source for education and thinking about an alternative order. Page 18-19 show Jyotiba Phule's rigorous engagement with Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man.* Jyotiba's mental engagement with Paine is shown as a conversation he is having, with Paine coming out of the book and standing before him, materializing Jyotiba's understanding of despotism and heredity seen in the context of the caste order. Paine quotes the French National Assembly's Declaration: "Men are born, and always continue, free and equal in respect of their rights." Phule uses this statement to see the contradiction – in relation to the upper caste Hindus, Sudras and Atisudras are born unequal and generation after generation this inequality is maintained. This sequence of unpanelled action between Paine and Phule helps to look at the longevity and interrelatedness between oppressions – racism, slave trading, feudalism; the similarity of the struggle helps to envisage ways of resistance and to build the imagination of the future.

At the same time, there are conversations about other narratives that are both popular and made for mass reading like *Amar Chitra Katha*. ACK mostly presents the characters that are from the upper caste, showing them as the carriers of Indian heritage but across the panels there are nameless people who are serving in court for example who despite their repeated appearances receive no subjectivity or interiority, appearing instead only as props that enhance the royal image. The demons and rakshas were shown in dung green colour, marking them out: "… remember how women are impossibly curvy? And the good guys were always fair and the baddies, the Rakshasas, were always dung green?" as the two writers notice, in a discussion in this book (30).

As opposed to *Bhimayana*, which is entirely made in a multi-coloured template, *Gardener in the Wasteland* is made in grey scale. Distinct from Digna way of paneling and overlapping backgrounds, *Gardener* has no clear grids drawn, yet there is a sense of panelling. To trace the history of casteism, the *Manusmriti*, a scripture written in 1-2 BCE, is discussed. Before the *Manusmriti*, labour and identity within the caste system were not stratified, movement between the castes can be seen in *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* whereas after it, stratification is codified and maintained through rules about birth, occupation, marriage, interactions between the castes. *Gardener in the Wasteland* presents a visual interpretation of *Manusmriti*, showing the inhuman punishments that have been prescribed for the lower castes, their reduction to mere laboring bodies, costumed as identifiable labourers who are found in different roles in one's vicinity their clothes signaling the work they are forced to do even today. Floating across the single panel on the page, there are Sanskrit verses that are shown passing from the ears of one sudra to another. These mantras are justifications for the brahminical order; also, various punishments that are prescribed for the lower caste should they transgress their caste are drawn – pouring of hot wax in the ears, chopping off of the tongue.

In the pages following, Jyotiba discusses the Hindu myth of the caste order with his friend Dodiba. Savitribai invites the readers to be a part of this conversation; she looks at them while Jyotiba makes tea for Dodiba (31). From the following pages, entire pages are painted black and the reference to myths is drawn out in white. This immediate colour contrast reveals Jyotiba's assertion about the contradictions within the scriptures, and violence being the undertone across. He illustrates the example of Bali, a just king, who was tested by the dwarf Brahmin, Vamana. Vamana asks for three places to step, to claim his dakshina. The just ruler first offers the earth; Jyotiba shudders that the thought of the number of villages, forests and fauna that would have been crushed under Vamana's first step. The

trees in this part of the page are “squished” under the pressure of the step, and a Nike shoe depicts the capitalist element of caste order continuing today (56). For promoting their own caste, the brahmans have repeatedly crushed Sudras and discounted their labour. Similarly, when Vamana would have put the whole sky under his foot, “how many stars would have collided, and crushed to dust on ground?” Finally, as Bali offered his head where Vaman could have rested his third foot, Bali is shown getting crushed under the giant foot. Jyotiba also shares the contradictions in another creation myths – emergence of varnas from Brahma’s body. Because birthing is exclusive to female body, did Brahma, the god, also menstruate? Imagining Brahma with vaginas, Jyotiba asks why Brahma did not receive the same discriminatory treatment that is prescribed for menstruating women. Why was he not been secluded and considered dirty when he bled? Such gaps between real life and the mythological narratives gradually start surfacing as the god is an upper caste man, and the suffering subjects are lower caste, women. Phule’s articulation of the caste creation myth opens the debate about division of labour. Brahma now is the god made by the upper caste for their own convenience. A four-level structure shows the number of people who occupy different castes (72). The top level, Brahmins, is the lowest in number and yet their position is maintained on the labour of the fourth level. Variations across castes are emphasized using - clothing, body shapes, and cramped placement of the bodies. The Brahmins sit on the top level with their mythological texts, using them they are also denigrating of all the castes under them. Next level is that of Kshatriyas who have worn their swords and shields. They also bear crowns which links them to the power of rule. Similarly, Vaishyas are shown with balances and diaries to maintain financial records. This whole structure is pulled by a different caste, clearly, that are at a level lower than Sudras. There are people standing on the fringes, looking at this structure; some are by-standers and some are responding.

Jyotiba rationally examines the mythical depiction and posits that these myths are in fact a symbolic depiction of the clash between the invading Aryans and the natives of the land, an idea that Ambedkarite views don't favour. Various avatars of Vishnu are critiqued: assuming that Vishnu had a human body, as shown across the mythological narratives, hybrids between the species does not seem possible at the time the myths were written. So, there are symbolic interpretations of the avtars in which Vishnu appeared. For example, talking about Matsya Avatar (37), Phule tells both the readers and Dodiba that this avatar shows the invading route of the Aryans through water. Just as this invasion is normalised, Phule questions the normalization of violence within the scriptures, as seen in the case of Vamana. This interaction glorifies the might of Vaman while downsizing the immense magnitude of violence that would have taken place. Cumulatively the analysis of myths like these suggests ways to rethink dominant cultural value systems, to choose means that are more non-violent and inclusive.

Taking these myths literally on the other hand allows violence. A typical narrative is the that of Bhrigu rishi, whose spiteful angry face here is shown to be kicking a resting Vishnu on his chest. Rather than penalizing Bhrigu, Vishnu massages his foot that would have gotten hurt, and the text shows a stout priest using this image to explain why Sudras should not react to the violence: "When Lord Vishnu himself could suffer a kick so patiently, why should the sudras complain about the kicks, blows and murderous assaults of the brahmans?" (59) Phule argues that as opposed to the logic and rationality of unpacking these stories, those in hegemonical positions have literalized the myths beyond the texts. Casteism, therefore, becomes the prime example of "the myth living its life" (*Breaking the Bow)*. With the help of reservations, Dalits have managed to enter mainstream education creating a place from where to break these literalized myths down, to create other narratives that will help us visualize equality and freedom from oppression for all.

Savitribai tells the readers that after her marriage with Jyotiba, she learnt that at some point in his youth he was inclined to join the cause of nationalism with hindu zealots, using Hinduism as a basis of self-rule (86). Young Jyotiba is shown learning martial skills to equip himself as an anti-British revolutionary. Around this time, he was cornered by the participants in a wedding procession of a Brahmin friend because he belonged to the mali caste (86): this incident became the turning point for him as Hinduism had different access points for different castes. Similarities across varying forms of violence is shown through a two page image with many flag bearers who have fought for the cause of equal and dignified living: Martin Luther, Nelson Mandela, Bhagat Singh, Irom Sharmila. While there may be socio-politico differences between resistances, the demand for liberty, equality and fraternity unites them. Following this, the text shares speeches of a few of these leaders: Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Particularly linking with racism, the text shows the ways of oppression that have sustained across time and geographical spaces (13).

The readers are taken back in to recent history (1957) when black students were denied entry to schools. This immediately connects with the denial of education to Sudras, and the significance of education as the primary tool for emancipation. Even within education, it becomes clearer that despite the reformatory element of education, the power of providing the content is in the hands of the powerful. Education therefore, can become a misleading endeavor that creates false ideas of identity and community. Even after a certain reform is imagined, for example reservation, the result might be slow to show the impact; today for example, Dalits face backlash for allegedly taking away opportunity from the meritorious classes. Similarly, Jyotiba's realization about similarity between the caste system and slavery by Americans and Europeans show the power structures within education: "god gave freedom to all the people including the Sudra and Atisudra" (22). The making of power structures however determines who can access resources and opportunities. We see Savitribai changing

her saree just before she enters the class, and the saree she wears outside the classroom bears marks of attacks on her because of her caste (14). On her way to the school, Savitri waves greetings towards Major Candy, a British official. Candy waves back; however, next to Candy are the Brahmins, looking at him angrily for his fraternity with someone who is a caste inferior to them: Candy is shaking the caste order by by bringing books for Savitri. This image also highlights the relationship between the British and the caste-oppressed. Denied the right to a living by the caste Hindus, Dalits found support in the British's approach towards education. But "strange fruits" hang from a tree (25), as in Billie Holiday's song about lynching and hanging of the black bodies next to magnolias to create a public spectacle and deterrent for transgressing blacks. This powerful image reveals the false sense of harmony in a place where there is no dignity in death also, crows pluck these bodies. "Southern Trees bear strange fruits, blood on leaves and blood at the root…" Similarly, the Phules are fighting fruits like slavery and oppression. Savitribai and Jyotiba are running towards this tree while risking their lives. Such a tree regrows the fruits of prejudices, oppression and violence. It is like a "weed" that needs to be dug up (27).

A variety of media to show the movement between past and present (12): For example, Vidya and Natrajan use mobile phones to create notes and communicate. As opposed to Savitri's study (16), there are computers that are ready sources of information. Vidya, one of the two narrators, learns much about Phules using her computer. Similarly, there is a poster to communicate to the masses that Savitri Bai has transgressed the caste order by spreading education to girls of Sudra and atisudra. This poster is pegged on the tree barks and walls by the Brahmins. This shows the occupation of the public spaces by the upper caste that not only deprived the sudras' immediate mobility and access, but in this case, these spaces are used to spread hate and threaten dalits. Previously, the upper castes men are throwing stones to physically hurt her, and break her determination (12). This interplay of majority attacking the

minority extends to Phule's intersectional identity as a Dalit woman. As a woman she becomes an easy target for humiliating Jyotiba, his family and the community. The deep-rooted sexism can be seen in the suggestions like locating women in the kitchen, as opposed to teaching in schools. Her transgression to public space relegates her status to that of a "slut', whose body is available for consumption and damage. The indoctrination of caste order becomes clearer as Govindrao, father of Jyotiba Phule, is threatened. He is demanded to let go of all the sudra students and girls in the classroom. This interaction shows the self-claimed generosity of the Brahmins in giving education to the Phules: in hindsight, they believe that both Jyotiba and Savitri Bai should not have been educated. Govindrao is threatened with violence should the status quo not be restored and he is forced to give in, sending his son away (15). Unlike his son, Govindrao has internalized the role of his community as the "cultivators of earth" (16), materially working with soil and not with knowledge. This gap between the imagination of selves within and beyind the caste order leads to Jyotiba leaving his father's house and pursuing his life-work in some other area.

In their depiction of caste-based violence directly, through creative biographies of famous figures like Ambedkar and Phule, these graphic novels use the non-fiction format creatively, playing with panel, lines, colour and art, explosively creating new ways of recording history. However, the circulation of books such as these may be too limited if their costs are prohibitively high, as well as if writing dominates the page despite the art; as such, a format wherein it is possible to enable discussions about caste and caste-based violence and oppression has to take into account the pedagogical: who is the book intended for? Is it for the already educated upper-caste reader, or is it meant to be for younger readers who do not know much about caste due to their protected upbringings? These become salient questions.

SECTION IV: REINVENTING MYTHOLOGY IN GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

The Indian storytelling tradition, as Wendy Doniger describes in *On Hinduism* is "fluid". The conventional notions associated with the written and the oral forms do not apply easily to Indian storytelling, Doniger states (510). Both the forms use fluidity and fixity, therefore the form does not become a way of ensuring the finality of the text. Classics like the *Rig Veda* were preserved for over 2000 years as oral narrative handed down from one generation of Brahmins to next, with no shifts in the content of the narrative. Even today, despite its availability in the written form, very little has been altered; this too possibly has happened because of the translations from Sanskrit to other languages. On the other hand, *Mahabharata* has existed in the written form; however, this cannot be said about all the versions in which it co-exists. For instance, while Ved Vyas' version has several sub-versions to itself – Krishna Murari Ganguli and C. Rajgopalachari being the popular ones, there are several oral traditions that are in the process of conversion to the written from oral or have been converted recently, like *Pandu ka Kada, Pabuji ki Pad, Legend of Ponnivala, Bharath: The Epic of Dungri Bhils.* These folk epics are not just versions of *Mahabharata*, but also simultaneously contain within them episodes from other works like the *Ramayana, Puranas, Upanishads,* while emphasizing on the worldview of the immediate communities they emerge from. Doniger compares these oral forms with the written on the broad basis of fluidity and meaning-addition. The oral form is similar to the addition of beads within a necklace, the form and the appearance of the necklace keeps changing as inputs are made. At the same time, the speaker of the tale, the author, has the power to alter the location and necessity of the beads based on the preference of the audience or shifting circumstances. Meanwhile, the written form is like adding threads to a structured scroll; these threads reshape the text, while also maintaining the primacy of the fixed text. These threads also emphasise on the location

of the reader, as they take the role of the author, to create changes. The moving away/coming together retelling is seen in juxtaposition to the pre-established text. Both change the way a text operates, the audience reached out to and the meanings that are processed. Besides the written version of the epics, these tales have also existed in the visual form as seen in the folk-art traditions like Madhubani, Patua, Phad Katha etc where expression is shaped by oral as well as visual. The audience participates not only at the listening level, but also with the visuality.

The *Mahabharata* and many versions of *Ramayana* do not express caste system as a structure; relationships across castes are developed to produce "mixed castes" and spaces for thought are opened by creating complex characters like Vyasa, Satyawati, Ganga, Shakuntala, Vidur, Eklavya, Karna, Draupadi, Hidimba, Ulupi. However, these texts do not entirely hew away from social stratification, as evident when for example one looks at Eklavya's experience with Drona. At the same time, there are symbolic references to other communities. Sharmila Rege writes in *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender* that Hindu epics cannot be categorically called brahminical for the structure is floating, based on the camaraderie shared between Brahmins and the warriors, but however, they are not abrahminical texts as well as they do keep away characters from margins, depicting lower castes as dependent and rebellious, trying to break the "order" for example. Importantly, violence is persistently inflicted on these lower orders, as seen during the making of Indraprastha, Lakshagraha, etc, and none of this violence is deemed as wrong but instead are seen as elemental to establishing civilization. Doniger notes that the othered castes are often named as dogs, dog-cookers, and dog-eaters, using associations of dogs with impurity, ritual pollution and aggression to colour non-animal people-groups (On Hinduism, 488).

Many contemporary writings, including graphic novels, working with the materials supplied by ancient myths and mythical characters fail to bring together intersectional

identities for these characters who remain static in their caste or gender identities as expressed in the past but without any new critical additions that permit insight. A case in point is how the Pandavas are often drawn in graphic art – as the image for Kshatriyas of course but always as tall, broad, and fair-skinned, thus forcing masculinity into a standard and stereotyped template that remains sometimes an unthinking reproduction of the visual content that has been supplied for a long time, as we see in recent graphic novels like *Vyasa: The Beginning* by Shibaji Bandyopadhyay. Compared to the main protagonists like the Kauravas and Pandavas, and their female consorts, there are very few representations of characters who belong in between, like Ghatokacha, Hidimbi, Ulupi, etc, just as there is very little academic engagement with the immense scholarship that has illuminated and given us new perspectives into these epic texts; there are exceptions: Amruta Patil's work draws on immense research and thus will stand the test of time, but overall, superficial understandings and mainstream interpretations are uncritically reproduced.

Graphic novels as a genre, and texts like *Adi Parva*, *Legend of Ponnivala*, *Vyasa*, *Ravanayan* also cater to an economically privileged audience; their high price range is one of the major reasons that graphic novels have a niche market. The question before the reader is why to spend that kind of money on the graphic novel, when they can get more books for less money. In a talk at Delhi Comic Art Festival 2017, Amruta Patil explained *Adi Parva* as a text that takes the characters through the forests. Forests are transformatory spaces; once inside the forest, the essence of a character no longer remains the same. However, spaces like forests are neither equally accessible nor similarly transformative for those from the bottom end of the caste stratification pyramid – the contextual factors that must be understood before genuine engagement with these hoary old texts is scarcely in evidence in many mythological retellings, thus preventing any genuine and deep love for *aranyani* the ancient forest culture, from emerging even as these works claim to study "culture".

The recent traditions have seen a coming together of lesser-known versions and depictions of the classics. In contemporary graphic narratives such as *Sita's Ramayana, Sita: Daughter of the Earth, Adi Parva, Sauptik, Amar Chitra Katha* and *Ravanayan* there is a fusion of the popular with the lesser-known. These tellings are often interacting amongst themselves and finding newer audience, such as Vivalok Comics that came up in response to *Amar Chitra Katha*'s lack of representation for different social groups, but they could not survive the market competition where ACK was already an established name. Tales like the 10-chapter series *Ravanayan* function at humanizing Ravana drawing on his life story and the destiny that he chooses for himself. Similarly, *Sita: Daughter of the Earth, Adi Parva, Sauptik* aim at seeing the shifts in the narrative as the sutradhar of the tale is changed to a woman. Folk art forms have also reappeared in the urban spaces with *Sita's Ramayana.* The present section aims at studying these mythology-based graphic writings through how they visualize the content of past for the present day.

LEGEND OF PONNIVALA

The *Legend of Ponnivala* (2008) is a medieval Tamil legend that has entered mass media as a children's animation series as well as graphic novel, finding a readership both in the US and India across several age groups. In this section, we examine the implications of a text leaving the local legend space to take its place in another public culture, one mediated by technology, disciplines like anthropology and techniques like translation. Recovered by Brenda Beck during her stay as an anthropological scholar in Tamil Nadu where she taped oral narrations as a listener in the 1960s, this legend is often not well known to native Tamilians but is today, due to her work in disseminating it, accessible to people the world over in written, film as

well as graphic novel formats. As a folk epic, Ponnivala tells of a mythic past where divine intervention in human affairs was normal, and where recognizable historical facts and artefacts are also visible, such as the cultivation of particular parts of the Deccan plateau, the displacement of artisans by farmers in some regions, religious traditions, etc. The legend as it survives now is part of oral folk traditions which the animated and comic book Legend of Ponnivala now gives a new life to and takes to new demographics. Storytelling traditions all over the subcontinent both appropriate from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as well as provide materials that enter these epics, through a process of cross-fertilization over retellings and renarrativizations. These conversations take place over centuries and it is interesting to observe how tropes change over time or are emphasized or minimized over time. In the Legend of Ponnivala, we have an extraordinary narrative of the relationship between a land and its people and the relationship is mediated by powerful, beloved female figures whose power and glory is truly memorable, yet not very well known beyond the immediate oral narratival framework till these comic books and animation films became available (primarily in the west and as digital books).

The tussle between female agency and what may be thought of as the ideal woman can be seen in the narrative, just as the changing relationship between the land and the tiller, between creatures and human beings, suggesting that what we take to be the hegemonic anthropocentric world we live in is itself tentative and mutable. The folk epic talks about the lives of farmers, their connection to the land, to local deification rituals, land struggles, divine intervention and the like; how can we make sense of sthese themes both in our present and when transplanted into another context altogether? These questions are considered through the female characters whose narratives are both marked by violence as well as stage successful resistance to different forms of suffering, to see how these narratives can impact the next generation of readers, this time children.

Ponnivala begins with the great goddess Parvati sitting with the volatile Shiva, taking a motherly look at earth. Though the land is a forested one, Parvati is deeply saddened to see its barrenness in terms of human population and its lack of agriculture; immediately it is evident that the goddess iconography here is in service of the project of "culture" and "civilization" as against the adivasi who lives off the "barrenness". Brenda Beck in a series of blogs contextualizes this "unseeing" of the goddess, who thinks the place barren but clearly it is neither barren of animal nor plant life, nor even of human culture, in the form of the artisan communities the later farmers will displace. When critically viewed, the accompanying images of lush greenness, with deer browsing, make us think what "barren" could mean, allowing for a space from which to gain perspective on Parvati's musings. It turns out she wants to populate the area with nine farmer men and so she does; here however, the text does not provide that much room for us to take note of what seems to be an act of parthenogenetic creation by Parvati, albeit in conversation with Shiva. Nine men immediately land on earth near a shrine to Ganapati in the forest and they work hard on the land, as directed. Next, again equally parthenogenetically, the goddess creates nine women, this time, as spouses for the nine men. This panel shows the goddess, clad like any subcontinental woman in a sari, but larger and taller than the other women, blessing them; in this sequence, Shiva is not present and the goddess isn't shown to be consulting him.

This awe-inducing sequence is a striking and extraordinary one for its speed – Parvati moves very rapidly from thought to making men to providing wives for men, handling creation seemingly autonomously – as well as for the agency Parvati has as a goddess. This sequence ends with men and women marrying one another, and here too the women are shown placing garlands on the men's necks, indicating that they take or can take initiative with regards to marriage and relationships. At a later point, Kunnutaiyya, now an orphaned boy, himself starved and abused by the greed and violence of several villagers, doubts the

character of a man who has taken him under his protection when he sees him strike his own mother for disobeying his orders with regards to this boy. The boy himself has just been beaten by that woman and denied food, yet, instead of exulting, the boy runs away from the house thinking what if that man next abuses me as he abuses his own mother. Brenda Beck writes in “Goddesses who Dwell on Earth” that during the process of storytelling, the idea behind creating a rhythm and giving many visual descriptions is to create a "mental image". The prolongation and interconnections between these images help the storyteller successfully narrate the tale; this elaboration becomes in turn a ratification of the social context, now confirmed as visual representation through the use of mimetic conventions. The complex interplay of words with text is able to generate critical thinking spaces that allow us to claim an epic text as readers who are critical rather than unthinkingly celebratory; we thus are allowed to enter the text as also tellers of the tale, noticing for example that during a drought, it is a fox who rues the lack of water because not even a mouse is to be found on dried out lands, or likewise, when the men and women of a village gather to hear the bard sing the legend of ponnivala, a dog also is seated with them, indicating that animals do live with us and among us and are part of our stories as much as we are part of theirs.

The legend of Ponnivala as an oral tale no doubt has many iterations that vary from singer to singer wherein any of the above tales may be given space or given less space, but in the visualized graphic narrative text, these elements of who human beings are as a people – gendered, human but in relationships with the land and animals, located in place, affective – are distinctive choices that permit (eco-)feminist thinking. At the same time, the same mimetic realist convention stabilizes heterosexuality, heteronormativity and able-ist framings of personhood, through the trials that several characters, particularly women go through which must be unpacked and re-examined as well.

In the first generation of characters in the tale, drought leads to the nine farmer brothers led by eldest, Kolatta, having to seek the help of the Chola king, who gives them the stretch of land called "ponnivala," where their arrival ousts previous generations of artisans from the land, making the latter vassals of Kolatta, who is refered to thereafter as "king". In the next turn of events, the Chola king himself is affected by a drought to the extent that he himself cannot manage any more to feed his beloved cattle, who are turned loose with a message attached to each, asking those who find them to feed them.

The twelve cows, again poignantly seeming to work as a team of friends, find Kolatta's field and eat his sugarcane under cover of dark, knowing, again darkly, that the farmer was likely to beat them if he found them eating off his field during the day, when they were likely to be caught. Having sated themselves, they return the next night only to die trying to jump the spiked fence posts that Kolatta has got erected the very next day. Incidentally, the spiked fence is created by the very artisans whose land was seized when Kolatta and his brothers settled here by order of the Chola King.

The death of the cows is recognized as murder, not mere accidental deaths, and fate and Lord Shiva decide that Kolatta's family deserve no offspring for seven generations. Interestingly, when the artisasns who possessed the land earlier were displaced, it was Lord Vishnu who ensured that the ordeal set up for deciding who the land should go to was lost by the artisans; here Lord Shiva's deciding against Kolatta levels the odds somewhat, showing the gods to be neither final nor fair. Parvati's intentions for the clan of course are also upset here, but she is not shown to feature in this decision at all; instead, Vishnu and Shiva, depicted as brothers-in-law in a relationship of mutal competitiveness, make a decision in her absence based on the distressing evil done to the benign cows. The narrative gives voice to the cows: we hear them speak to one another, we see them choose as we do, they are hungry as other human characters are; again the visualization of the animal thus as a participant

whose slaughter and abuse is part and parcel of a culture of systemic violence and abuse is an important message driven home when one pauses to look. In a contemporary context where cow slaughter has attained other political valences, the fine balance embodied in the narrative is important: Shiva, up in heaven, punishes Kolatta; no mortal, even the Chola king takes it into his head to lynch another on this count, indicating that only the long moral arc will correct this violence. Yet, the curse is indeed feminized, though the offender is the male Kolatta, the curse is that no children will be born to the wombs of the women. At this point, a critical pedagogy becomes necessary: why was an appropriately masculine punishment not devised: after all the craftsmen who did not ask why such a cruel fence was required were men, as was the farmer-king who commissioned that cruel fence. Where no women are present why does the curse of barrenness, contextually recognizable as falling more upon women's lives and subjectivities in most societies, become the acceptable mode of "justice"?

Yet, the curse is indeed feminized, though the offender is the male Kolatta, the curse is that no children will be born to the wombs of the women. At this point, a critical pedagogy becomes necessary: why was an appropriately masculine punishment not devised: after all the craftsmen who did not ask why such a cruel fence was required were men, as was the farmer-king who commissioned that cruel fence. Where no women are present why does the curse of barrenness, contextually recognizable as falling more upon women's lives and subjectivities in most societies, become the acceptable mode of "justice"? This impact on women, on punishments and penance absorbed by women in the name of wanting offspring is emphatically normative; yet the text presents the woman herself as seeking these children, rather than her spouse as castigating her. The text presents the hatred of the childless woman as rooted in others rather than the husband, but the oppressiveness of being childless is experienced as a terrible suffering by the woman, who in turn suffers more humiliation to try to change her lot.

The text presents the woman, Tamarai, as undergoing penance for twenty one years, after first being humiliated by her own natal family. Having been beaten and abused, Tamarai curses her brothers' children with death; later a Brahmin priest has her revive them but offers two girl children as hostages Tamarai can keep, to be married to her own sons in the future, whenever she has them. Till that time, these two girls are transformed into stone, kept in suspended animation as it were: again the cruelty of what happens to women is striking, and shows that patriarchal violence can be carried out by nearly anyone, gender no bar. This violence continues when the sons are born and marry these two girls, refuse to consummate the marriage but keep the girls locked up in an isolated place. Their story ends when their sister in law torches their abode in her anger that these girls wouldn't attend her brothers' funerals. These two young women, forgotten or voiceless through the narrative are the perfect victims as it were, with no one to speak for them, and whose presence ratifies the idea that violence may be done to women if after all no one speaks for them.

That these girls are biological relatives of Tamarai and are culturally thought of as ideal spouses for her sons only makes the claims of family seem more fearsome. Tamarai is unwilling to adopt children from her husband's cousins' families, having inherited hatred of them after hearing stories from him of how much they abused him; this resistance to adoption again becomes a way of normativizing biological children, strange also because in the previous generation, Kunuttaiya himself was an infant found under rocks and adopted by his parents and Tamarai was a child found inside a lotus and taken in by her parents because her mother desperately desired a girl after several male children. While desire can take many shapes, the fulcrum of the narrative is Tamarai's desire to be fertile, to give birth to children, and in the process of furthering this goal, to bring fertility to other creatures cursed perhaps by their proximity to her marital family. In the narrative, we see her talk to several such creatures, all of whom ask her to bring offspring for them when they learn she is going on a

pilgrimage. During this pilgrimage too, Tamarai's energy and initiative keeps Kunutaiyya alive; at one point she also carries him on her back because he is too emaciated to walk any further while she does not appear to be at all run down. The drive thus to be a mother makes a terrible force out of Tamarai and she prevails, successfully winning a boon from Shiva for two male children, who however will die when they attain age sixteen, and one daughter. When the children are actually born, Lord Vishnu is forced to hide the male children for fear that jealous relatives will destroy them and thus the mother sees only the girl, whereupon she is bitterly disappointed, once again underlining son-preference as a cultural goal. The narrative correct this by showing how happy she and Kunutaiyya are with the little girl: the father in fact says that child is more than enough for him, again allowing the comic book's narrative to step back from an overpowering alignment with son-preference after several sequences dedicated to biological motherhood. Kunutaiyya in his child was fortuitously fed by the milk of a dedicated cow who neglected her own calf to instead stand atop a crack through which her milk could nuture the babe hidden several layers below rocks by Lord Shiva who did not want to let Kolatta have easy offspring. Yet these histories seem to be forgotten in Tamarai's passionate urge to create children from her own womb; her single-mindedness and intensity could even be described as heroic, excepting that they describe the pursuit of motherhood, which is hardly thought of as heroic, but perhaps it should be where it becomes a measure of her will rather than a measure of her desperation to fit in with society, though the two things become indistinguishable over the narrative's flow. However, the violence inflicted on Tamarai all along the journey is for no act of her own: after all, she was not cursed for her own deeds, thus suggesting that after all feminine characters have little agency.

Discussing heroism, Stuart Blackburn suggests in "Death and Deification" that heroism is deemed valuable only if it is earned after many rounds of painful, torturous

penance. It is the pain which shows the honest yearning for a desire, and how much effort one is ready to put in so that their desire is met. Tamarai now undergoes twenty one years of penance, which she embarks on with Kunnutaiya, who is too tired to carry on. Tamarai carries him on her back as she climbs the Kailasa—a very poignant image of her being burdened by social pressure to reproduce and— the rigour of this massive journey undertakes in an attempt to become socially complete. As part of her trial, she has to stand on one foot, her body covered in ash; her agonising penance sees immense cruelty from Shiva including cutting her body in many pieces and making his subordinates trample on them, making us wonder why the gods take part at all in this ultimately degrading and humiliating journey for women. Meanwhile, Vishnu helps Tamarai come back to life again and again, suggesting that Shiva is not the final word. Shankar, Ponnar and Tangal respectively are raised as royal offspring but Beck discusses how Tangal was already a disadvantaged child when compared with Shankar and Ponnar. Right at the time of her birth, she is seen as less than half boon received. So, her acceptance is that of a compromise, a reminder for several years that despite the rigorous penance, they are still heirless. When the boys are returned, we further find that while Tangal has been given a house diet, the boys have been given a "special diet" – elephant and lion milk, care and training by Celatta so that they are prepared to fight their enemies in the future. Meanwhile, Tangal has shifted from her cradle to a swing, and has a dog for company. She has not been given any special training such that she can fend for herself in any way. Therefore, this image of a swing completely moves in sync with her infantilized image, as it did with her mother Tamarai, with her desires being met by male elders.

However, Tangal has the gift of seeing visions, including visions that help save her brothers' lives, though they do die when a wild boar who was sworn to kill them arrives, and she does not seem to do anything to stop that. Tangal's special powers continue after their

deaths as well and in the end she ascends to Lord Shiva's abode in a special vehicle, and is perhaps the only character who goes there without having first died, besides her mother who did some part of her penance there before she received the boon with which she conceived children, including Tangal.

Tangal's forest counterpart, Veeratangal, like her is another single woman, a virgin/maiden with fire in her breast (Tangal literally was blessed with a fireball in her breast and can cook things just by holding them), and her special friend is the wild boar, just as Tangal's special animal friend is the dog Ponnacchi. Both women thus befriend animals thought of as "dirty" whose love and care for them, as well as their ability to function as alter egos for these women must be discussed. Ponnacchi travels all over the place where Tangal physically is always within the palace though with the help of her visions she traverses time and space. Ponnacchi is able to show anger at not being allowed on the field of battle, symbolizing perhaps what Tangal feels as a woman of her community, regarded as subordinate or secondary; Veeratangal however organizes and collects her community, who not only listen to her but feel protected by her wisdom. The conflict between the hunters, the community that Veeratangal belongs to, versus the farmers, Tangal's group, suggests that the spaces available for women to lead shrink as a community becomes more settled and leaves its forest roots and antecedents.

Veeratangal, who occupies a tiny space in the narrative, also appears less damaged by isolation, and more capable of performing nurturing yet noble acts consistently unlike Tangal who attacks her sisters-in-law for example, reducing them to skeletal remains with her fireball for nothing more than lack of fervor for husbands who ignored them. Veeratangal – brave sister – however is not the protagonist of the narrative in the way in which Tangal and Tamarai have been; yet, her presence suggests ways for women to regain autonomy and to claim leadership, suggesting that these pathways have always existed, only not been overtly

narrativized. Through the successive different generations and cycles the tale traverses, feminine protagonists demonstrate more resilience and agency: Ariyannacci's relative passivity is followed by Tamarai's passionate zeal to attain motherhood at all costs, and followed again by Tangal's contemplative inwardness which sees her calmly running the house she lives in with her brothers but without any real desire to give up her chatity for sexual consummation. Veeratangal on the other hand leads not only her home but her clan, suggesting that women's roles need not be only domestic but that the space of the domestic can be fully claimed by women without its becoming a patriarchal burden, just as the space of the public world outside can be claimed equally fearlessly, as Veeratangal does when she protects two parrots who seek refuge in her forest and for whom she sets up many layers of protection using thousands of tigers, cobras, and so on, showing herself to be a commander of different kinds of forces. Veeratangal's abundance and fearlessness, symbolized in the graphic novel by beautiful greens including the parrots she safeguards and the massive peepal tree that becomes their home, allow us to conclude that the tree of myth explored in the graphic novel gives sublte fruits that can be enjoyed even where no overt victories are attained.

EPIC INTERPRETATIONS: DRAWING THE *MAHABHARATA* FOR OUR TIMES

Characters like Tangal and Veeratangal are familiar in type to Tamil readers/audiences who would know the stories of the *Silappatikaram* as well as the epics that follow it, but the framework for accessing these, particularly for female characters, is often the framework of chastity rather than of power. With an oral epic like *Ponnivala*, the power of female characters to direct lives and to lead the lives they find suitable is once again assessed but within a more open environment resulting from the not so canonical status given to oral source texts. Thus, the graphic novel form of *Ponnivala* sets the legend of Ponnivala in

motion in a more demotic space than the spaces in which the more hallowed *Silappatikaram* et al are studied and venerated. The ability to be in irreverent dialogue with texts that are as old and therefore culturally considered precious is often disregarded or refused in many cultures as an act of disrespect. Yet, it is these very so-called irreverent dialogues and conversations that keep ancient epics alive and fresh. We see the same phenomena with regards to two renditions of the *Mahabharata* by Amruta Patil, whose *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean (2012) and Sauptik: Blood and Flowers (2016)* revise the visual vocabularies available for these texts lavishly and originally, while her *Aranyaka (2019),* a rendition of the Upanishad of the same name gives a similar lush and enriching framework to the question of what it means to create knowledge, and indeed, understand the world.

Using stellar graphic art as the story medium, Patil's texts further the *Mahabharata*'s boundaries by bringing in narratives from a variety of older and recent written sources such as Bibek Debroy's and K. M. Ganguli's translations of the *Mahabharata* but unlike fiction writers like Pratibha Ray's (*Yajnaseni),* Chitra Banerjee's Devakaruni *(Palace of Illusions),* Devdutt Patnaik's *(Jaya and Gita),* Kavita Kane's *(Karna's Wife*) to name a few, Patil has preferred to be more "faithful" to the literal text of the *Mahabharata,* with her explosive and illuminating art instead opening interpretative doors for us where other writers have used plot or narrative instead.

Destroying our dependence on words and instead making us explore the emptiness or colour or brushstrokes on the page, Patil asks us to recognize the vital continuities between the epic and our present day and to use these continuities as philosophical touchstones. The foremost thing that catches the reader's attention, because of the media, is the use of colour and realistic images blended with digitally made backgrounds. These are interspersed with black and white charcoal sketches to reference shifts in temporal and spatial narratives as well. In *Adi Parva* for instance, the story of the origin and creation, of the gods etc. are

brightly coloured, while the breaks in the storytelling itself with the villagers seated around the sutradhar are in black and white. This shift between coloured panels and those in monochrome serves as a succinct visual narrative device that both blends past and present seamlessly while simultaneously serves to capture the epic's multiple narrative voices.

The characters from the forests, most typically are portrayed as having darker pigmented skins, such as Eklavya, Pootna, Hidimba, but far more authentic than the dung green and blues of ACK's "dark" or tribal characters. *Adi Parva* depicts architectural structures - the pillars, floor, furniture, palace, gardens, and the structure of the kingdom outside to show the grandiose wealth of the Pandavas but symbols of authority like the sceptre, weaponry or the crowns and thrones are conspicuously absent. Most interactions between kings and queen takes place in private quarters, showing both the vulnerability and the familial engagement of men, starkly different from ACK where kings are invariably located in their courts, or walking and brooding in large open courtyards, usually alone and situated at a worm's eye view, out of reach and invincible. Ashvathama's journey of remaining in exile is depicted through his nakedness, his physically unattractive body unformed by the of heavy pencil or charcoal and never coloured, dark as if he has taken the very shades of sin. Lower class and tribal characters have unclear sketched faces as well, indistinct and unformed, as if to suggest they are not important and do not get illumined in any way by the story they hear.

Based on the first book of the *Mahabharata*, *Adi Parva* opens the tale in a grand full page blue panel; it immediately throws up multiple connotations of blue–the water element, the cosmos, the unknowns, fertile, fluid, chilling, and outlasting us– to the fore. This blue is also the river incarnate, Ganga the sutradhar of the narrative. Part of Patil's contribution as a graphic novelist is her ability to make the intensely polluted river come alive as a chatty storyteller, sassy and colloquial in her vocabulary, thus immediately making her an intimate

rather than a mythicized river we never visit and certainly pollute thoughtlessly. Ganga has children (the audience) waiting for her to arrive with the story (which is the water of our lives, both metaphor and literal). Ganga appears young and timeless, despite existing for a long time, there is no age on her face or body, with her audience skeptical of her competence, suggestive of how human disregard for the forces of nature, whether it be trees or creatures we kill or rivers we pollute, continues without us learning any better.

Feminising the source of the blue thus, conflating the river Ganga with the sacred blue expanse that Vishnu flows on, Patil immediately provides us with a lexis of thinking of creation and creativity as masculine and feminine, of refusing feminine subordination, of understanding that the dialectic of different impulses is within us all. Reclaimed alongside is the image of the lotus, as a flower of tremendous grandeur and metaphoric force for human distress and suggestive of the possibilities of recuperation. The metaphor of the lotus can also be found in folk epics like *Bharath: The Epic of Dungri Bhils*, which compares the petals of the flower to the episodes of the epic. The leitmotif of the lotus becomes the essence of the community, each petal/episode must be carefully preserved and retold; the flower/epic and its scent must linger within and outside the community. Each chapter is like a lotus flower opening ever so gradually; the poignancy of the tale is underscored by the fact that this is the book of beginnings: how the men and women of the *Mahabharata* were before their sorrows reshaped them being the focus of Patil's narration, her choice of leitmotif is able to create room for continued introspection over multiple readings.

In the telling of this story of beginnings, creative and bodily beginnings such as motherhood, marriage, childbearing and barrenness, fulfilling of desires through sons, recur frequently, with the difference that because a female sutradhar anchors the narrative and seems to be speaking to an audience which includes women of many ages, the life-cycle stories of women are communicated simply and received with understanding, including

stories of basic human emotions like jealousies, anger, revenge and rivalries which may appear utterly un-feminist but are certainly both real within patriarchal contexts and are an outcome of entrenched patriarchal structures that try to ensure mutual female solidarities do not survive for very long.

When Ganga appoints Ashvathama as her successor, he is hesitant to take up the telling of the tale; she directs him to do his job and the text sets up the guru–shishya dialectic thus, marvelously making a woman lead a man as his teacher. The implications of this shift can be seen in *Sauptik* in the way the narratives are chosen, the activities that keep the tale moving, and the formation of the audience within the text: Ashvathama's audiences are mostly men, and he seeks out the Doms of the cremation ground to listen to his terrible doings as they cremate bodies. But Ashwathama is a criminal in his own right; the Doms are sentenced to the job of burying or burning dead bodies simply because of their caste: the text is unable to undo sinister implications of this kind of conflation between own action and accident of birth in a caste, suggesting yet again the complexity of the epic itself and the skill and experience required to translate it across time, media and protagonists.

At the same time, in Ganga's tutelage, given that the ganga-snaan is the standard mode of liberation and freedom from sins, suggests that Ashwatham is getting a second chance at being a different kind of student than the one he was with Dronacharya. Becoming a bard, the speaker of such tales is in many oral traditions the result of years of devotion and commitment. There are mantras, episodes, and ways of performing and performances that have to be learnt and mastered by committing to the tale and its preservation within the community. This symbiotic relationship between the guru-shishya can be seen between Ganga and Ashwathama. She pacifies him by affirming faith in his tale and skills that improve with observation and practice.

Sauptik, therefore, is the tale recited by Ashvathama to redeem his sins, and also the sins of his fathers. At the same time, Patil makes problematic statements like "A Brahmin is by the acts he does" – while such a statement may be true for those who have the luck to be agents of their destinies, such statements cannot sit well on those who have experienced caste discrimination and who will rightly see such statements as unnecessary and arrogant erasures of their experiences as persons marked by their poor caste standing. The text however, different from Patil's unfortunate statements in the "Author's Note" is able to show that caste is not simply what one does, but what is done to us.

Sauptik gives space to Eklavya's story, bringing a sympathetic reaction to Eklavya's plight, especially when the Doms listening to the story tell Ashwathama that his father was the problem, not Ekalavya, using a popular expletive. Yet, Ekalavya is not the focus of the narrative, but Ashwathama is, which makes us wonder why, when Ashwathama has ranged the world already looking for his absolutions, he does not go back to meet Ekalavya and learn more about his feelings on what was done to him. Co-opted in the attention-seeking narrative built around Ashvathama, a clear line of distinction in the hierarchy emerges in the text: because Eklavya falls much lower in the rank when compared to Arjuna he does not get to speak his own story despite all the other characters who now do in *Sauptik*. Eklavya's dakshina is marked as a terrible outrage, a crime, and Drona must answer for it; the Doms have the last word here and Ashwathama's explanations do little to justify the wrongs done by Drona and Arjuna who come across as both entitled, bureaucratic and narcisstic besides insecure.

Patil's dexterity brings together several versions of *Mahabharata*, often contentious ones, in a relatively coherent manner. For instance, she draws the panic that Arjuna feels when he sees the dog whose mouth is filled with arrows that muzzle him but do not hurt him. As opposed to the popular version where Drona asks for Eklavya's thumb as gurudakshina,

Sauptik shows Arjuna reminding Drona about the words that he committed to him-the position of the best archer in all the worlds: fearing this loss, Arjuna blackmails his tutor demanding Eklavya's thumb as ransom. Patil's focus on what goes on in the mind of Arjuna is useful to de-pedestalize these heroes, as for example Dharamveer Bharti does with the older Pandavas in *Andha Yug*. The slight body of Ekalavya and his boyish tenderness yet his assurance as a boy about to become a man are moving in and of themselves, illustrating how graphic art can do what writing may not or will not. Drona and Arjuna do not tug at our tenderness as readers. Ekalavya's gentle acquiescence to their demands is perhaps a reminder to how we ourselves were thus abused; but equally poignant is how even when now disabused in Patil's text, Ekalavya is still refused voice: why does the text not imagine his autonomy?

Patil in several instances shows how the gender and the caste of the characters connect to the power dynamics: two sages for example ogle at Parvati, marveling at her beauty and ability to endure in the harsh forest while she sits in long meditation. To take an instance of a conflict with a longer arc, Vinata and Kadru are co-wives and sisters but their relationship is based in outdoing the other. The better-known, more public part of the story behind this complex relationship can be glimpsed in Samhita Arni's graphic novel retelling of the epic, *Sita's Ramayana* (2011) where, snakes crush Rama and Lakshmana when they were attacked by Ravana's son Indrajeet, but when Rama invokes Garuda, the divine bird's long animosity with the snakes ensures that Rama prevails (76-77). Garuda's mother, Vinata, was enslaved by Kadru using snakes and it is only when Indra's blessing allows Garuda to eat snakes as food that Vinata becomes free. Interestingly, while this episode appears exactly at the middle of *Sita's Ramayana*, *Adi Parva* begins with it, showing the interconnections between the epic stories. In *Adi Parva*, while Vinata asks for a hundred sons, Kadru asks for two sons that bear more strength than the hundreds of Vinata's sons, patterning the later rivalry of Kunti and

Gandhari, and in both cases the rules of primogeniture and son-preference necessitate the birth of sons so that women can survive in a system where their survival is dependent on their creation of these sons.

The pattern of jealousy however is not confined to women. In the story narrated by Ashvathama, the story space is dominated by men – Arjuna, Drona, Ashvathama, the text layered with stereotypical "manly" emotions like hubris, anger, resentment, competition in an attempt to preserve their own social position. Karna, Ashvathama and Eklavya are all denied guidance by Dronacharya, instead, all they get is comparison with Arjuna with the result that all stand in opposition to Arjuna in the battle of Kurukshetra. Arjuna is not just Drona's favourite but Krishna's dearest too, who is at one moment god, at another god incarnate. Suggesting that jealousy isn't a feminine failing by exploring the fury of scorned men, Patil allows for readers to explore stereotypes about gender with care, to unpack them for their patriarchal valences.

A comparison of how ACK's *Gandhari* and Patil's differ in art and impact is necessary at this point. Spread across 32 pages (31+1 page advertisement) the ACK *Gandhari* text makes particularly extensive usage of close-ups, with very little speech by Gandhari, even less than Draupadi, and illustrations are mostly dominated by male presence. Gandhari can be seen as a thinking person, but she rarely articulates her thoughts. From the first, half-paged panel (Gandhari, 1), Gandhari like Draupadi, is shown directly in maidenhood, as she heads out to perform the morning rituals, where among four powerful men, she puts a teeka on her father's forehead as he sits in the court, and all the men look at her in admiration, signifying their approval of her unconditional devotion towards her father, and her symbolization of ideal womanhood. This image keeps stabilizing as Gandhari takes up other roles in her life. In the following two panels she touches King Subala's feet, and finally, she sits alone in a room to perform rigorous penance for unknown reasons. This image cements Gandhari's

identification: her costume remains unchanged until the last page of the book. Except for the final panel, she is placed at an odd imbalance against the men because once again, besides the king's daasi, she is the only woman present. Daasis are also frequently removed from the scene as the angles shift in the image; the absence of women in public spaces in these narratives suggests to audiences that women did not have public roles during the epic period and by extension, should not have these spaces in the contemporary world either, as these stories are extrapolated by young readers into the present.

The immediate narrative is dominated by panels of King Subala though the first panel shows the fruits of Gandhari's rigorous penance; Shiva appears before her to give the boon of a hundred sons. It should be noted that unlike Draupadi, the readers have no sense about the boon that Gandhari was seeking. Following this, King Subala receives a proposal for Gandhari's marriage. He instinctively responds saying that it's too soon for his "little Gandhari". The expanse in which the minister talks to the King shows the stretch of capital and power that is commanded. This prosperity has to be maintained and King Subala learns that the proposal is from Kurus for their prince Dhritarashtra. Though Kurus are the strongest, in the private sphere, it is a huge compromise to make. Subala struggles to imagine life with a blind man and the subsequent page (3) is about Subala's meditation, with close-up shots on him as Gandhari plays in the garden with her friends, at a distance. The final panel shows his meditative face: "A blind husband. Across panels, he paces from one corner of the room to another as he looks at Gandhari, whose beauty is suggested by her grace which is presented as a contrast to the dim ugliness of blindness.

However, the next panel shows the king in a dominant position giving his assent to the proposal (4). Gandhari has not been made a part of this decision, and she is found later in the middle of forests, sitting next to a lake, itself a symbol if femininity for its fluidity. She is talking to herself while praising the bounties of nature. Her tone is almost empathetic as she

thinks about Dhritrashtra's loss of sight – "He cannot see the birds, the flowers and nature's beautiful colours." At this moment, as a conclusion to her brooding, she realises that she wants to live the life of her husband. She decides to blindfold herself in the biggest panel (5). In front of the statue of a Shivalingam, she pledges to wear the blindfold all her life. Though the king asks her about the permanency of the pledge, Gandhari has already cast herself in the mould of a devoted wife, after serving as a dutiful daughter. "Since a woman shares her husband's lot in life and in death, should she not share his blindness, father?" This sacrifice immediately pedestalises Gandhari as an extraordinary woman, as recognized by the men in the crowd. There are a number of women in these panels, all silent. In the following panel a resolute Gandhari marries Dhritarashtra (6) and her brother, Sakuni, has accompanied her, but as seems to be a pattern in ACK, there are no other women, the marital ceremony is attended only by men.

Starkly different from the ACK is *Adi Parva's* representation of who Gandhari is the landscape is rugged and not conventionally beautiful as in ACK, to signify the mountains of the Caucasus from where Gandhari comes, the Kandahar/Gandhara that is geographically a distinct place far apart from the Hastinapura of the fertile subcontinent. Yet the distinct cultural artefacts of her world: her richly embroidered robe and headscarf, her jewelry that would mark her as distinctly Afghan today, the rich gem-like pomegranate seeds that signify the fruit of paradise that the pomegranate is in songs from that culture, where femininity itself is celebrated as the "anar of Sistanem," all evocatively show us the world Gandhari inhabits and the world she will lose in one fell swoop when she not only blindfolds herself, but goes to another terrain.

Perhaps she cannot bear to look at that dusty, arid world of the Gangetic plains, perhaps her ecological affinity with the world she is born to is so strong that she cannot re-root anywhere else as she is expected to because she is female: her terrible tragedy, the weight of

her pain, borne as an adolescent, is so impactfully communicated to us through just two or three pages of rich colours that communicate textures different from the subcontinent so well, just as the Ekalavya pages suggest that for Ekalavya the demands of the Guru mark the Guru as the other, as someone who does not know better. Ekalavya's thin, dark, refined body, capable of surviving gently in those wilds trounces the blowsier bodies of the urbane men, just as here Gandhari's beloved land, the roots women are expected to sever in virilocal patriarchies, are so precious that she binds them up immediately so that no one sees the longing in her eyes.

Art in both these instances trumps words, trumps the normative expectations that the words and narratives of the plot have taught us to expect. In the pause the art forces us to make, the readers have to contend with thoughts that encourage us to question the systems that allow humiliation of the gentle Ekalavya or the tender Gandhari. Gandhari's acquiescing to the father, a small chieftain in a vastness in the mountains, becomes her act of grace towards him rather than her victimhood as a woman; Patil's narrativization visualizes Gandhari as someone with agency that others do not recognize. The patriarchal tropes of confinement in blindness and dominance by her husband are real, yet we must also consider what it means for a female person of little resources to make herself vulnerable in this way: as a political act, Gandhari's blindfolding of herself becomes protest, refusal to participate, resignation. Ganga reveals that Gandhari's act of blindfolding opened multiple speculations – why she did it is a question that continues to resonate, and never being settled, suggests that Gandhari's fury and rage are not forgotten, contrary to the perception of the Gandhari as the docile woman who only becomes angry with Krishna at the end that ACK's version communicates.

Despite the title *Sauptik*, like *Adi Parva*, enfolds parts of the Sabhaparva, Vanparva, Yudhparva also to the period of sleep after the deathly bloodshed of war, and the muriad

emotions and relationships that brought on the war. The copestone of the epic of course is the insult and humiliation of Draupadi at the dicing. The story is told from the point of view of how Ashwatham sees Draupadi: regality personified, and someone so desirable to everyone that "frail egos" were bound to be hurt. The text thus completely brushes aside what Karna is said to have felt about Draupadi's refusal of him, going instead straight to her blissful choice of Arjuna, who as the desire in her eyes shows, she wants – her desire is emphasized, which being clear and loud and discernible to all who can see, is also evident to young Ashwathama. Seeing and recognizing female desire for men and accepting of that desire for another (when not directed at them) as valid and legitimate is an emotion or gaze structure rarely depicted in texts. This stands out completely again when compared with the ACK *Draupadi*.

In the ACK version, the big action is the announcement of Draupadi's swayamvara in the Panchal's Court where, in the first and the biggest panel on the page (7), Dhrishtadyumna announces the competition in which the prowess of the men will be judged and where Draupadi's movement from sister to someone's wife will be decided. Here too, like Gandhari she is shown always drawing identity from the men in her life even as she and her daasi are the two lone females that stand in a room full of men, whose extent can be only guessed from the huge number of scribbles representing faces, creating an impression of a sea of men. On this panel, it is evident that Draupadi is a sexualized property that many men may want to possess, and implicitly, the swayamvara represents this exchange of Draupadi as a commodity rather than her choice. Yet despite her vulnerability amidst the vast number of men, her foregrounding in the panel as an attractive and highly desired woman draws focus on her as an object of desire that the readers participate in. The power of the visual medium that draws and defines the gaze must not go unremarked.

In Patil's *Sauptik*, on the other hand, Draupadi is the cynosure of our gaze as a reader, and masses of men are not looking at her in the same frame, thus preventing her reduction to

an object to be claimed. Instead, her attributes as a person and as a body are connected to the earth itself, to flowers, fruits, flames, and her desirability and our inability to possess her are underscored in the same way as we would be unable to possess nature's forces – Draupadi's content, beaming face looks on happily as she chooses Arjuna and her brother says the competition is moot, because "my sister has chosen," upon seeing her look at Arjuna. In doing so, in making the competition irrelevant and "love at first sight" flame up in Draupadi on seeing Arjuna, her sexual power and the force of her desire are suggested as human forces that we all possess and which if wrongly shackled or abused will lead to the dark nights of apocalypse. The elemental quality of a Draupadi or a Sita, as land, as nature, as prakriti, things we must not possess if we are human–purush, is what the graphic novel suggests whereas ACK goes ahead with a normative framing of how Draupadi's hand was won in the swayamvara. The mark is not just the fish's eye, but by framing Draupadi and the fish in the same frame (8), the graphic book makes sure Draupadi also becomes the coveted mark, once again aligning all readers with the male gaze, irrespective of our own viewing contexts. In addition, Draupadi expressing her reservations about Karna's lowly caste status shows Draupadi makes a "choice" at the swayamvara as rooted in casteist discourse.

Other interpretations rethink this episode in the swayamvara too, such as Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife* which details Uttara's unconditional love for Karna and her skepticism about Draupadi. There too when Karna gains the status of a Kshatriya equal after Duryodhana gifts him the kingdom of Anga. Uttara is not immediately allowed to marry Karna; there are suggestions about the impossibility of Uttara's "adjustment" with lower caste persons and her consequent lowered social standing; her choice to marry him may ruin relationships with other powerful kings like the Panchal king Drupad and the Pandavas. Yet, Uttara finally marries Karna, underlining the differences between Draupadi and Uttara's attitudes to caste and varying degrees of pliability. The ACK version however entirely wipes out the visibility

of other women present in the court and also any explanation of how Karna's honour is restored, thus underlining a very static caste stratification as both real and historically valid for the epic's text. This done, it moves to a panel where Draupadi is seen seductively admiring Arjuna who is disguised as a humble Brahmin (9), and whose caste presents Draupadi with an implicit hypergamy. As soon as Arjuna strikes the mark, a jubilant Draupadi looks at the arrow in the fish's eye and in the next panel, she is marrying Arjuna: Draupadi's jubilance is presented as confirmation that it is a "swayamvara" and that she has chosen as she wished.

The cover page of ACK's eponymous volume shows Draupadi, not as a dusky princess, but as extremely fair, standing helplessly between seven men as she is harassed in the Kaurava court, the picture of helplessness, as she seeks help. The men are Dhritarashtra, the blind Kaurava king, the Pandavas who lost the game of dicing and therefore, are slaves of Kauravas, and two Kauravas – Duryodhana and Duhshasana. Draupadi is not making eye contact with the readers; her eyes are filled with shame. There is no hope that she can place in the mortals as she seeks divine help while looking at the sky, hinting at Krishna. This is the conventional iconic and iconoclastic spectacle of a woman being harassed and unable to help herself. Readers familiar with Mahashweta Devi's "Dopdi" or J.A.B. van Buitenen's *Mahabharata* translation will however be able to visualize Draupadi as fiery, refusing to be shamed and angered that her humiliation is tolerated at the sabha. ACK's reading of her as shamed and downcast, foregrounding her helplessness must be thus understood as merely one of the many readings of her responses in the epic. The choice of the affective element of sorrow, helplessness, looking to the learned, elderly, powerful, men for help is the normative hegemonic portrayal of Draupadi and to a great extent all women across media. However, the fury and fire of Draupadi is as much part of the cultural imaginary as the fact of her harassment in the sabha-ghar, why then is the one chosen over the other?

Patil's Sauptik shows Draupadi on one half of the page (all pages are panel-less) recognizable in a single white single garment and hair unbound, conventional, with tears streaming down her eyes; she says grimly that she will not bind her hair till Duryodhana's blood has washed it; the other half of this page, steeped in black, has a Kali-image, eyes and mouth and rage visible. Patil's commentary is sparse, saying how the iconography of Kali very often masks her breasts and over emphasizes Draupadi's hair as if terror needs any more volume to signal its presence. The pair of pages shows Draupadi's response to her humiliation as two-fold – the word outside of the chaste, worldly woman who does not let go of decorum, and the world within of the rage and anger of the wronged self that must right itself. Revenge and violence will result; this much is guaranteed to those who wrong, not impunity, the text underlines (118-19).

In the ACK version, the readers are already aware of Yudhishthira's successive losses in the game of dicing (13) and it is only after he loses Draupadi that there is a realization that there is no winning possible. In three bold panels, Pratikami, a "suta", occupies primary space as he delivers the news to Draupadi who is shown sitting comfortably on a big. A critical contrast can be noted between her speech bubble and thought bubble. In her thoughts, Draupadi seems to quickly move from shock to anger, "A king staking his wife away! Alas, he was surely intoxicated with dice." In the second panel, she turns towards Pratikami. In this interaction, she learns that the king had nothing else to stake away. Yudhishthira had lost all, "even himself." However, Draupadi's angry face is partially hidden from the readers.The pages hereafter show immense violence on Draupadi as she is thrown on the court floor (14). Over three equal-sized panels, Draupadi is dragged by Duhshasana to the court. In the first panel, he asks her to accept the Kurus as her masters; in the second panel he calls her a slave as she tries to escape – she is no longer angry but helpless at her husbands' failure, Kaurava's villainy and her female self – Draupadi is shown to the audience as covering her face with her

hands, shame written all over this gesture, as Duhshasana pulls her by the hair. In the third and the most striking panel, Draupadi is subjected to further violence as men are either silent or participating. She warns Duhshasana that her husbands will not "forgive" him.

The violence continues on the following page (15) as well, where again the page is divided into three almost equal sized panels. As Duryodhana and Duhshasana continue to ill-treat Draupadi, she remarks on the silence of the Kuru elders. However, similar to other moments in the text, her angry face is kept away from the audience. She looks at her "helpless" husbands, "her glances full of modesty and anger," in the following panels; the conversation is not controlled by Duhshasana and Duryodhana who start disrobing her – "the very clothing she is wearing belongs to us." Draupadi calls Krishna to save her, who magically extends her garment: the very ornate and sumptuous one she is draped in, in this version. When Draupadi is dragged by her hair onto the floor, this action gets the biggest panel on the page (17). All men in the court stand silently looking at her harassment, whilst she requests the Kuru kings to makea decision for her to end her humiliation. Even so, Duhshasana asks her to sit on his lap as she is "won by (him)". Next, the ominous sound of hyenas signals something foreboding, and the king decides to make a compensatory reaction to salvage the situation, giving a series of boons to Draupadi. Dhritarashtra gains in stature now like Shiva who previously had "blessed" her, and like Shiva, shapes Draupadi's destiny. Words like "modest", "virtuous" and "girl" are used repeatedly for Draupadi and reduces her individuality to an infantile or juvenile status, marking here as very young or very vulnerable rather than as a high-ranking person in her own stead fallen upon a bad moment. Draupadi seeks two boons from Dhritrashtra, restoring her husbands' freedom and that of her children's but her own freedom is automatically granted because of Pandavas' shift in status.

Further, this sequence of images has a significant gap when read with the ACK Gandhari in which the queen sits, a silent and blind witness to the gambling, dumbfounded by

her son's actions and helpless because of her lack of authority in the masculine space. She regrets defending her sons, excusing all of their sins. Interestingly, while it is Krishna who inhibits the process of disrobing, it is Gandhari's nudging the king to put an end to the events before irreparable damage is done, that finally restores freedom to the Pandavas.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that between these narratives, gender roles and their transfer through the medium of the graphic novel to newer audiences are fraught projects. *Ponnivala* takes the literal realist way forward. *Sauptik* and *Adi Parva* reinvent the myths of the *Mahabharata* not by changing the narrative but by playing with the conventions of literalist representation. Amruta Patil generates imagery that shows women to be thinking, self-aware, sentient beings who are placed within a patriarchal frame, but are not necessarily happily compliant to be within it. Thus, in the graphic novel in India today, one sees the critique of gender-normative ideas at the same time as one sees their reification and reinforcement. If the graphic novel is viewed as a series of public cultures, what emerges is a sustained feminist engagement with representation and with realist conventions, which are subverted through the graphic novel format itself, or through criticism and scholarship as Brenda Beck does.

SECTION V: FEMINIST PEDAGOGY AND DIGITAL COMICS

Hush (2010) is the story of Maya, a school going girl who has faced child sexual abuse at the hands of her father. Her mother knows about this, but she remains tight lipped, quivering in fear and helplessness. Left without many choices, Maya chooses the path of violence and finally commits suicide. Written by Pratheek Thomas, illustrated by Rajiv Eipe, and published by Manta Ray comics *Hush* is a graphic novellete, of 17 pages. Karthik Subramanian in "HUSHed up no more" calls it a "graphic short story." In the introduction to *Hush*, Mumbai-based journalist Rahul Bhatia sets the base for the coming of *Hush* and its relevance in the current times. The preface by Manta Ray explains that the narrative of violence revolves around the lives of readers and characters; through the protagonist, an innate desire to "do something" about this silent culture of fear is shown. The characters are unnamed through the narrative and are only introduced at the end; they do not have any speech bubbles. The idea here is to help recognize and acknowledge similar suppressed stories that are part of our lives. This graphic short story is cinematically, frequent and gradual close ups and then long shots are the technique of choice. It keeps the readers on tenterhooks, with heavy brushstrokes of black and gray that overwhelm with wordlessness and eventually leads to the "escape" by suicide.

The cover page shows a fearful, blank face staring at the readers. A thick white line passes across the lips, with "hush" is written on it. As the text proceeds, we learn that this silencing stems from close power relationships that perpetuate violence and lack of support in dealing with it, and the continuity of this cycle. While the gender of the character remains ambiguous on the cover, on the immediate page that follows, the lead character's face and body are shown – she is a young girl, possibly school-going, who is not looking at the reader. Her name, Maya, will only be revealed after the end. The opening page of the story shows four panels, a spider web of cracks appears on the black surface. It is gradually brought closer

to the reader. This web shifts across the panels, the reader is caught in this literal and metaphorical crack; the final panel shows something that smudging out from this crack. It can be blood. There are chemical equations written on the surface implying that the surface is probably a blackboard; therefore, the location of this incident is a classroom. The first and the last panel show the shocked, terrified expressions across the faces of students, their mouths open. A young girl fired a gun at someone; this attack cracks the blackboard, there is a blood smear that follows this crack. The repetition in images; these images replace the need for words as they organize the meaning across different pages. For example, the cracked blackboard reappears making a link between the successive pages. Repetition helps build meaning visually as the image acquires greater clarity with the help of supporting panels; their meanings also evolve from varying placements. Following this, we see the protagonist making an agitated exit from the classroom while holding the weapon. The space of attack expands from the classroom to the corridor; the presence of other folks around does not deter the girl, she continues to walk and climb a staircase to find the Vice Principal's office.

Next we learn that she has been subjected to child sexual abuse; every night is a fearful experience as she tightly shuts her eyes. Her shut eye might momentarily protect her, but things have not worked as she would have liked. She is abused by her father, as she weeps through the night. Several close ups around the terrified face and struggling body are presented; the face of the girl is separated from her various body parts – her wholeness is reduced to a fragmented helpless body. The narrative is fragmented to , and eventually, the readers find that she is in her bathroom, crying, signaling a shift in narrative time and space. She is pictured sitting under the shower, her knees close her chest.

The narrative shifts again to portray blinds in the Vice-Principal's room; Maya parts the blinds to reveal people outside. This process is shown rather slowly, across three panels. The

movement of Maya's fingers are emphasized as she makes small efforts to break the illusion of normalcy that the blinds maintain.

These blinds may also signify the nature of violence in private, intimate spaces, removed from the public, even though the line between the two spaces is quite permeable. The vice principal clenches his fist when he sees the girl at his door. He yells at her and points, her out of his room. We see the vice principal resembles the girl's father, as does the teacher who was shot in the classroom. Her father's violence is shown in the flashback. The similarity between men connects their participation in the violence, both active and through passive silence.

Maya walks towards the boy's restroom in a kind of subversion and revolt, a very personal masculine space. As she looks straight into the mirror, her trauma personifies into physical form. There is a faceless shadow that appears behind her in a mirror; and she shoots the mirror. The cracked mirror reappears. It imposes itself over Maya's reflection and also reiterates the web on the black surface at the beginning of the book. This repetition adds to the attack, which is now the web in which the girl is caught. The fragmented mirror and the web both entrap the girl.

The shift between the present and the past is contrasted through sketchy lines for flashback events and rigid digital drawing for the present. This suggests also that the past is malleable in the hindsight, and the rigid art makes tangible present events. In one of these flash backs, the girl's family is having dinner. The four family members are placed in different panels, closing up on their facial expressions. The younger daughter is chewing food, Maya is eating frugally; the mother looks tense as the father looks at her and then Maya. He seems comfortable while eating food. Post dinner, the passing of time is shown in the three parallel panels, as it passes from 9:30 pm to 11:30pm; a pendulum adds to the palpable tension. The girl tries to force herself to sleep close to 11:30. Her eyes are tightly

shut,. At 11:30, the mother's eyes open in terror as the father steps out of the bed and climbs towards the daughter's room. She neither stops him nor alerts her daughter; The father's legs climbing the stairs and the girls struggle are placed in quick succession, creating a classic montage effect that allows the readers to piece together the action, rather than explicitly showcasing the violence. The next panel shows the girl sitting under a tap, drenched and sobbing alone.

The flashback gives way to the girl in the restroom where she shot at the mirror; panicked voices and police trying to break into the restroom place her in the broken present. The incidents that shaped her life thus far are placed next to each other in tight panels, oscillating like the pendulum between happiness and pain. The action slows to a standstill when she places the gun to her head across three successive panels and pulls the trigger. The story closes on the note of a stunning silence stating that Maya has killed herself. The dark silence forces the readers to contemplate other alternative that she could have chosen and to understand the absence of support structures in society and specifically in educational institutions to both help prevent and confront such violence.

For all of its fine drawing and complexity though, *Hush* makes the victim of sexual harassment and abuse take her own life through this plot resolution when in fact other possibilities could be explored, which may be more domesticated and less sensational, but which do exist, such as the exploration of shelters, therapy, friendships that give her economic autonomy, and so on, all of which, while difficult are documented in the lives of sexual abuse survivors from all over the subcontinent. The pressure to provide a "happy" ending need not make a narrative unrealistic, just as the pressure to tell a racy, captivating story need not make for a coherent narrative that stands scrutiny. In this sort of comic narrative, the actions of the character and the possibilities that could have existed are important to nuance given how much these narratives travel or are valorized as experimental

or independent. In contrast to this sort of fetishized narrativization of victims of suffering is the next text we look at: *Priya's Shakti*, a webcomic which has already got over twenty six million views.

CREATING NEW MYTHS TO RESOLVE OLD PROBLEMS

Priya's Shakti is a graphic narrative that mates the superheroine with the religious/mythological to create a story where Lord Shiva's fury with the human race becomes the narrative catalyst for change. The novel is important in its depiction of a mortal woman who has been sexually harassed, finds resilience and survives. However, the woman's quest for justice is through the semi-religious framework of Hindu mythology rather than through law as a means of recourse. This makes it imperative to remember that this graphic narrative's version of Hinduism is but one of several possible iterations or points of entry into the faith and by no means a universal homogenous one that is accessible to all.

Girls like Priya are much more likely to be lower caste Hindu today due to structural inequality and will be denied equal education opportunities. When Priya's real life counterparts are not heard at the panchayats, again, it can be with feature and function of the meta narrative of caste exclusion, which is sustained and sponsored through other meta narratives. However, the comic book doesn't once mention that being savarna/avarna can cause a difference in how a Priya from each group could be perceived. Lord Shiva is presented as hearing Priya's voice regardless, which again is at odds with how various religious groups in India organize around questions of caste. Similarly, Parvati's own presence as "parvati" and not "kali" or "amman" etc to take two names of folk versions of the mother goddess suggests a sanskritized narrative of faith rather than a folk/, vernacular one born amongst the people.

When *Priya's Shakti* is read in the classroom, the immediate questions that surface are questions of how religion can aid social transformation on this count given the various taboos, social and ritual, placed on the bodies of Hindu women which very often go undiscussed and sometimes even unrecognised by individuals who are thus marked. Students point out fairly immediately that the taboo against menstruating women, for example, continues to go unseen by Lord Shiva, even as this taboo leads to loss of educational opportunities for millions of Indian adolescent girls.

The arrival of this inequity in a heightened form – that of gangrape – should not be necessary for the evils of deprivation based on gender to be spoken about or theorized; yet the book prefers to make the heroine undergo a gangrape before it provides her with tools for transformation or redemption of her circumstances, if not mitigation. This abjecting of the heroine could be dispensed with but is not – indeed it becomes the necessary condition of her superheroine selfhood. We explore why this is necessary: cannot a heroine who is feminist be formed without trauma and violation of this scale. One of the answers is that gangrapes like this are extensively documented in contemporary Indian media and have been vehicles for conversations around rape culture, as well as vehicles for the arrival of legal tools like the Vishakha case judgement in 1997 and the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act in 2013.

Yet, gangrapes like these are also undocumented or go unnoticed when they happen to lower caste women; intersectional compounding of the offenses that derive from both casteism and gender discrimination isn't in evidence in how these cases end up being dealt with. Instead, gender violence is lofted into a vaccum wherein it seems to be happening in isolation to all women. Yet many women in India face the accusation (backlash) that they are recepients of unfair privilege and unfair advantages because of their femininity. The inequities and injustices borne by those of "low" birth are well documented enough that we can understand the implications of eliding these differences in texts like these that purport to

give a feminist education or serve as a tool for feminist work. Yet, these forms of privilege and advantage are not universally available to all Indian women even as these may be available to women from advantaged caste and class groups. In other words, lacking an intersectional framework, the comic book is unable to visualise how the superheroine may undo intersecting forms of oppression. Instead, a patchwork of Savitri, Gulabi Gang and Gandhi stands in for women's liberation.

Compulsory marriage (and the violence faced by widows) is already so strongly enforced as well as internalized by Indian women as well as cultural frameworks to the degree that Savitri's bravery in challenging Death to bring her husband back to life cannot be seen merely as an act of bravery, but also as an act of desperation given the immense precaricity of life as a a widow in this cultural framework. M. K..Gandhi as a figure is extremely ambivalent when we consider his record in terms of women's rights, from his reluctance to see contraception as a necessity for Indian women (Margaret Sanger) to his self confessed attempts at brahmacharya wherein his naked nieces served as the "temptations" he successfully resisted. Even seeing these two figures as part of a progression that leads to the Gulabi gang is extremely limiting given that other examples from history and myth could be used or even these employed in a less facile way. Yet shoehorning all these into one page simply to show the connections between the past and the present falsifies the history of struggle, especially by women in the Ambedkarite movements for example, as well as in more contemporary times, by women and groups such as Bhawari devi and Vishakha case.

Extraordinarily, removing these from the framework of contemplation by not giving them even such marginal space is an act that has tremendous consequences for how we then trace the history of what we perceive as feminist in India. We can see a similar removal of lower caste persons directly from the narrative even as images of their work are used in

Patil's *Kari* (where the eponymous super-powered heroine walks through the sewers unclogging them at night). The expense thus of depicting feminine power is borne by bodies and subjectivities that are avarna, whose work becomes metaphoric or unseen in these narratives, sadly.

The animal who is erased is another instance of such lost connections in a project where solidarities are hard to fashion and yet necessary for feminist community to emerge. Working with animals, consuming animals, avoiding animals are all also actions marked by caste in India; as such there are several possibilities suggested by the tiger's presence that are not fully realised here because subsumed into the narrative of mainstream Hinduism, yet contrasting sharply with how many other mainstream texts (like the Malayalam popular film *Pulimurugan*) represent the tiger as an antagonist for the (male) protagonist, to be tamed and killed. This more compassionate and yet strangely metaphoric tiger as vehicle for a woman is thus a striking leap for any character in comic narratives and comic art, allowing us to think of new connections given eco-feminist work as well as the ecocides that accompany the immediate present we inhabit. How can we imagine these new constructs?

Where the animal is a non-person, someone deprived of personhood, the animality as denial of subjectivity is equivalent to how casteism strips the lower caste individual of personhood. Yet the lower caste person will refuse and rightly so to be likened yet again to an animal, that too with no speaking part often, a mute servant–a vehicle yet again. Creating an individuated animal protagonist whose animality as personhood, representation of otherness from homo sapiens will allow the reader to engage with that animal-person as a subject rather than another commodity or a ride / vehicle (here like Batman's batmobile), would have suggested ways of solidarity and becoming. The more recent *Priya and the Mask* comic suggests these possibilities in showing one page where tiger and woman enjoy a beautiful landscape and the tiger further is feminine in presenting voice in the film version of the

comic. Yet, it forecloses exploration into what animality and personhood mean for animals and privileged (most often but always savarna) subjects in comic art by never allowing the tiger's interiority to develop. The tiger thus remains a "flat" character; denying him/her roundness becomes a way to refuse to engage with the issue of how someone can be stripped of personhood and become a something, as women all too often can be, especially in narratives of their subjugation.

There are many instances of how graphic art can work to narrativize protagonists out of this silence. One panel in the *Gardener in the Wasteland* shows women standing in a sort of human pyramid, which looks like the Janmashtami ritual of men cracking the pot of milk. The women are supported by the women below them, in a style that could be read as a metaphor for how feminism supports women. The woman on top is trying to hit a pot which contains, remarkably, a woman with shaven head and robe sitting inside the pot. This woman is the isolated widow, isolated by religious prescription, who the women in the pyramid can be seen as trying to liberate. The pyramid of women is standing on a book; near that book are bystanders watching this attempt to reach the pot. All the women are wearing traditional Indian clothes. There are, again remarkably, no men in the pyramid, but there are two men shown to be pulling the pot out of reach of the human female pyramid. Among the women in the pyramid and also among the bystanders are other women who are dressed similar to the woman still confined inside the pot. This suggests that the liberation of widows is a project in which fellow widows as well as all other kinds of women including married ones have to contribute.

The men on the side are dressed like gods/upper castes and stand on a height, which suggests their ritual dominance as well as greater power. The neighbouring page shows many women in a book shop, casually buying books, suggesting that even if the women in the previous page failed to hit the jackpot, their struggles are part of the reason why we in the

present have access to education. So overall, it's possible to see that the goal of women's education has succeeded a great deal. The human pyramid image occupies a whole page, indicating the massive nature of the women's struggle in the past, for access to rights. The following page however is split into three vertical panels, where we see one or two women at a time, showing the women are now again individuals, and not part of a collective struggle. However, widows are yet not fully free: taboos against widows still persist. In showing women's struggles here tweaking what would be a familiar, even iconic religious representation, the graphic narrative makes us take a new look at what solidarities mean, and how they can be built up and a pot brought home.

In *Priya's Shakti*, the iconic image that is tweaked is that of the woman with a tiger; yet to tweak it successfully to make new meanings means making new connections that unify and individuate the different elements within the formula. Are all tigers friendly? Are all women kind to tigers? Do tigers necessarily believe in feminist values? Are tigers victims of Stockholm syndrome in allowing a race that kills them and subjects them to violence to now further dominate them? These questions though seemingly facile are at the heart of the question: exactly what kind of superheroine rides the tiger? How do we know her value system is not anti-tiger, anthropocentric and violent in insidious ways? The narrative gives us various cues: Priya is indeed gentle with the tiger. Yet the tiger is a gift from Shakti/Parvati, and not a product of Priya's own material relationships with this world, despite her working in the forests in the initial parts of the narrative.

The murals of the woman sitting on the tiger that the makers laudatorily state adorn two major Indian cities are another ambiguous artefact in this narrative: drawn by male artists and passively present in selfies and other photographs the passing public takes isn't necessarily a tool for feminist pedagogy if different other mechanisms (other than the divine voice of God as a guide and resource against abuse) available in the contemporary world are

not simultaneously manifested. So in the absence of a digital kiosk where passersby can read or engage with the comic book, as well as in the absence of any information about how the law can be accessed the feminist struggle becomes a comic (absurdly fantastic) one wherein a woman on a tiger is able to persuade her entire village and community to be more feminist, less discriminatory. Giving dignity and reality to the Indian feminist movement's work such as the work of Majlis in Bombay's poorer areas as well as to the possibility of religious gurus (of either gender) being roped in is moot here.

Keeping the actual discursive processes involved in the struggle for justice outside the frame while visibilizing the actual violence as well as the divine turmoil that follows the violence refuses to make central the impact of progressive work. The comic book could show us different situations like Priya talking with the police to file a case, or her being able to write w complaint or indeed even, filing a zero FIR in some other town if necessary. Yet these narrative possibilities are not explored because the narrative stays within a pseudo-mythological world from where it emerges somewhat in *Priya and the Mirror* where the different career possibilities available to women burned by acid are depicted, and the contemporaneous *Priya and the Mask* where the mask-wearing doctor treating Covid patients is female and in our present world. In other comics like *Priya and the Lost Girls*, though the issues, like trafficking and the rehabilitation of those who survive sexual trafficking, are of immediate moment, the suggestion through art and narrative is of a mythological chronotope.

What kind of feminist goals then can be articulated here? Is it possible to talk about gender equality in the abstract using a superheroine? Priya's name itself suggests that she is desired, loved, yet as her costume and the narrative suggests this desire isn’t the heterosexualized commodified feminine who’s figure and gaze on her suggests that she is an object for consumption. Instead, Priya’s garb – a salwar kameez and dupatta worn almost like

a cape could be any modern Indian young woman in her modest yet business like daily gear where the floatiness of the kurta suggests she wants to avoid the gaze and yet the modernity of the pants, which are not a conventional salwar, suggests that there are sartorial and other adaptations that have already modernized traditional ways of doing things like dressing; the cape like dupatta suggests Priya is an everywoman, who seen from some angles could be a superwoman or superheroine; the diadem alone suggests that this isn't the typical Indian woman off the street, and of course the presence of the tiger.

The refusal to create a sexualized Priya (unlike, say in the case of Wonder Woman where the feminine form, however athletically rendered, is typicalized into rounded and perfect breasts, big hips, tiny waist, long hair and short dress, as both a simulation as well as a satire on conventional normativized comic book heroines) suggests very strongly and satisfactorily that women and women's stories need not be about male desire. Yet the nature of each problem Priya tackles (with the exception of *Priya and the Mask*) is about the impact of patriarchal domination on women's bodies, lives, desires, subjectivities, rights. Thus, while Priya has much to do, her actual work is indeed that of a specifically feminist justice crusader which is what makes the absence of any historically inflected feminist work painful and troublesome.

It would be possible to say that *Priya's Shakti* makes these choices because of the intractability of the problems at hand, but indeed the intractability makes for even more adventures in the comic book world where the same good versus evil trope is explored by various superheros through multiple ways. On the other hand, making the plot uni-vocal in terms of a simple linear movement from undeserved suffering to pain to "shakti" or power through riding the "tiger" of Empowerment, I argue, cuts off reader empathy.

The average female reader though hopeful may be forgiven for being unable to participate fully in the suggested outcome, wherein she has to identify with Priya successfully

teaching her way out of her oppressions. As women and girls and even non-masculine-presenting men trying to argue, pedagogize or appeal their way out of injustice, we know that narratives of "backlash" take over very rapidly. Women's issues are seemingly important to all, yet there is no substantive action at the systemic level on many of them, or equally often, substantive actions turn counterproductive or stratify into a new form of hegemony and exclusion. We can see this process at work in the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act for example, and its indifferent use in educational environments where it is supposed to be used to ensure a discrimination free environment in keeping with Indian ideas of fundamental rights for all persons.

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Appendix: Interview with Amruta Patil

Jadavpur University at Doing Graphic Stories Conference on January 13, 2017

Q: *Kari* was your first graphic novel. Do you think that the audience was prepared for the kind of content brought?

A (Amruta): Considering it was the first work, I was not expecting any reaction. That is also the beauty of first work, it is guileless. There was no expectation from the market, or for the text to be loved. However, it was a pleasant surprise that the *Kari* was appreciated by an underground, niche audience.

Q: Do you think it came "before its time"?

A: It came at a time when there were several responses to sexuality like the LGBT pride marches that sprung up in many parts of the country. *Kari* was definitely a frontrunner, but I do not think it was before its time.

Q: LGBT is a contentious issue in the country; it is extremely critical how the main characters are created. How did you decide to depict Kari in the way she is shown- both "butch" and "femme" aspects are focused?

A: It is difficult to put into words why Kari looks the way she does, but there is a certain self confidence that she inhabits about her body and sexuality. Her sets of issues are different, but they are not about appearance. I would say I always had a sense of how I wanted Kari to look: androgynous. The questions about labels were not entirely thought through.

Q: In *Adi Parva,* there are clear metaphors of birth and birthing. There is a significant female presence and voice vis-à-vis the men.

A: Not sure if the men have been given a backseat, they are part of the story and they play their roles as they are. However, there is a significant shift in the tale with the shift in

sutradhaar. However, this engagement has been there for some time. For example, if you look at Karthika Nayar's book of poetry- *Until the Lions*.

Q: *Adi Parva* has literal episodes of birth and then there are birthings across representation and symbolic meanings. With Ganga as sutradhar, there is definitely a shift in the voice. There seems to be a birth of a different visual language. How do you see it?

A: Certainly there is a shift in the lens with which the narrative has been seen. At the same time, my biological and contextual reality also colours the depiction.

Q: Consistent depiction of the lotus, for example, really plays on the idea of birth, regeneration and regrowth. It is like a leitmotif that sticks with the reader's imagination. At least that happened with me. It can also be consistently seen in the images of Hindu gods and goddesses.

A: Have you seen a lotus? I am not talking about water lily; most people confuse the two flowers. It is magnificent! The scientific reality, growing in muck, certain time of bloom; all add to the magnificence of the flower. It is charged with metaphors.

Q: Yes! The gradual opening of a lotus bud in the beginning to a full bloom flower in the end.

A: Almost like an awakening that is happening.

Q: You have come out with *Sauptik* also recently. How do you see it in relation to *Adi Parva*? Are they dependent on each other for a holistic understanding or they can be read as stand alones also?

A: *Sauptik* is definitely a sister book, but it can be read as a standalone also. Unlike Ganga, the tale is told by a very specific kind of man.

Q: That changes a lot of things.

A: Unlike the heroic, sublime man, this man is different. He is tormented and jealous. He has his troubled past right behind him. In fact, if you read *Adi Parva* carefully, you will find Ganga telling a hunched man that he has to lead the next story. So, as such, all three books are united, yet they have a very different kind of emotion running across.

Q: Specifically in *Adi Parva,* I feel that women have been shown in some stereotypical ways. They are immensely jealous of each other. From our basic knowledge about feminism, we know that such stereotypes do not exist independently, but are rather cultivated.

A: Well, it may look like stereotype, the way you are looking it, but it is also a reality to a lot of people. In fact, *Sauptik* takes it a step further. It shows jealousy between men, who are students, to get the attention of their teacher. It is a human trait, and one can't waive off human personality. It may be outgrown.

Q: Are you suggesting that by depicting jealousy, you are humanizing female characters?

A: Precisely! Jealousy is an emotion, and I am working more in that realm as opposed to ticking boxes like feminism. My work is a retelling, I am not inventing stories.

Q: What are your sources for the selection of episodes? What did was your selection process?

A: For *Adi Parva,* I have effectively taken tales from Adi Parva segment of the *Mahabharata*. I have also referred to puranic tellings. The stories I have drawn on can easily be found. When you read certain stories, you get a feeling that it would have been told by Ganga, or not. That was one. Besides, these works have been created over a long time. Heavy editorial work has been done in picking up and dropping texts. And the choice of the sutradhar also affects the way in which stories are chosen.

Q: Looking at *Mahabharata* and the newer renditions of the same that are occupying the market space nowadays, how equipped do the authors feel to bring out an epic (retelling) of their own?

A: Having a sutradhar shift changes the fibre of the tale. Already a number of people such as Karthika Nair are shifting narratorial voices. being present under a patriarchal set up for a very long time, it is apt that the other side of the story is heard.

Q. Can one go to the extent of saying that it is not just a text about birthing, but also birth of a new text?

A. The story has got a new birth, female characters have got a new voice.

Q: Have you given a new language of *Mahabharata*?

A. If we change the narrator, we may possibly reach out to a language where it is possible to create a feminine language.