

Representation of History in the Indian Graphic Novel: An Analytical Study of History through the Frame of Graphic Narratives

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Abstract

In this research paper I attempt to explore how, through the amalgamation of images and words, India's historical events have been represented within the frame of the graphic narrative and how these narratives serve to uphold the principles of the "history from below" type of historical narrative, thereby providing counter-narratives to the more dominant, so-called "historical facts". History in the graphic narrative is a persistent theme as "the visual dimension of the graphic novel contributes substantially not only to our understanding of history but also to a larger question of how history can be represented" (Nayar 2016, p. 14). By primarily focusing on texts like *This Side That Side: Restorying Partition*, curated by Vishwajyoti Ghosh (dealing with the Partition of India in 1947 and its aftermath), *Bhimayana*, by Srividya Natarajan, Durgabai Vyam and S. Anand (dealing with the caste system by tracing the life of jurist, economist, politician and social reformer Dr B. R. Ambedkar), *Delhi Calm*, by Vishwajyoti Ghosh (portraying the Emergency of 1975–76) and *Munnu*, by Malik Sajad (the national crisis in Kashmir). By also drawing references to graphic narratives across the world like Spiegelman's *Maus*, Satrapi's *Persepolis* and so forth, this paper aspires to identify the omissions, loopholes and discrepancies in established history and seeks as well to question and counter dominant historical narratives, thereby revealing the different manner in which history can be represented within the graphic narrative. Hence, this paper attempts to analyze and understand history and its representation through the "visual-verbal literacy" (Hirsch, 2004, p. 1212) of the graphic narrative.

Keywords: history, Indian graphic narratives, historical documentation/facts, representation, de-centering

Introduction

One of the most controversial themes for which writers and artists of graphic narratives seem to have a consistent penchant is that of history. As the subversion of sanctioned analytical narratives of the historical past seems to be a constant in their work, their interest can be considered a product of a socially/politically insubordinate stance. In this ever-altering and ever transmuting age of technological modernity, writers and artists are ceaselessly searching for new mediums that can reach out to the reader in the most intimate and most effective way possible. Speculating on this contemporary age of “Archives and Collectors”, Jared Gardner observes that “it is the structural affinities of the comics form with the “database” aesthetic that has contributed to the increasing visibility and relevance of the comics form in the 21st century” (cited by Baetens and Frey, 2015, p. 218). In this regard, Marianne Hirsch had also proposed that the medium of graphic narrative can capture the “visual-verbal literacy [that] can respond to the needs of the present moment” (2004, p. 1212). Graphic narrative can be defined as a medium that amalgamates words and art to represent the world around and is said to “embody a seriousness of purpose that goes against the essential lightness of the cartoon mode” (Orvell, 1992, p. 111). Coined in 1964 and popularized by the American legend Will Eisner, the term “graphic novel” was initially synonymous to “expensive comic books”, “adult comics” and even “alternative comics” (Hatfield, 2005, p. x). Despite the “inauspicious welcome” the genre received, to quote Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey:

. . . the graphic novel, as an idea and a publishing phenomenon, has endured and has had a significant impact on comics, literature, film, and many other media besides . . . Today, the graphic novel has escaped the cultural exclusion of much of the comics’ universe and has gained great respect... (2015, p. 2)

This obsession for representing history through graphic narratives began in the 1980s with the publication of Art Spiegelman’s graphic narrative on the Holocaust titled *Maus* (1986; 1991), which has since then inspired artists and writers globally to represent the unspeakable, repressed and alternate histories using this medium. Consequently, this paper attempts to explore how, through the juxtaposition of images and words, India’s historical events have been represented within the frame of the graphic narrative and how these narratives espouse the “history from below” philosophy, providing counter narratives to historical documentation or “historical facts”. The Indian graphic novel, which is in itself an emerging genre and is said to have initiated with the publication of Orijit Sen’s *The River of Stories* (1994), “possesses all the qualifications of a literary text (the construction of self-contained worlds, character development, plot, metaphoric use of visual and verbal language, among others) but adds the visual dimension to the narration” (Nayar 2016, p. 7). In the Indian context, to call the rise of historical graphic novel writing a recent phenomenon would be misleading, as it would downplay the significant role played by early comics such as *Amar Chitra Katha* (this can be roughly translated as “Immortal Picture-Tales”), first published in 1967, and the numerous graphic representations of Indian mythology (see Figure 1). To elaborate, the Indian graphic novel, from its very inception, has manifested an inclination to bring to the “surface issues under-reported in conventional news media”, thereby serving to unravel an alternate history (Gravett¹).

¹ This quote has been extracted from an interview of Alan Moore with Barry Kavanagh on 17th October, 2000. It is found online at: <http://www.blather.net/projects/alan-moore-interview/northampton-graphic-novel/> [Accessed: 7th February, 2017].

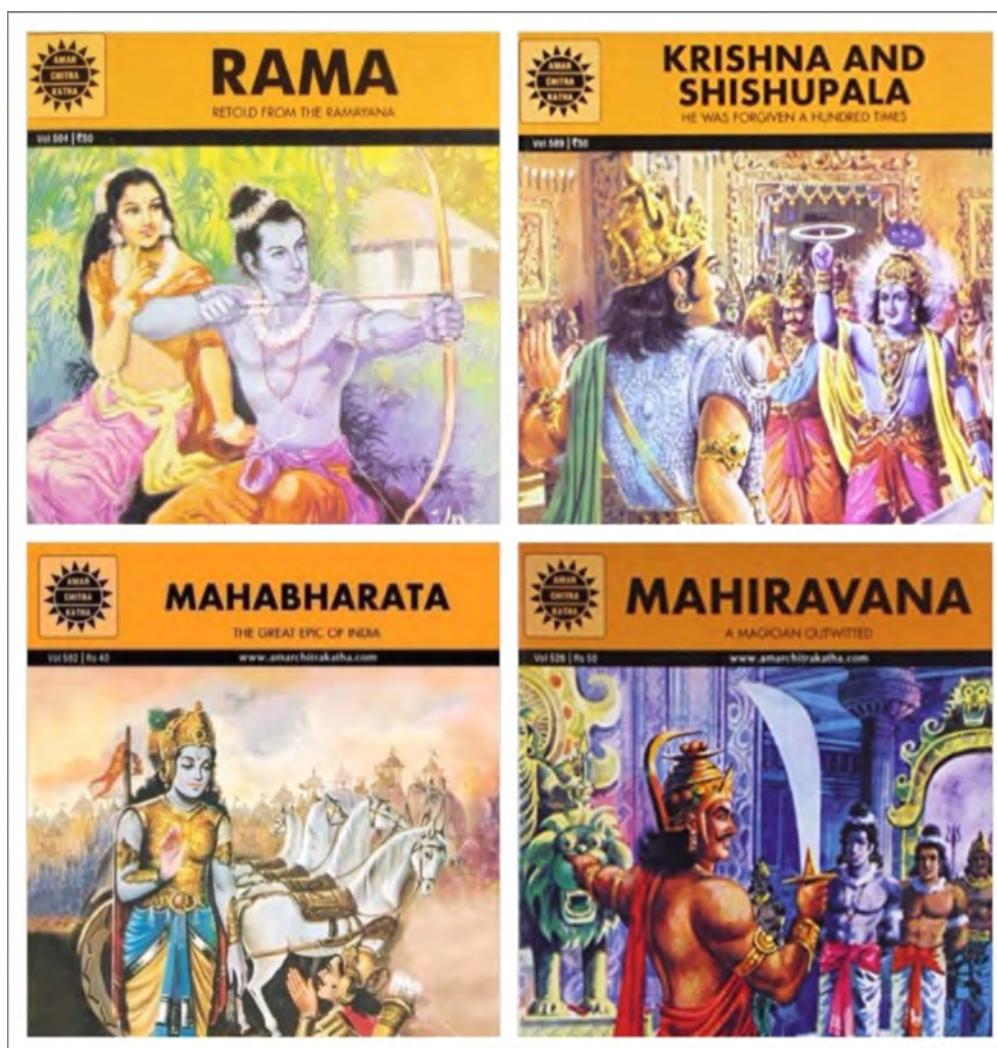


Figure 1: Indian mythology through graphic representation in *Amar Chitra Katha*

Consequently, Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994), which is arguably the first graphic narrative in India, outlines the impact of constructing the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the local people of Narmada valley; Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010) canvases the Emergency of 1975–77 that thwarted the democratic system; *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) written by Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand, reiterates the story of untouchability through the biographical graphic account of Dr B. R. Ambedkar; *This Side That Side: Restorying Partition* (2013), curated by Vishwajyoti Ghosh, turns to the Partition of India and its ongoing legacy; Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (2015) paints the horrors perpetrated by the government and the trauma of dwelling in a conflict zone. The list is long. These graphic narratives engage in constructing a new historical narrative, questioning, contradicting and often satirizing historical documentation in this sub-continent, thereby contributing to the global "graphic novel movement"² of the 21st century. Thus, this type of narrative, in English, spreads "Indian social imageries among the English-speaking classes to which it offers alternate readings of Indian history, draws attention to the lacunae and follies of our cultural practices and makes visible hitherto taboo subjects" (Nayar, 2016, p. 7).

² The "Graphic Novel Movement" is explained by Paul Gravett in the abovementioned article.

Taking this cue from critics like Gravett and Nayar, this paper analyzes how the Indian graphic narrative engages in representing history through the visual-verbal interaction in the graphic narrative by primarily drawing references from graphic narratives that engage with the history of the subcontinent. Additionally, references to other historical graphic narratives written across the world will also be made in order to enhance the discussion. The following section will elaborate on this category of graphic narrative by focusing on primarily four tropes through which history is represented in the graphic narratives: firstly, de-centering the center of historical facts/ documentation; secondly, amalgamation of the public and private spheres of history; thirdly, projecting history through the frame of irony and satire; and finally, history through the canvas of nostalgia and memory.

“De-centering” the ‘Center’ of Historical Facts/ Documentation

Indian graphic narratives have displayed a recurring tendency to disclose untold history by, to use Derrida’s term, “de-centering” the center of prevalent historical facts or documents through the mode of visual and verbal interaction. What is meant here is that graphic narratives tend to question established history by producing a counter-narrative that often engages in narrating a “history from below”,³ thereby subverting official narratives on history. In this regard, J. Spencer Clark, who had proposed to teach history in classrooms through graphic narrative, writes:

. . . there have been an ever-growing number of graphic novels that emphasize historical events and individuals. Many of these provide detailed coverage of historical situations and conflicts that are sparsely covered in the traditional history curriculum. (2013, p. 490)

Through the graphic and the textual dimension of the narrative, the writers and artists aspire to create a historical text that does not sulk away from portraying the unutterable, insufferable and abominable events. It is intriguing to note that besides the textual layer that helps in advancing the plot forward, the text’s visual dimension adds a category of meaning by embedding a multi-layered narrative in the artwork itself. To quote Nayar, the visual dimension

. . . generates the critical literacy by making us aware that history had witnesses who responded in different way to the event, whose emotions writ large on their faces should convey to us the scope and nature of the events and thus alert us to the subjects of that history, the social and individual dimensions of the larger historical process (2016, p. 14).

Our histories are strewn with incidents of discrimination based on class, caste, gender and race where those who wield power often victimize the powerless. Those victimizers are often the same people who compose history. However, graphic narratives unabashedly unravel the ugly face of discrimination by embellishing texts with art, thereby creating a multi-layered narrative.

As a first example, the first chapter of Sarnath Banerjee’s *The Barn Owl’s Wondrous Capers* (2007), titled “The Dark Armpits of History”, can be construed as an insubstantial tale about

³ Extracted from the abstract of ECAH 2017 [Accessed site: <https://ecah.iafor.org/> Date of access, 22 June, 2017]

colonial Calcutta (the capital city of the state of West Bengal in India, presently called Kolkata), revolving around petty duels and liaisons. Amidst all the pettiness, the only notable historical tales are silently narrated by fringe characters like servants and maids of the British officials. Beside the presence of servants and workers in almost every page of this chapter, Banerjee acknowledges these unsung heroes of history by devoting an entire page (p. 8) for the forgotten individuals who contributed in their own way for the proper functioning of the society.



Figure 2: *Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (Page: 8)

In this Figure 2, the readers are introduced to the varieties of servants (nine panels all showcasing the 9 different types of servants) who worked at the British officials' house: "chobedars" or stick holders, "jammadars" or sweepers, "khandutgars" or waiters, "hajaam" or Muslim barbers, "buxie" (presently, bakshi) or paymaster, "musselchees" or kitchen-helpers, "ayahs" or nursemaids (nannies), "punkah coolies" or fan-bearers, and "head bearers". Historical documentation mostly never pays heed to the minor figures of the social structure. However, Banerjee's graphic narrative introduces the readers to historical figures dwelling in the fringes of society, heralding them by providing them the center-stage of his narrative for their contribution in the functioning of colonial Calcutta.

Again, historical documents have very often failed to produce knowledge that focuses on women as much as it considers men. Gender bias is a recurring phenomenon when one considers historical facts, firstly because history is mostly represented through men's perceptions and, secondly, because throughout history women have been subjugated into a position of inferiority. In the global front, Marjane Satrape's *Persepolis* (2000; 2001) offers an autobiographical tale of growing up and surviving in Iran during the Islamic Revolution, thereby serving as a narrative that transmits women's perspectives amidst a largely patriarchal society. In India, female artists and writers like Malini Gupta and Dyuti Mittal,

among others, have created a space for women protagonists by carving powerful female characters who do not hesitate to crawl out of their shallow existence in history and carve a niche for themselves in a man's world. Their story "The Taboo" (anthologized in *This Side That Side: Restorying Partition* [2013]) chronicles the journey of a refugee woman who, through her efforts and the income from her own garage, is able to leave behind the "nightmare of Cooper's Camp" (2013, p. 246), "which is one of the largest refugee transit camps in West Bengal" (2013, p. 238) from the time of the Partition of India.



Figure 3: *This Side That Side: Restorying Partition* (p. 246, 247)

The above images (Figure 3), through an intricate artwork that refrains from employing panels or frames, basically showcases a world of women where their expressive faces are blended with the landscape. The circularity of the art is extended over the two pages where Lily, who refused to remain a "faceless refugee, disliked, disowned" (2013) is given the center-stage of the narrative by foregrounding her face upon the backdrop of the shabby Cooper's Camp. "The Taboo" showcases a world where the men give up on their dreams of escaping a gruesome past while the women folk strive on, even if it means leaving one's husband and surviving as a "taboo". Hence, this graphic narrative re-inscribes history and offers a counter-narrative of Partition.

Not only does a graphic narrative de-center historical documentation but they have also engaged in dethroning the very idea that historical facts are indisputable by showcasing the "constructed nature of all history" (Nayar 2016, p. 26). The question that exists at the very heart of historical graphic narratives is: "who gets to tell history?"

In "An Old Fable" (anthologized in *This Side That Side: Restorying Partition*), Tabish Khair and Priya Kuriyan create a Partition narrative by employing the fable of King Solomon and

the two women who both claimed that the child was theirs. Here, the “woman in green” (symbolic of the Muslims) as well as the “woman in saffron” (epitomizes the Hindus) claimed that the child was hers. The graphic narrative showcases how history is often a mediated narrative that is manipulated at all junctions through the presence of the silhouettes of Muslims and Hindus who “shouted on their behalf” (pp. 18–19). The graphic content contains empty speech bubbles, implying how the colonial ruler never actually paid attention to their needs, as expressed through their horrified faces (p. 20). What is interesting here is how the King’s courtiers interpreted for the King, writing down the complaints in “convoluted petitions full of legalese” (p. 20) and how their interpretations were blatant misrepresentations of what the women actually wanted.



Figure 4: *This Side That Side: Restorying Partition* (pp. 20–21)

The images above (Figure 4) showcase the King’s courtiers with grim and smug faces noting down the “crowd’s complaints” (p. 20) in terms that befitted and benefitted their cause. The gist of the petitions shows in three distinct paper slips: 1 – “The saffron crowd wants my son promoted”; 2 – “The green crowd wants you to invest in my business” and 3 – “Both the crowds want you to order a perpetual scholarship at Oxford for my family” (p. 21). This clearly shows how history is largely an apparatus for justifying the positions and perpetuating the entitlements of the powerful and the privileged.

Amalgamation of the Public and Private Spheres of History

In the Indian graphic narrative, which goes on to deal with socio-political issues, the public and the private spheres interact incessantly until, much like the real world, one becomes inseparable from the other. In graphic narratives published in other parts of the world like Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986; 1991) and Delisle’s *Burma Chronicles* (2007) among others, it is this fusion of the two spaces that allows for the realistic representation of socio-political history and “it is not trauma on a macro-scale that haunts the pages of graphic narratives such

as *This Side That Side*, *Bhimayana* or *Delhi Calm*, but the impact of the national trauma on common lives” (Nayar 2016, p. 21). For instance, in *Delhi Calm*, Ghosh portrays how the sudden declaration of emergency was firstly perceived as a threat to the individual’s economic and social security, and then as a hindrance to the development of a democracy.



Figure 5: *Delhi Calm* (p. 3)

As seen above in Figure 5, the protagonist Vibhuti Prasad, who is seated in the very private domain of his own room, is connected to the public sphere through his transistor, which astounds him (note the question marks shrouding his face in the second panel) with the jarring information that the “President has proclaimed Emergency” (2010, p. 3). What is interesting is that, instead of speculating on the crisis of the nation, he immediately recoils into his private life. For him there is a “bigger crisis”: “It’s the end of the month. Bloody hell – my salary?” Hence, it is through personal histories that graphic narratives give way to national histories, thereby humanizing a historical event that otherwise would have remained as historical documentation devoid of human content.

Again, in Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand’s *Bhimayana*, the biography of B. R. Ambedkar is narrated with the purpose of introducing the readers to the larger social history of segregation based on caste or the practice of untouchability prevalent in India during those times. In *Book I* titled “Water”, the writers trace the journey of a young Ambedkar, along with his brothers, to Goregaon, showing how they were not given a ride by the cart-man simply because they belonged to the lower caste of *Mahars* (p. 36). They were allowed to ride the cart only when they were willing to drive the cart by themselves and pay double fare.

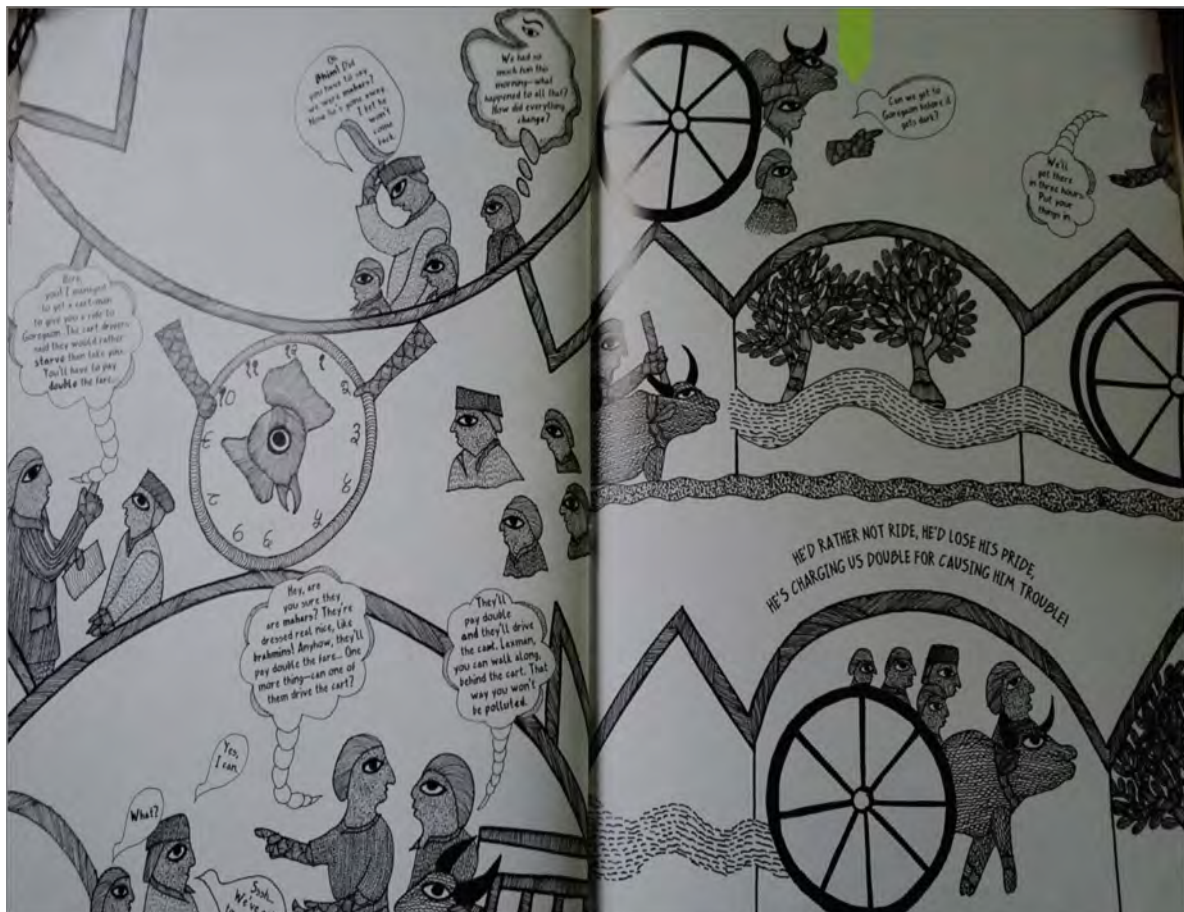


Figure 6: *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (p. 36, 37)

The images above (Figure 6), which are devoid of panels or frames and seem to flow seamlessly (much like the practice of caste system that went on for hundreds of years), shows how the cart driver would rather starve than “lose his pride” (37) by giving a ride to lower-caste people. The flow of water, the turning of wheels and the clock at the center of the page are symbolic of the timelessness of caste system, representing the history of suffering among the lower caste people. It is intriguing to note how the speech bubbles of the upper caste people are marked with a hook resembling a sting, symbolizing their harsh and barbaric attitude towards the Mahars. Hence, through the personal story of Ambedkar’s journey, the readers are familiarized with the larger spectacle of the dehumanizing effects of untouchability, thereby humanizing history through the frame of graphic narrative.

Projection of History through the Frame of Irony

Since time immemorial, graphic satire has been adopted as the mode to represent the defects of an individual or a society and also for illustrating the shortcomings of diverse versions of a nation’s history or even, more comprehensively, the follies of human civilization. In India, cartoonists like K. Shankar Pillai, R. K. Laxman and Manjul, among others, have not only used graphic satire to display the deficiencies inherent to the political system and its leaders, but also to expose the social, economic and cultural drawbacks of the narratives about the national past. In a similar approach, the authors of the historical graphic narratives use the medium of political cartoons, sketches and images to satirize and bring to light the unutterable issues that shroud the history of the nation. The tendency to amplify the effect of the socio-political issues on the readers by using satiric caricatures and cartoons can be

observed in the works of Malik Sajad, Vishwajyoti Ghosh and Sumit Kumar, among many others. Underscoring the contrast between conflicting versions of events, situations and personalities also serves to buttress the satirical power that characterises graphic narratives. Economic contrasts between the rich and the poor have also been an important element of graphic narratives. Observing this trend in Indian graphic narrative and taking his cue from Medhurst and Desousa, Nayar remarks:

Contrast between wealth and poverty, competing ideologies, present and past or between popular perceptions and the visual forms, reveal the differences, schisms, and just plain extremes in a socio-cultural form, and it is a key feature of the political graphic satire . . . The contrast is meant to direct us to two Indias: one belonging to the politicians, fundamentalists, wealth and immoral people and one belonging to the poor, honest, low-caste/ minority people . . . (Nayar 2016, p. 156).

In Sumit Kumar's *Amar Bari Tomar Bari Naxalbari*, both the visual and verbal modes interact vigorously to spotlight the exploitation of the tenant farmers by the landlords in pre-Independence India. In the figure below, the author critiques the zamindari system,⁴ which was legally abolished in 1951, by drawing a contrast between the landlord and the tenant farmer through his powerful amalgamation of images and words, creating a Juvenalian satire.

⁴ The Zamindari System was introduced by Lord Cornwallis in 1793 through the Permanent Settlement Act, and was primarily established in the provinces of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Varanasi. Under this Permanent Settlement System, zamindars (landowners who lease their lands to tenant farmers) were recognized as rightful owners of lands and invested with the right to collect rent from the peasants. The realized amount would be divided into 11 parts. 1/11 of the share belonged to zamindars and 10/11 of the share belonged to the East India Company. Hence, it was the tenant labourers/ farmers who became the victims of this gruesome policy for generations.



Figure 7: *Amar Bari Tomar Bari Naxalbari* (p. 32)

As can be seen in Figure 7 above, the zamindar's extravagant lifestyle, clothing and sturdy physique is contrasted with that of the bare and starved body of the tenant farmer and his family. The abnormally disproportionate division of food grains (where the zamindar keeps the bulk of grains giving only a handful to the farmer) also highlights the wealth gap between the oppressor and the oppressed, which finally leads to the revolt of the peasants (the Naxalite movement, a Maoist insurgency that began in 1967). The page, which is devoid of panels and shows a distinctive rope (noose, firstly for the farmers and then for the landlords, as many of them were killed by the Naxalites) snaking across the page, its end burning next to a farmer's face in the foreground, his fiery eyes displaying the sickle and hammer as he embraces the Naxals. Hence, through satire, events in history are rendered straightforwardly for the readers in the graphic narrative.

Often, the brutality of historical events is best revealed through irony; one of the most commonly used tools to expose cruelty and violence is that of the child protagonist. The irony is a function of the child's perception of the dreadful situation, set in contrast to the thought processes of adults. In *Munnu*, Sajad contrasts the innocence of childhood with the barbarous treatment of Kashmiri civilians by the government.



Figure 8: *Munnu* (p. 12)

As can be noted in the detailed figure (8), *Munnu* speculates that the “entire process [of crackdown] will last from dawn to dusk” and that this will give him “plenty of time to draw on woodblocks without papa’s interruptions” (Sajad 2015, p. 12). Thus, the satire is evident when *Munnu*’s innocent perception is contrasted with the surrounding brutality.

History through the Canvas of Nostalgia

History is often written by individuals who have had no direct experience of the historical event. However, they may have inherited memories of that event so strongly that they are compelled to pick up their pens and give vent to their pent up thoughts. Photographs, letters, etc. are devices through which history is passed on to future generations. It is Marianne Hirsch who terms this phenomenon of “inherited memory” as “post- memory” (1992–1993). In this regard, Spiegelman’s *Maus* is a direct projection of post-memory, where the author Artie inherits the memories of the Holocaust from his father Vladek. Interestingly, if one puts the sub-title of the two parts of *Maus* together, it reads:

“MY FATHER BLEEDS HISTORY”.

“AND HERE MY TROUBLES BEGAN”. (1986, p. 3)

Hence, the protagonist makes it clear that *Maus* is the result of inherited intergenerational trauma. Among Indian graphic narratives, and in agreement with Pramod K. Nayar, *This Side That Side: Restorying Partition* can be held as the most potent work on memory and graphic history. For instance, “Water Stories” by Appupen and Arundhati Ghosh is an astonishing projection of how traumatic memory haunts the one experiencing the event and how it is passed on from one generation to another. The textual narrative opens with the phrase: “In all her father’s stories about the land he came from, there was water” (2013, p. 130).

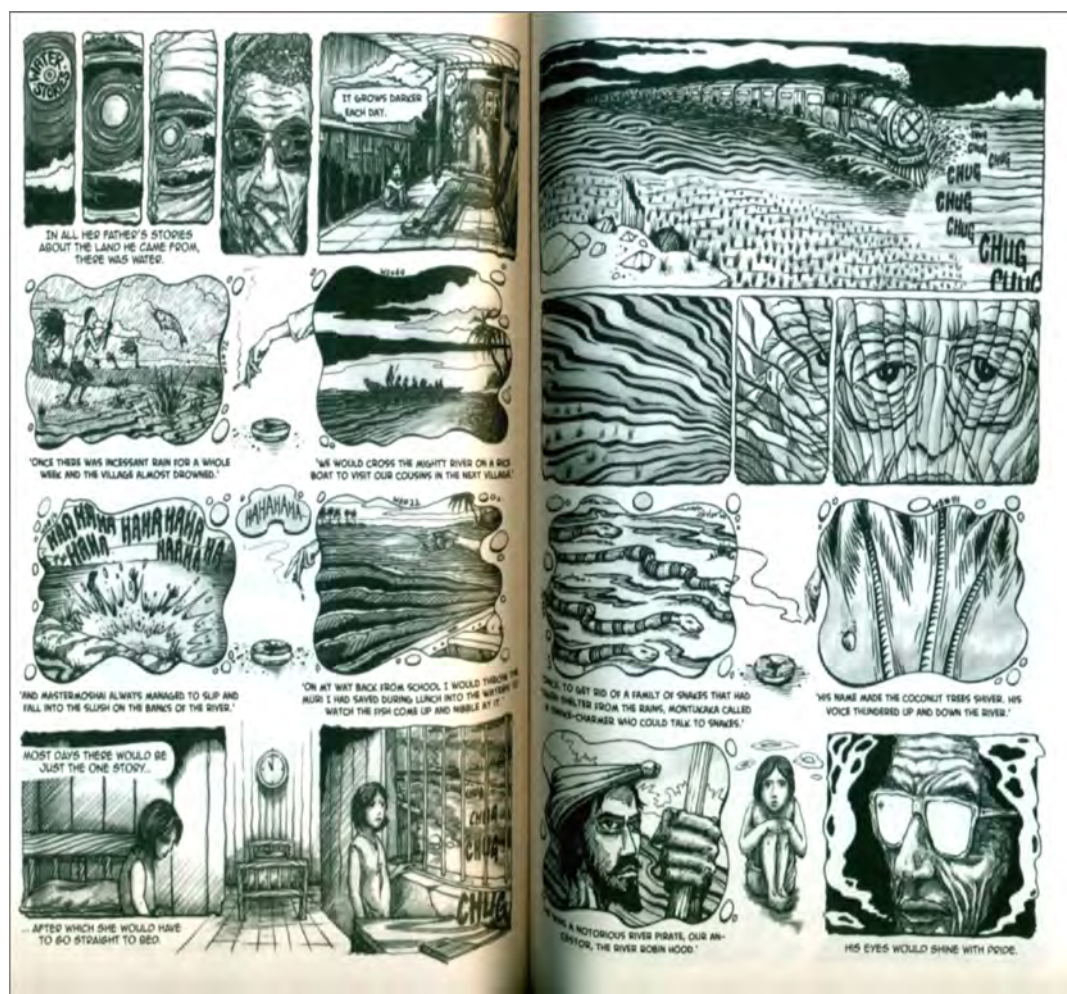


Figure 9: *This Side That Side: “Water Stories”* (pp. 130-131)

As can be perceived in the first panel of Figure 9, the iris of the eye (with “water stories” scribbled on it) gradually magnifies into the face of the man who is seen smoking a cigarette while a small child, sitting on the floor, is engrossed in listening to her father’s stories. In fact, the panels resemble a fragmented frame, thereby symbolizing the partition of India and the fractured existence of the people displaced. The child is seen engrossed amidst the water narratives as her father becomes the water with quivering waves shrouding his face, his eyes oozing pain (panel 4, p. 131). His memories of his homeland are entangled with the river Padma, which has “made and ruined many lives” and has also submerged his own mother. In the final page, it is seen that the daughter goes “looking for the river in the other land”, and as she touches it, she slowly “becomes the river” (p. 135) that, somehow, had flowed within her through her father’s narrative all the while.

Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated that the Indian historical graphic narrative, with its unique voice, is gradually carving a concrete niche for itself in the global realm of graphic narratives. The paper has explored the mechanisms through which Indian history is represented and how this aesthetic work can compete and even challenge established historical “facts” and documents that claim a monopoly on truth. More specifically, by focusing on the microcosm, that is, individual suffering, the graphic narrative flows up into the crisis in the macrocosm, that is, the national, social crisis. The past finds a new dimension in the present world through the

non-linear, multi-layered language of the graphic narrative that draws readers across disciplines with its captivating projection of history.

Thus, with the increasing number of published graphic narratives that deal with history, we may conclude that the popularity of the historical graphic narrative is not a passing fad; it is an emerging trend that has trenched deep into the domain of Indian writing in English. Indeed, as the title of Paul Gravett's article (2015) reads, "The Indian graphic novel is here to stay".

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