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## Voices of Marginalities: History, Nation and Contemporaneity in the Graphic Novels '*The River of Stories*' and '*Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimarao Ramji Ambedkar*'

**Mr. Phutke S. Narayanrao**

Assistant Professor of English, P. A. H. Mahavidyalaya, Ranisawargaon, Tq. Gangakhed Dist. Parbhani, MS.

**Dr. Sachin L. Patki**

Head & Associate Professor, Department of English, Adarsh College, Hingoli, MS.

### ABSTRACT

In the present research paper, the researchers aim to highlight the marginalities and social exclusion reflected in the context of the graphic novels, *The River of Stories* by Orijit Sen and *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimarao Ramji Ambedkar* by Srividya Natrajan et al. This aspect is treated by the Indian novelist earlier than this. But with the rise of the graphic novel and narratives, it becomes significant. The artist, with a varied background, utilized illustrations, images, colours, and text to hone their skills, resulting in a unique presentation effect. From ancient times, the voices of the socially excluded have been ignored. The research methodology adopted for this study combines descriptive and analytical approaches, utilizing illustrations from the novels to support the analysis. Through the present research, the researcher found that the voices of marginality are no longer heard by the established section of society, or in other words, superficially it seems, but beneath the reality, things are still the same. It is evident in the life of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Here, it has been demonstrated that the Indian Graphic novel is a significant phenomenon, utilizing the diverse issues of the contemporary world to present a unique and earnest portrayal of the problems

through pictures and images. The experimentation of the Indian graphic novelist shows that they have created new possibilities in world literature.

**Keywords:** *Marginalization, social exclusion, Graphic Novels, Untouchability.*

## FULL PAPER

Indian writing in English after postmodernism has undergone a sea change. A lot of experiments have been done in the area of literature, particularly in fiction. The Graphic novel evolved out of these. Western writers have influenced it, while Indian art from ancient times has also contributed to its development. During the 90s, artists and writers like Orijit Sen have made significant strides in the field of graphic narrative, notably through their work on the phenomenal graphic novel, *The River of Stories*. The second novel for the present research is *Bhimayana*, written by Srividya Natrajan and S. Anand; Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, a Pradhan Gond artist, do the illustrations. In both novels, the voices of marginality are shown curbed. It is in the historical record that the construction of the Narmada Sarovar Dam affected the indigenous tribals and uprooted them from their places, cultures, and lives. The voices of these tribals are silenced by the state and central authorities. In the second novel, *Bhimayana*, the contemporaneity of untouchables is described by relating the life of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar in 21st-century India. The present research paper is an attempt to illuminate the marginalization process by focusing on both of these graphic novels.

### Indian Graphic Novel: Historical Development:

Recently, Indian novels can be termed as the novels of experimentation. Writers like Vikram Seth, Allan Sealy, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Makarand Paranjape, Kiran Nagarkar, and Anurag Mathur write about the new trends of life and individual quest for meaning in life. Women writers like Arundhati Roy, Meena Alexander, Kiran Desai, and Jhumpa Lahiri are also contributing to this. In the post-modern period of Indian writing in English, the prominent challenge writers faced was representing the complexity of life's experiences in words. People were living in the world of globalization and its effects; they were feeling the trauma of loneliness, absurdity, and lack of communication. These experiences were necessary to create a means of escape through literature. So, the new experimentation continues in search of expressing those inner feelings and emotions. For this purpose, graphic representation was a suitable choice for the writers as it adds another dimension to the narrative techniques. Summarizing, the graphic novelist accepted the new challenge and discovered a new way of narratology. This is a unique contribution to the development of the new genre in Indian writing in English. The Dictionary Merriam Webster gives a proper definition of graphic novel in the following words: "Call it a fictional story that is presented in a comic strip format and published in a book." This genre has also been rooted in the comics in India and

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abroad. In Indian comics history, the role played by Anant Pai is noteworthy. He joined the Times of India in 1961 and started publishing *Indrajal* comics. His series of *Amar Chitra Katha*, which began in 1970, has become very popular. *Krishna* is the first story published, followed by *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The language used was initially Hindi and English, and later made available in other languages as well. However, there is a difference between graphic novels and comics, according to Lila Christensen. “In contrast to superhero comic books, graphic novels are more serious, often nonfiction, full-length, sequential art novels that explore the issues of race, social justice, global conflict, and war with intelligence and humour.” (Christensen, 227)

#### Historical wounds:

Our nation is on the path to becoming a developed country. As we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it has different challenges. Due to globalization, policymakers must develop plans for economic development. In the decision-making process of nation-building, leaders and bureaucrats have chosen to expand infrastructure, address the growing needs of the people, and create new options to fulfill these requirements. Any strategic decision made by the government has advantages and disadvantages as well. Following Indian independence, the country's energy and food demands increased due to population growth. It has become a challenge to make some plans strategically to meet the needs. Then the government of India under the leadership of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru decided to build some significant projects, including Dams, across the nation. Narmada Sagar Dam was one of them., Veena Gokhale, in an article “India’s Narmada Valley Hydro Project,” Commenting on this, “India’s Narmada Valley project-a series of 3200 dams to be built over a century on the Narmada River in the western part of the country- is the country’s biggest irrigation scheme. And, according to many environmentalists, it is also its most controversial. For Rs. 135, the project will displace more than a million people and submerge 350,000 hectares of forest and 200,000 hectares of cultivated land in exchange for providing irrigation, electricity, and the economic opportunities both will bring. As always, development comes with a price; the Narmada valley project is under worldwide scrutiny to determine how big its human and environmental price will be” (Gokhale, Veena, 01)

The foundation stone of the dam was laid in 1959, but the people affected by it gradually raised their voices against it, particularly the tribal people. Significantly, three states were involved in this project. Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh. It was decided that the people who were affected and displaced had to receive compensation in the form of land and houses. They will be rehabilitated by the government of India and the state government. Unless and until it is done, it violates the fundamental rights of human beings. Later on, social activists like Medha Patkar, Baba Amte, noted environmental activist Dr. Sundarlal Bahuguna, eminent author Arundhati Roy, and a famous actor, Amir Khan, took the initiative in the form of *Narmada Bachao Andolan*. They arranged agitation, satyagraha, and fasting to redress the injustice. Finally, with the court's verdict, the government has to give compensation to these marginalised elements.

It was a historical incident as mentioned above, and based on this, Orijit Sen, an artist and writer, wrote a beautiful Graphic novel, *The River of Stories*. Although

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he claimed “... this narrative is based on real people, places and events. It has been conceived as a work of fiction.” (Sen Orijit,02) Commenting on the rise of the graphic novel and linguistic development, Banerjee Supriya said, “A brand new trend where the artists in India have created an interface between tribal art and graphic novels is based on collective memories, oral sources, and forgotten histories, which are effective in triggering traditional language systems based on imagery and colours”. (Banerjee Supriya, 217-18)

The second novel, which is under consideration for the research, is *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar*, written by Srividya Natrajan. It's a significant graphic novel on the social evil of Untouchability. Even after 75 years of Independence, stigma is deeply rooted in the minds of people. Here, the author has taken the help of the incidents in the life of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and brilliantly juxtaposed them with the contemporary world around in the nation. The social stigma can be a part of the day-to-day life of the ordinary person everywhere. A research scholar, Suhaan Mehata, in this context said, “Indian graphic novels have created an ‘alternative space’ that ‘accommodates the voices that usually fall outside the realm of socio-politico-cultural discourses” (Mehta Suhaan, 173)

#### **Social Exclusion of the marginal peoples:**

Whenever there is a decision-making process, it is a civil call and a natural expectation to consider the opinions of the stakeholders. During the construction of the dam on the Narmada River, the leader and bureaucrats intentionally neglected the affected people. The people, particularly the tribals, who are illiterate, are far from the modern world. They have their own culture. The culture developed over time. Their art of living, artifacts, agricultural techniques, and attitude towards seeing God in everything around them are reflected in the novel. Orijit Sen, through this novel, portrays the stories of the people. Vishnu Bhai, in the book, a new journalist remarked, “But a story itself is a river. A river that welled up from the underground of human consciousness and flowed over the slopes and plains of human memory; twisting, meandering, almost as if trying to trace the million different contours of the words with which it was formed” (Sen Orijit,07) The power of politics under the name of water affects the marginalised peoples in today's India. The novel *Bhimayana*, as John Berger, eminent art critic, novelist, and poet, called this “An extraordinary book tells its story” (Natrajan, Srividya, and S. Anand, 09). The novel depicts the incidents in the life of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Most of the citizens of this country are aware of the hardships that Dr. Ambedkar faced. But those still have contemporaneity in today's India. The book brilliantly juxtaposes the incidents of Ambedkar's life and relates them to the present. It is divided into four parts, viz: Water, Shelter, Travel, and The Art of Bhimayana.

Both novels share some common elements. On water, the first right was considered the privilege of the upper classes. In *The River of Stories*, after visiting various places, Vishnu Bhai, a new journalist working for the daily *The Voice*, has intensively studied the matter regarding *Rewa Bachao Andolan*. He tirelessly interviewed individuals affected by the project, project authorities, and social activists who have become their voice. Tribals who were displaced by the project were not given

the proper compensation. Their culture and livelihood were being lost due to the construction of the Rewa Sagar Dam. The people, such as Relku and Antriyo from Jamali, and a poor weaver from Ballanpur, were affected by the dam. Gradually, there is an “upsurge of tribal consciousness.” (Sen Orijit,42) against the project. One of the social activists voiced these marginals “Today’s planners have taken us so far down the path of destructive development, that talking about alternatives may seem futile to some-and yet, that is precisely why we have all come together... because we want to express and share our confidence in our knowledge and experience, and in our ability to live wisely with nature’s gifts. I believe that a message of hope for the future is emerging...” (Sen Orijit, 46). All these things have been described in an article, REWASAGAR DAM: Monument of Progress or Wall of Despair, written by the protagonist Vishnu Bhai. The opinion of Khursheo from Umargan is heartrending. He said, “The government says they will settle us. But our community will be broken up. Our music, our festivals, our gatherings, will all come to an end. Will there be any point in living after that?” (Sen Orijit,52).



Fig.01 Article published in Voice depicted of the affected Adivasi

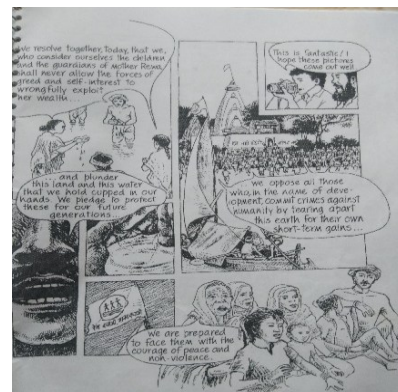


Fig. 02 Tribals and Social Activists: The life agitation against the construction of the dam

The representatives of the so-called established societies are Rathore, the liquor merchant, who spreads addiction among the youth of the tribal community, and such persons are considered honourable and respectful. With the help of money and muscle power, they exploited the tribals from their land. The inspector of Jamali is also a corrupt police official who, considering his promotion and Rathor’s acquaintance with the ACP of the police department, ill-treated Antriyo, who had complained against Rathor's fake debt. Antriyo was brother to Maaru, a drunkard, who, according to Rathor’s calculations, owed him eight thousand Rupees by drinking wine. In that crisis, Relku’s family lost their home. Ultimately, there are no options for these tribals to leave the place and everything forever. They migrated to the city helplessly. Relku with words of plight ridden said, “My life is like a river, mother, and on it I float away to the big city. I hear the sirens of the factory, father calling, beckoning... and leave your world far behind.” (Sen Orijit,28) Her roots lie in the lap of nature, but now, due to the forced migration, she is disturbed. In a research paper, research scholar Bhanupriya Rohila, while analysing the traditional art form and graphic novels, said, “Traditional art forms give individuals an opportunity to connect

with elemental life and their roots, and thereby the inclination towards traditional art forms is justified. Also, these tribal arts are the manifestations of culture and ethnicity and therefore, translate the readings into people’s cultural identity.” (Rohila Bhanupriya,19)

The insensitivity of the leaders is also shown. They intentionally did not heed the plight of these people and cunningly disguised the issue in these words: “Today, activist has come to mean the same thing as ‘terrorist.’ These people are funded by foreign countries that don’t want our nation to become powerful. Their foreign masters tell them to go to backward areas and spread wrong ideas in the minds of the people! We should denounce them as anti-nationals” (Sen Orijit,55). *Bhimayana* describes the marginalization of the untouchables. Here, the life of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is portrayed. According to Zahra Ahemad, a research scholar in a research paper entitled Perception and Purpose of Indian Graphic Novel, “The title itself is a decisive subaltern move since it subverts the Brahmanical hegemony and presents a counter narrative against them. It presents an alternate epic of heroism. The mythical god, Prince Ram, is depicted in the sacred Hindu text, Ramayana, as an ideal man. *Bhimayana* presents a parallel narrative similar to Ramayana, which is an account of the everyday expulsion of Bhimrao Ambedkar, an untouchable, from civic dignities like water, shelter, and travel. He is depicted as the central figure in the battle against the caste system. (Zahra Ahmad, 160)

**Book 1:** Water has revealed the historical injustices committed against the Mahar community, particularly its people. In the school Dr. Ambedkar as child forbidden from drinking the water freely as the other students can drink it freely “When the bell rings, all the other students go to the tap. By the time they finish, the peon has gone home and I’m not supposed to touch the tap.” (Natrajan, Srividya, and S. Anand, 19). Here in the panel, Dr. Ambedkar is shown sitting in the corner. This is a marginalization of the untouchables, as evidenced by the way the young Bhima is depicted in the panel, where a fish is on his body. Fish cannot survive without the basic need for water.

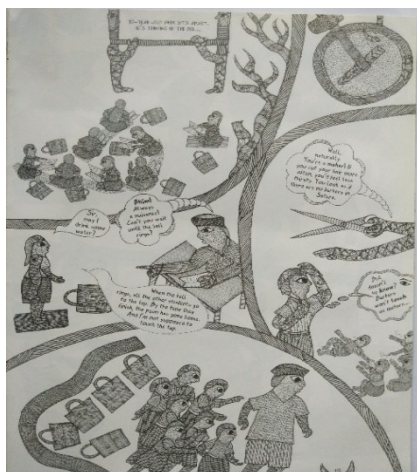


Fig. 03 Young Bhima thirsty demanding water to Teacher



Fig.04.Marginalization of Bhim in School.

In India, the caste system has been prevalent since ancient times. Before it, there was varnashrama (a system of classes based on people's skills). Some communities are suppressed in terms of fundamental human rights. Dr. Babasaheb's life suffered from this inhuman treatment from his early childhood to the end of his life. Although we got independence, the novel, through the incidents in the newspapers, shows how societal evil cannot be completely wiped away from the minds of the people. Superficially, we are equals, but still, there is inequality imprinted. The novel is described with the help of the reputed newspapers, how a Dalit was killed for digging his well, and in another news report, a Dalit woman was torched and burned alive due to the water. All this is happening in the same district where young Bhima learnt his first lesson of untouchability.

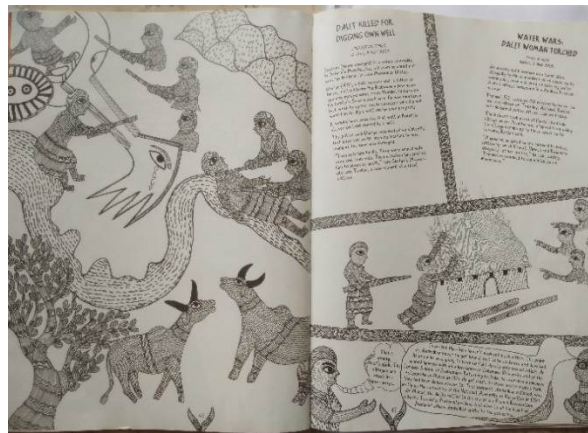


Fig.05 Recent atrocities against Dalits, which were reported in the Reputed Newspaper

In adverse conditions, young Bhima completed his education and went abroad to study extensively. On returning, he fought for the rights of the untrodden peoples. He conducted satyagraha for water in Mahad's Chavdar Tank with 3000 Dalits. Still, the established section of the society purifies the tank by pouring 108 pots containing cow dung, cow piss, ghee, and curd with the chanting of Vedic Mantras in the tank. A famous graphic novel critic and academic, Pramod K. Nayar, said:

"I propose that the graphic novel's foregrounding of history and the contemporary calls for us to be made aware of the extension and impact of the former on the latter. The sitting of tribal lives, modernized technology, media, and folklore in the same frame ensures that we see a social conflict, and a contest over not just the land but over the stories of this land, and this is the critical literacy demanded of us by the form" (Nayar, Pramod, 112)

#### Suppression and exploitation of the marginals through terror, Menace:

History witnessed the curbing of the marginalized peoples by threatening their lives. In a stereotyped society, people from the upper class believed their right to be beyond question, and consequently, power politics pervade every field. The novel *The River of Stories* describes such an incident of terror. It is shown that the Relku's family was continuously under the threat of the Rathor, a liquor merchant. He had an eye on their land because it was a prime and advantageous spot. He intentionally provides liquor to Marru, who is the uncle of Relku. By that, he claimed that Marru



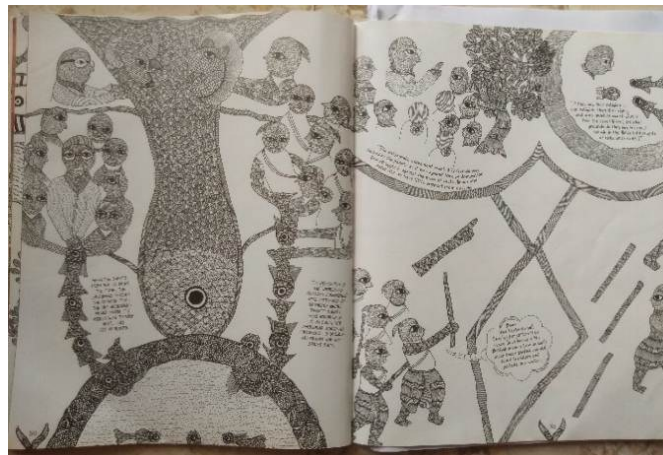


Fig.08 Dr. Ambedkar and other Dalits' conference of the depressed class was attacked by the orthodox people after the Chavdar Tank peaceful agitation.

On page 55, the news article Shackling Water is a grim reminder of today's reality, which shows there is continued social discrimination and vengeful violence by the upper class of society. The panel shows how the Dalits in Chakwara won the right to use the village pond for drinking water, but the reaction of the Hindus was to turn it into a sewer.

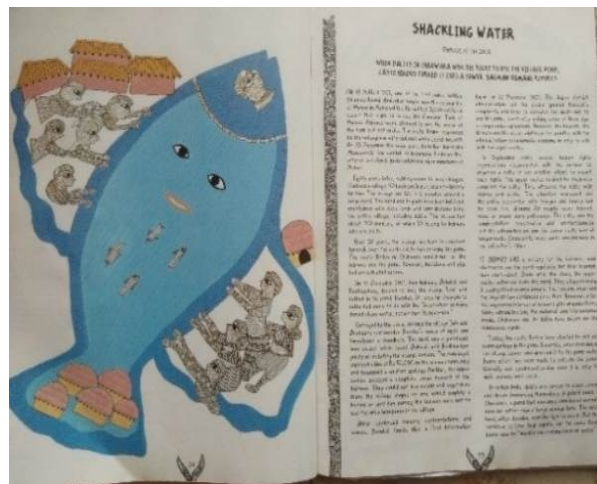


Fig. 09 At Chakwara Hindu's Unjust reactions after Dalit won the right to use the village pond

Research scholars Punyaprada Singh & Mercy George wrote an article entitled “Representation of Social Issues in Indian Graphic Novels,” published in a journal, remarked, “Caste-related graphic novels from India provide a visceral depiction of ingrained prejudices and underprivileged people's hardships. By highlighting the real-life struggles of Dalits and other oppressed groups, these works expose conventional narratives. The visual medium makes the portrayal of discrimination more intense, which makes the commentary more powerful and vivid.” (Singh, Punyaprada & Mercy George,106)

**Conclusion:**

Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* is a significant graphic novel that comments on the social consciousness raised through the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The characters are already fictional ones, as the author says, but they are telling a fictional reality. The rehabilitation of the tribals, along with the government's schemes, is a matter of debate in today's world. Another novel, *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimarao Ramji Ambedkar*, shows the incidents around us. They are demonstrated simultaneously through the news published in the various newspapers. And the fourth pillar of the state is the media. With this unique technique, Srividya Natrajan relates it to the contemporary world and shows the condition of the downtrodden, marginalised people. We are celebrating 75 years of our independence, but the condition of the people's psyche remains unchanged. Superficially, we are equal, but beneath it, still, the evil is lurking underneath. The researcher wants to conclude the research paper with the words of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: "A just society is a society in which ascending sense of reverence and descending sense of contempt is dissolved into the creation of a compassionate society."

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