



Visualising Caste and Subaltern Resistance in *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar*

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Abstract: *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar* is a graphic narrative that merges visual storytelling with socio-political critique. Using traditional Pardhan Gond art and an unconventional narrative structure, the text captures the brutal realities of caste oppression while illuminating Dr. Ambedkar's personal experiences as a subaltern subject. This paper explores how *Bhimayana* redefines biographical writing, employs indigenous artistic practices as a form of resistance, and functions as a counter-hegemonic narrative that challenges dominant discourses around caste, identity, and representation in Indian society. Drawing on subaltern studies, Dalit literature, and visual culture theory, the paper argues that *Bhimayana* not only documents Ambedkar's life but also acts as a collective voice for ongoing Dalit resistance.

Keywords: Bhimayana, Ambedkar, Dalit Literature, Subaltern, Graphic Novel, Gond Art, Caste, Visual Culture

Introduction: The caste system remains one of the most enduring forms of social stratification in India. Despite legal frameworks aimed at its abolition, caste continues to structure social relations, access to resources, and collective identities. *Bhimayana*, authored by Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand and illustrated by Durgabai and Subhash Vyam, emerges as a vital narrative that not only recounts key incidents from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's life also symbolises the resilience of Dalit voices through visual form. This graphic novel transcends the traditional boundaries of textual biography, employing the vibrant aesthetic of Pardhan Gond art to express emotions, ideologies, and resistance. It reclaims the visual and narrative space for subaltern histories, situating Ambedkar not merely as an icon but as a lived reality of protest and perseverance.

Theoretical Framework: Subalternity and Representation The concept of the subaltern, as proposed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, refers to those whose voices are historically silenced or rendered invisible by hegemonic discourse. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak argues that subalternity is not merely a social position but a condition of epistemic erasure. *Bhimayana*





intervenes in this erasure by foregrounding Ambedkar's testimonial voice and aligning it with contemporary instances of caste violence, thus bridging history with the present. It asserts that the subaltern can speak—and draw—and by doing so, challenges the historiographic monopoly of upper-caste narratives.

Visual Grammar and Symbolism in Gond Art The visual grammar of *Bhimayana* radically departs from Western comic book traditions. Instead of boxed panels and linear sequences, the narrative flows organically—fish curve across pages, trees branch into thought, and footsteps navigate memory and trauma. As Nayar (2012) notes, “The non-linear layout defies Western visual narrative logic and instead embodies the aesthetics of the Adivasi worldview, which sees nature, memory, and identity as fluid and interconnected.” The use of Gond art is not ornamental but profoundly political—it asserts the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge systems in narrating modern political histories.

As the “Politics of Storytelling” review notes, the art allows “space for all to breathe,” making visual choices such as open layouts and the absence of frames integral to its egalitarian message. The speech bubbles shaped like birds signify gentle, marginalized voices, while those shaped like scorpion tails convey the venom of casteist speech, reinforcing the anti-caste ideology of the work (“Politics of Storytelling”).

In one powerful scene, a water pot—a symbol of basic human dignity—is denied to young Ambedkar. The rejection is illustrated using thorny speech bubbles and barbed backgrounds, making the reader viscerally feel the cruelty of untouchability. Gond art's fluidity allows for an emotive and culturally embedded way of representing both the brutality and resilience inherent in Dalit experiences.

Testimony and the Ethics of Storytelling *Bhimayana* occupies the domain of what Felman and Laub term “testimonial literature”—narratives that bear witness to suffering and demand ethical engagement. By juxtaposing past and present narratives of caste violence, the novel insists that the past is not over but lingers in lived realities. For example, a section that recounts Ambedkar being denied lodging is paired with a modern example of caste discrimination in employment. This parallel not only historicises Ambedkar's trauma but collectivises it.

This approach aligns with Sharmila Rege's assertion that Dalit narratives are not individualist but collective, speaking for a shared historical and social experience. *Bhimayana* deliberately avoids the “great man” trope and instead presents Ambedkar as the representative of a larger community. This narrative collectivism contrasts with the celebratory and often sanitized portrayals of Ambedkar in mainstream politics.

Challenging Narrative Hierarchies The book's refusal to adhere to linearity or typical panel formatting disrupts the reader's comfort with narrative coherence. This mirrors the fragmentary and continuous nature of caste trauma. The speech bubbles are shaped to reflect tone—bird-shaped for calm, scorpion-like for venom—creating a visual rhetoric that supplements textual meaning. As Chacko (2020) argues, “The semiotics of the image-text in *Bhimayana* creates a new pedagogic tool to unlearn caste privilege and visual dominance.”



A notable artistic decision is the use of a consistent black-and-white style for all characters, regardless of caste, religion, or class. This not only emphasizes their shared humanity but subverts visual hierarchies based on physical appearance. As the *Politics of Storytelling* review suggests, the blue hues scattered throughout the book—particularly in water and Ambedkar's attire—evoke the “neel salam,” the blue salute of Ambedkarite ideology, turning color into a political signifier.

Dalit Literature and Graphic Resistance *Bhimayana* is part of a broader Dalit literary tradition that includes the autobiographies of Baby Kamble, Omprakash Valmiki, and Shantabai Kamble. These works foreground lived experiences as sites of resistance. What *Bhimayana* adds is a visual dimension that democratizes access to these narratives. The graphic format makes the story accessible to readers across age and literacy levels, thereby broadening the audience for Dalit voices.

As Satyanarayana and Tharu (2013) have emphasized, Dalit writing must be understood not merely as literature but as a form of sociopolitical action. *Bhimayana* fulfills this function by exposing structural violence and offering representational dignity through artistic innovation.

Conclusion: Towards a Visual Subaltern Archive *Bhimayana* is not just a biography of Ambedkar; it is a visual archive of Dalit resistance. Its significance lies in its ability to integrate aesthetics with ethics, testimony with pedagogy, and memory with activism. It expands the scope of both graphic novels and political biography by centering indigenous artistry and subaltern voices. In doing so, it invites the reader not just to observe, but to witness—and, perhaps, to act.

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