

BHIMAYANA

Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability begins in “the recent past”. A young man waiting at a bus stop complains about his unsatisfactory job and blames his lack of advancement on the system of reservations that ensures job quotas for people from the backward and scheduled castes. As a young woman waiting at the bus stop responds and engages in the debate, this man trots out a series of arguments that will be familiar to those of us who have had this debate before. That caste has been abolished; that his own merit has been unfairly overlooked; that in arguing with him the woman is talking “like one of *them*”. It’s almost a parody of the ignorant and privileged, and it works only because *we have all met people like this*. It is at this point that the unnamed woman sets out to educate him about the continuing violence perpetuated against Dalits, and she does this with reference to B.R. Ambedkar.

This framing narrative provides us with a context in which to read the main body of the text. First, it is explicitly, openly didactic. This is not a criticism of the text; simply a statement of its form. Secondly, Ambedkar’s story here is told specifically in terms of how it is relevant to *present day* caste discrimination.

With art by Durgabai and Subhash Vyam, *Bhimayana* is physically gorgeous. The artists here have chosen to eschew the traditional panel style of the graphic novel (in S. Anand’s afterword they describe this as “forc[ing] characters into boxes”), and the pages are open and free-flowing, divided in places by traditional dignas. Durgabai and Subhash Vyam are working from the Pardhan Gond tradition, and each page is filled with details that act as clever signifiers.

There are the animals, for one thing. Nature is all over this book – fortresses are fierce beasts; trains are snakes; the road is a peacock’s long neck. The handle of a water pump turns into an elephant’s trunk. The first section of the

book, which deals with the right to water, is full of water-based imagery – when the young Ambedkar is thirsty his torso turns into a fish, and when he urges a crowd to stand up for their rights the speakers morph into showers sprinkling water into the audience. A section on shelter has the recurring imagery of the banyan tree and its many twisted roots. Even the speech bubbles have significance – harsh or prejudiced words are given a tail like a scorpion’s to evoke their sting. Gentle words are encased in bubbles shaped like birds, and unspoken thoughts are given an icon to denote the mind’s eye. Trying to work out what each of these symbols mean is part of the joy of the book. With this in mind it’s rather a pity that the afterword should explain everything –this assumption that we need a translation makes me feel rather as if a layer of separation has been placed between the reader and the book.

The text itself, by Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand, is workmanlike, serving mostly as a background for the art. *Bhimayana* doesn’t attempt a comprehensive biography of Ambedkar; what we get instead is a selection of important scenes from his life. At no point does *Bhimayana* attempt (or claim) objectivity. We are allowed to see the justifiable bitterness against the Hindu religion – at one point the text even makes a flippant comment about the priests’ attempt to “purify” water touched by Dalits by using cow urine. The scorpion speech bubbles are occasionally applied to comments that are well-meaning, if ignorant and harmful.

Yet none of this is evidence of any kind of simplistic reading of caste. It’s clear throughout that caste oppression is a complex, many-tentacled beast – Bhimrao faces discrimination from Muslims, Parsis and Christians as well as Hindus. If it’s possible to draw from this book a child’s narrative of good versus evil, this is because the simplest narratives are the most politically expedient. *Bhimayana* is always conscious of that, and of the sort of book it aspires to be.