

BHIMAYANA: Experiences of Untouchability

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Genre: Historical Biography, Socio-Politics

Subthemes: Continuing practice of caste based discrimination in India

Timeline: The story is largely set in India of 2010 while contextualising its struggle against Caste by tracing it down to BR Ambedkar's (1891-1956) life.

Storyline

To say that Bhimayana is the story of how an extraordinary man's politics was instrumental for the indictment of the hydra-like Caste system rampant in India would be an incomplete truth at best. Bhimayana seeks to humanise Ambedkar by providing a graphic account of the ordinary experiences that led to the emergence of an extraordinary politics.

The story starts with a conversation between an upper caste man and a Dalit woman. The man, who is in search for a new job, is sulking about reservations and that gets the woman started. Through the use of news articles about recent events, she makes him conscious of the ubiquity of caste based discrimination in India while simultaneously situating every such incident to the life of Babasaheb Ambedkar.

The book is divided into three major chapters: Water, Shelter and Travel. As any ordinary human being would, these are the things Ambedkar seeks in his life. As the young Bhim becomes conscious of his identity, the struggle for these basic needs translates into something bigger: the struggle for Equality.

Each chapter is layered with metaphors. In the first chapter, a thirsty child in school is made to look like a fish who pleads to his teacher for water. Among the upper castes in the classroom, Bhim is clearly a fish out of water. When the young Bhimrao returns to Baroda from Columbia, his search for a shelter is also a search for companionship, comfort and spiritual recognition. Rejected by the Parsis at their inn, turned away by a Christian friend and later insulted by a Muslim, Bhimrao learns that no religion is willing to accommodate Dalits as equal practitioners. This search for Shelter lasts all his life until he finds solace in the Buddha just before his death.

The book is unapologetically political in its approach. It is unsparing of Hinduism, the Brahmins and Gandhi. At the same time, it is uniquely innovative in its narrative style. While Ambedkar is quoted throughout, there are several references to significant personalities from his life like his professor at Columbia, John Dewey. The poets Namdeo Dhasal and Dilip Chitre find place in innovative ways as their poetry introduces the reader to the modern day children of Ambedkar. The storyboard itself breaks into poetry every now and then. Fancy this:

“Vadodara, named for the kindly banyan tree,

In all your crowded streets there is no place for me.”

The Pardhan Gond artists use their rich art as they embrace Ambedkar as one of their own. They remain true their own artistic tradition in their rejection of the usual boxes and panels choosing to replace it with the Gond digna instead. The boundaries of each digna resemble the fences one sees in villages. The Gond love for aquatic life is wholeheartedly. Other animals such as the cow, snakes, peacocks, dogs, lions and a variety of birds constitute an important part of the art work for this book and have been placed creatively in its narrative.

The story culminates into the most important events of Ambedkar's life towards the end of the book. Namely, the confrontation with Gandhi over separate electorates for Dalits, the drafting of the Constitution for independent India and the mass conversion to Buddhism led by Ambedkar towards the end of his life. However, the most beautifully captured moment from Ambedkar's life remains the Mahar Satyagraha of 1927. As S. Anand has written, this is possibly the most innovative use of gutter space in the history of graphic art. The struggle for access to water results in water becoming a panacea for Dalits. Ambedkar's words of wisdom fall on Dalits like water from sprinklers.

Symbolism

Bhimayana chooses the iconic dialectical approach of storytelling through a conversational style. This has been used by Plato in his 'Republic' and Gandhi in 'Hind Swaraj'. This is no coincidence. Neither is it a choice for the purpose of making the story most accessible. It is a symbolic statement regarding the historical significance of the story of Bhim's life.

The narrative ploy of representing the woman as the Dalit who informs the nonchalant upper caste man is equally radical. As Sirish Rao and Gita Wolf write in the introduction to Bhajju Shyam's 'The London Jungle Book' (2005), Good Art does not represent, it signifies. When Ambedkar is thirsty, he becomes a fish. When Ambedkar is contemplative in Kamathi Baug, he becomes the garden.

When Ambedkar returns to Baroda after completing his studies in Columbia, his life takes a full circle. The naive Ambedkar is under the impression that he has risen above his social status and Caste identity but the Brahmin copassenger on the train to Baroda is quick to make him conscious of it. The cyclical nature of identity based oppression is depicted through the circuitous path of the slithering train.

The book uses different bubbles to represent different thought processes. A person whose thought process is castest speaks from a snake-like bubble. All victims of caste based discrimination speak from bird-like bubbles. A third kind of bubble is the thought bubble that has eyes of its own and represents things that remain unspoken. In the end, the upper caste man finds himself speaking the language of the oppressed after having received a lesson in his caste privilege from the Dalit woman.

When he says “Jai Bhim!” to her before boarding the bus, his speech bubble transforms from a snake to a bird for the first and only time in the book.

But the most symbolic metaphor in the book remains the use of hands in it. Hands of all kinds can be found in it. The hand that refuses to touch and hence leaves behind an echo of casteism is recurring element. Whenever a character makes a casteist remark, s/he is shown having a progressing trail of hands that point at the oppressed. Similarly, the Mahars leave a trail of their footsteps wherever they go. The hands of solidarity, the touch of the hand amongst Dalits, the strength of the fist and the profound message entailed in a raised hand with a finger pointing upwards while the other hand carries the book serve varying purposes in the overarching narrative of Bhimayana.