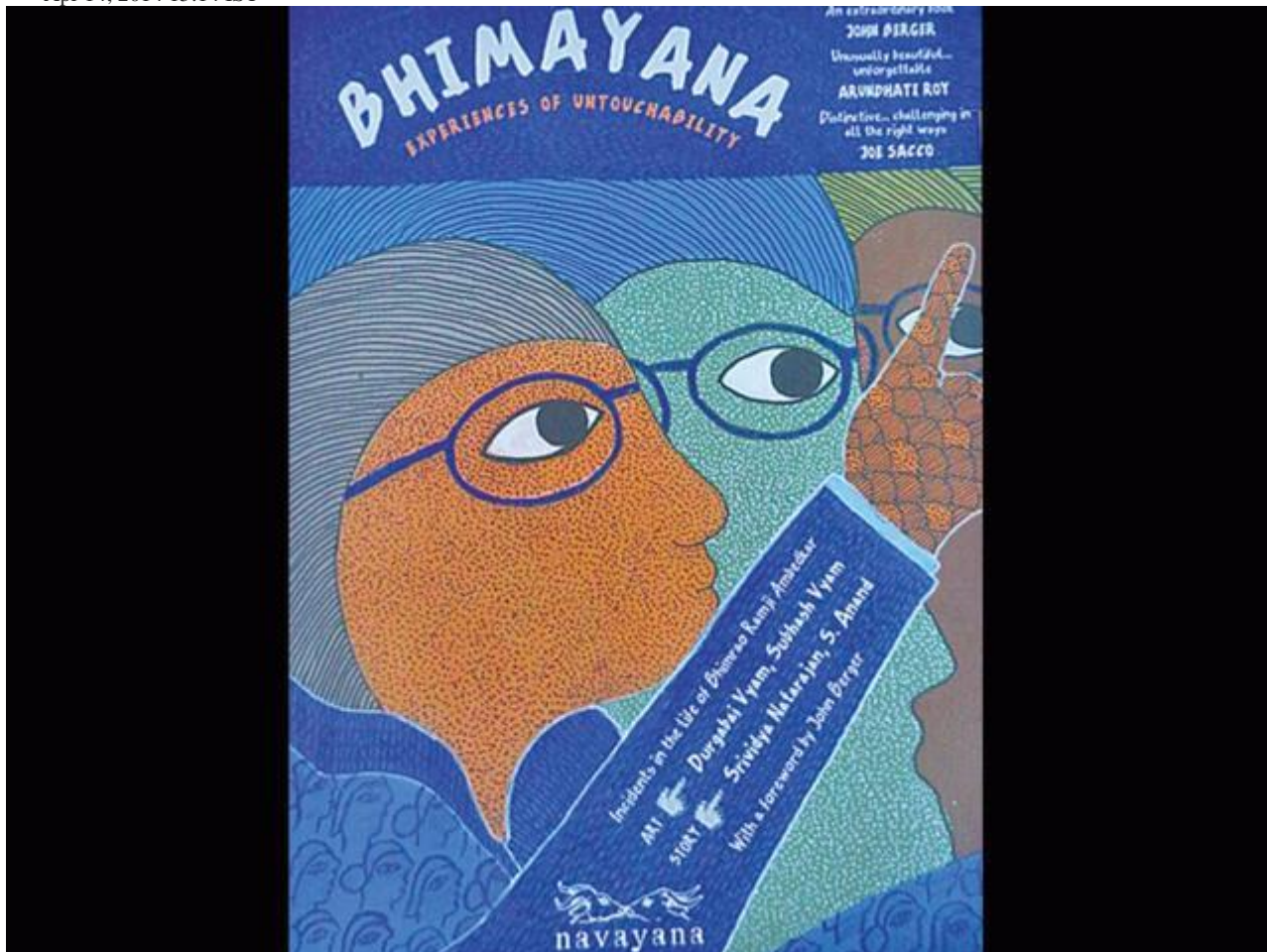


Gone with the Wind, James Bond make way for Ambedkar in Delhi University

Paramita Ghosh, Hindustan Times, New Delhi

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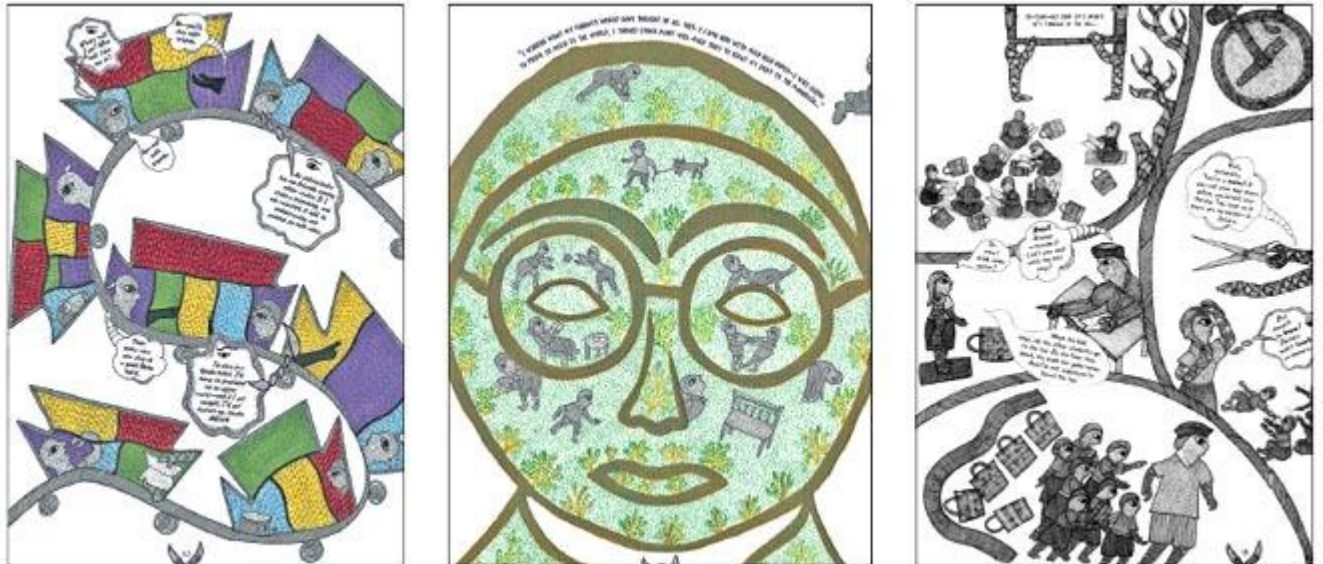
Cover-of-the-B-R-Ambedkar-graphic-novel-being-taught-as-course-in-Delhi-University

This year, Delhi University chucked *Gone with the Wind* and *James Bond* from its optional paper (now compulsory) on popular literature in the English undergraduate course, and included *Bhimayana*, a book on some of the experiences of B.R. Ambedkar's early life. Probably the first graphic book to be incorporated into the syllabus of any Indian university, it has, however, raised a few questions on the way Ambedkar has made an entry into the realm of 'popular' culture even as he remains a diminished figure in the life of our nation, fixated as it is on Gandhi, Nehru and Patel.

So, would the inclusion of *Bhimayana* count as a progressive move? Its inclusion in the new syllabus has more to do with making a gesture towards Ambedkar; an attempt to "give Dalits

their due”, than about a re-positioning of Ambedkar and his politics in history, say some Delhi University teachers.

Since January 2014, Bhimayana is being taught in classrooms. “Ambedkar is not just the answer to a quiz question. He was more than the drafter of the Constitution,” says Catherine Robinson to her students while teaching the book to her class at the Jesus and Mary College, Delhi. “He was a man of politics, he led 3,000 Dalits in the Mahad satyagraha of Maharashtra to assert their right to use water from a tank.”



Artwork from the book by Gond Pardhan artists, Durgabai and Subhash Vyam

As she works the class, the responses to the book, however, throws light on the way urban middle-class students might be reading the book and which the book, it has to be said, leads them onto. The conversation between the cool, upper-caste dude and the bespectacled activist girl woven through the book sets the terms in which readers might consider the caste question -- as part of the reservation debate with all its related anxieties alongwith a story of Ambedkar’s plight as a Dalit.

“Whether the book makes us have respect for Dalit politics I don’t know, but it sure makes us conscious of the community and aware of their suffering,” says Durba, a student at another college. For students, Dalit suffering thus remains an academic question.

Academicians, however, insist the book has the potential to overcome its limitations if taught in the right way. “Bhimayana succeeds in undermining some of the presumptions of upper-caste logic if discussed in a manner that questions the silent acceptance of prevalent Brahmanical logic,” says Sachin N, who teaches the book at Dayal Singh College.

Bhimayana is, indeed, the perfect book for a politics of inclusion. S Anand, whose publishing house has brought it out, points to its educational value. “I grew up reading school-books that told me nothing about Ambedkar. There’s been some awareness in the last two decades thanks to the Dalit movement. Yet, few know that Ambedkar experienced untouchability from his childhood till well after he became a statesman. We have heard about Gandhi’s South Africa train

experience where he was discriminated against but we did not know, as Dalits did, that Ambedkar did not have to travel abroad to experience discrimination.”

The issue, however, is not the rehabilitation of Ambedkar or to give him voice but to see his politics as integral to his life. Written like a bildungsroman, *Bhimayana* follows Ambedkar through selected episodes from his childhood to adult life and shows his ‘growth’ as a response to his adverse circumstances. There is less space here for that Ambedkar who, in such politically charged and intellectually incisive tracts as *The Annihilation of Caste*, had written about changing the structure of oppression itself, and about Dalits themselves being agents of such change.

Nandini Chandra, author, *The Classic Popular-Amar Chitra Katha*, who works on graphic/comic literature also pointed to the unwitting contradictions in form, by the matching of tribal art to the story of a Dalit icon.

“Tribal art harks back to a primitivism, a lost paradise. In the Dalit world, there’s no liberation in going back to the past,” she says. “While the story emphasizes the need for a Dalit standpoint, the eclecticism of the graphic novel tends to make this just another viewpoint, not something that grounds the world.”

The educative value of Ambedkar’s biography cannot merely lie in it being a sociological representation and recognition of Dalit oppression. Ambedkar is a figure of an intellectually-powerful current of emancipatory politics. But can popular forms of literature like a comic/graphic book do justice to him? It sure is a challenge, particularly in a society that seeks, both in reality and imagination, to reduce Dalits to objects of atrocities rather than active political subjects capable of changing their destiny. In terms of confronting that challenge, *Bhimayana* is not quite there. But it is the crucial first step in that direction.