Empowering Narratives: The Role of Gond Art in Graphic Storytelling of Bhimayana

Roopa Rani G.S[1], Dr. K. Charles Godwin[2]

[1]Research Scholar
English Jain (Deemed-to-be) University.
Bengaluru
[2]Associate Professor, Department of English
Centre of Management Studies
Jain(Deemed-to-be) University

ABSTRACT

Storytelling, as an ancient art form, transcends mere narration; it breathes life into cultural memory, weaving together the past and present through vivid imagery and symbolism. The evolution of storytelling through the interplay of word and image in the post-millennial era, with a particular focus on contemporary Indian graphic narratives. Tracing the history of storytelling from its origins in cave paintings to the digital age, the study emphasizes the significant impact of technology on narrative forms. Contemporary Indian graphic narratives, especially Bhimayana transcends conventional comic books by delving into themes that reflect India's sociocultural and political landscape. The article highlights how this narrative incorporate endangered traditional indigenous art forms, particularly Gond blending folk and tribal aesthetics with modern storytelling techniques. This fusion adds depth and complexity, offering readers a culturally immersive experience that showcases India's rich heritage. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the text and attempts to argue that the integration of traditional art forms into contemporary graphic narratives not only preserves these endangered practices but also empowers the storytelling process, making it a powerful medium for exploring and retelling the diverse facets of Indian society.

Keywords: Gond, Storytelling, Comics, Visual Narrative

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling, as ancient as humanity itself, has always been a fundamental part of our existence, deeply intertwined with our most primal instincts. From the earliest days of civilization, humans have sought to make sense of the world by piecing together the fragments of life and imbuing them with meaning through the use of symbols, signs, and imagery. The origins of this timeless practice can be traced back to the earliest cave paintings, where our ancestors used visual narratives to communicate their experiences, beliefs, and understanding of the world. These primitive illustrations not only served as a medium of expression but also laid the groundwork for a storytelling tradition that has evolved and endured throughout the millennia. Before the advent of spoken language and writing, visual storytelling was the primary method through which knowledge and culture were shared and preserved. In those early times, the human need to connect and communicate found expression in the vivid images etched onto cave walls, capturing the essence of life in a way that words could not. As human societies progressed, there was a significant evolution in storytelling practices, moving from purely visual depictions to a more complex blend of visual and oral narratives. This marked a pivotal moment in the history of storytelling, as the integration of speech with imagery allowed for a richer, more nuanced conveyance of human experience. The combination

of these two modes of storytelling became a powerful tool for education, cultural continuity, and the preservation of collective memory.

The shift from visual storytelling alone to the use of both visual and oral narratives signalled a major advancement in the way stories were told, shared, and passed down through generations. This hybrid approach became a cornerstone of human civilization, enabling stories to transcend time and space, carried forward through the spoken word and visual symbols. As these stories travelled from one generation to the next, they not only transmitted cultural heritage but also evolved, adapting to the changing contexts and needs of the societies that embraced them. Storytelling, in its various forms, has long been a resilient and adaptable practice, mirroring the ever-evolving nature of human society while safeguarding the essential elements that bind our collective experiences. At its core, storytelling began with visual representations, as evidenced by the ancient cave paintings that stand as the earliest records of humanity's attempts to communicate and make sense of the world. These visual narratives, rich in symbols and imagery, were the first mediums through which knowledge, beliefs, and cultural values were shared within communities. As societies evolved, so too did the methods of storytelling, transitioning from purely visual depictions to more complex forms, including oral narratives that further enriched the storytelling tradition.

The transition from visual storytelling to the use of written language marked a pivotal moment in the history of human communication. Writing, which has its origins in drawing, gradually evolved into structured scripts that allowed for the recording of stories in a more permanent and accessible form. This development was crucial in ensuring that stories could endure beyond the limitations of oral transmission, which often relied on memory and person-to-person retelling. While oral storytelling was powerful in its immediacy and emotional resonance, it was vulnerable to the passage of time, with stories potentially being lost or altered as they were passed down through generations. The advent of writing provided a solution to this problem, allowing stories to be preserved in their original form and shared across vast distances and generations. For instance, Aesop's Fables, which originated as oral tales, have survived for millennia largely because they were recorded in written form, ensuring their continued existence and influence. However, this shift from visual and oral storytelling to written narratives also led to the gradual decline of visual storytelling as a dominant mode of communication. The scribal practices that emerged with the development of writing began to prioritize the recording of spoken language over visual representations, leading to a diminished role for the latter in the preservation of stories. The rich tradition of visual storytelling, which had been the cornerstone of human communication for thousands of years, was increasingly overshadowed by the written word. Yet, the ancient cave paintings, the earliest known specimens of storytelling, remain as a testament to the enduring power of visual narratives. These paintings, some dating back tens of thousands of years, continue to speak to us across the ages, reminding us of the primal origins of storytelling and its deep connection to our shared human experience. The evolution from visual to written storytelling, while transformative, also underscores the importance of remembering and honouring the diverse ways in which stories have been told and preserved throughout history.

Over the past two centuries, visual storytelling has experienced rapid and dramatic changes, driven by technological advancements. Since the early 1800s, innovations like photography, motion pictures, telephones, radio, and television have fundamentally altered the way stories are told and shared. The introduction of digital media, mobile platforms, and social media in particular has become one of the most powerful means of communication today, rivaling traditional forms such as print media, television, and film. The digital era has ushered in a new chapter for visual storytelling, where the medium itself plays a crucial role in shaping how stories are told, interpreted, and disseminated. Graphic narratives have emerged as a significant form within this dynamic realm, captivating modern audiences by blending text and imagery to navigate intricate cultural landscapes. The synergy between the visual and the verbal in graphic narratives not only engages contemporary readers but also offers a powerful tool for exploring and expressing the complexities of today's cultural realities.

The Impact of Indigenous Art on the Graphic Narrative Landscape
The contemporary Indian graphic narrative has evolved far beyond the traditional confines of comic books. It now explores a wide spectrum of themes and visual styles, moving beyond the mere depiction of

mythological stories, moral lessons, or heroic figures. This genre has grown to reflect a unique sensibility, one that is deeply connected to India's sociocultural and political landscape. By crafting visual narratives that create a distinctive cultural identity within India, these graphic works simultaneously question and challenge existing myths and cultural norms. Boldly addressing topics such as the partition, sexuality, child abuse, women's menstrual health, puberty, and migration—subjects that traditional comics rarely touched—the Indian graphic narrative has emerged as a specialized and significant artistic form, relevant to the complexities of modern Indian society.

Creators of graphic narratives have been pushing the boundaries not just in content but also in form. One significant aspect of their innovation is the revival of endangered traditional indigenous art forms. Artists, publishers, and designers are actively working to breathe new life into folk and tribal art, which has seen a decline in popularity amidst the rise of modern artistic expressions. In contemporary times, these traditional Indian art forms have seamlessly integrated into the realm of graphic narratives, creating a unique synergy. This fusion of traditional art with the comic medium has enriched the narrative landscape, adding depth and complexity to the discourse in a meaningful way.

Folk and tribal arts are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural and socio-political fabric of India, each with its unique context and significance. Beyond their cultural richness, these artistic traditions, when integrated into graphic narratives, provide a distinct visual language that enhances the reading experience. The stylistic elements—such as colors, shades, shapes, and spatial arrangements—play a crucial role in setting the narrative tone, creating an immersive atmosphere that engages the reader in ways that text alone cannot achieve. The combination of traditional art forms with contemporary storytelling adds layers of depth and complexity to the graphic narrative, offering a powerful medium through which to explore and understand the diverse aspects of Indian society, both past and present. Indian graphic narratives that draw upon folk and tribal art traditions present readers with an experience that is not only culturally enriching but also visually captivating. These narratives invite readers to engage with the story on multiple levels, encouraging them to follow the flow of the panels, interpret the interplay between visual elements and written dialogue, and actively participate in uncovering the meaning behind the narrative. This dynamic interaction between images and text stimulates the imagination, creating a multi-dimensional reading experience where the visual elements are as vital to the storytelling as the words themselves.

The intricate and vibrant artwork featured in these graphic narratives is integral to the overall reading experience. Traditions such as Madhubani, Warli, Patachitra, and Gond art bring to life visually stunning panels that captivate the viewer's attention. The detailed craftsmanship, from the meticulous brushwork to the delicate patterns and vivid colors, transforms each frame into a piece of art that invites close examination. Readers are drawn into the rich visual world these traditions offer, allowing them to appreciate the skill and creativity that goes into each narrative. This fusion of art and storytelling not only honors India's artistic heritage but also provides a visually enchanting and culturally immersive reading journey.

The integration of graphic storytelling techniques with folk and tribal arts significantly elevates the narrative experience. The visuals not only complement the written text but often extend beyond it, conveying emotions, setting the mood, and introducing additional layers of meaning. The intricate designs and symbolic motifs inherent in these traditional art forms add contextual depth, infusing the story with richer cultural connections and subtleties that might otherwise be overlooked. Deeply embedded in India's cultural heritage, folk and tribal arts bring a distinct sense of identity and tradition when woven into graphic narratives. They transport readers into the landscapes, customs, and mythologies of various regions, offering a glimpse into diverse cultural backgrounds. This fusion of artistic expression and storytelling not only celebrates India's rich artistic legacy but also creates a unique synergy between visual aesthetics and narrative, enhancing both in ways that might not be as impactful when used independently. By combining these two modalities, the storytelling gains a new dimension, where the power of each is amplified through their union. The result is a narrative that is as visually compelling as it is culturally resonant, offering a multifaceted exploration of heritage and artistry that resonates with readers on multiple levels.

Endangered traditional art forms have discovered a new platform in graphic narratives, transitioning from their original mediums of mud walls, floors, and textiles to modern glossy pages and even the digital domain. This fusion creates a unique idiom that reflects Indian culture while providing economic and social empowerment to artists. With India's vast cultural diversity and the variety of regional art forms, Indian graphic narratives have the potential to develop into a genre as distinctive as Japanese Manga or French Bande Dessinée, representing a unique mode of cultural expression. Historically, comics have often been dismissed as trivial, juvenile entertainment, leading to a lack of serious scholarly attention. This perception of comics as insignificant has relegated them to the margins of academic inquiry. However, the growing interest in cultural studies and the critical examination of cultural hierarchies have begun to shift this view. The advent and popularization of the term 'graphic novel' have also contributed to the recognition of this medium within academic circles, marking a significant shift in its scholarly acceptance.

Cultural Significance of Gond Art

The Gonds are one of the largest indigenous communities in central India, primarily residing in the region now known as Madhya Pradesh. Their rich history and cultural heritage stretch back nearly a thousand years. The name "Gond" originates from the Dravidian word "kondi," which translates to "green mountain," reflecting their deep connection to nature. However, the Gonds refer to themselves as the Koiture. Traditionally, they have lived as forest dwellers, with a spiritual practice centered around the worship of natural elements and forces. Their supreme deity is Baradev, who holds a central place in their religious beliefs. The Gonds speak the Gondi language, which has its roots in the ancient Dravidian language family, further connecting them to their historical and cultural lineage. Gond art is deeply intertwined with the community from which it originates, offering a vivid portrayal of the world the artists inhabit. The use of vibrant colors and animated motifs, filled with intricate patterns of dots and dashes, breathes life into scenes of the jungle. Trees, animals, birds, and elements like the sky, water, and earth seem to sway and move in harmony with the rhythmic brushstrokes and tunes of the Pardhan storytellers. These paintings transport viewers into a world where imagination and surprise blend seamlessly.

Traditionally, Gond artists derived their colours from natural sources such as charcoal, coloured soil, plant sap, leaves, flowers, and even cow dung. The creative application of lines in these paintings infuses the still images with a dynamic sense of movement. More than just art, these paintings serve as offerings in the worship of nature, while also acting as protective charms to ward off evil. A distinctive feature of Gond art is the use of signature patterns to fill the larger forms on the canvas, with a notable balance and symmetry. Spiral forms, along with depictions of trees, leaves, animals, and human figures, are commonly used, all rendered in bright, bold colours. The meticulous placement of motifs that showcase village life, and the seamless blending of human figures with scenes of rituals and nature, demonstrate the Gonds' remarkable skill and creativity. For Gond artists, everything in their environment is sacred and deeply connected to nature, and this reverence is reflected in their work. Their unique oral narrative tradition finds a visual counterpart in their paintings, where storytelling is an intrinsic element. While these artists draw from their rich folklore and cultural heritage, each one also develops a personal style and a unique visual language within these narrative frameworks. This individuality has led to a rich diversity of aesthetic forms and styles in Gond art, making each piece a reflection of both communal traditions and personal expression.

The Pardhan Gond clan of Gonds and their contributions to the evolution of Gond art form the foundation of an exploration into the intersection of this traditional art style with the comics medium, particularly in relation to **Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability**. This graphic narrative intricately weaves together the life and challenges faced by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar with the broader struggles of Dalit communities. The work showcases how Gond art has been adapted to the comic form, providing a powerful visual and narrative portrayal of the enduring fight against caste-based discrimination.

Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability, published by Navayana, India's pioneering anti-caste publishing house, is a graphic biography that chronicles the life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. The narrative draws from Ambedkar's own account, "Waiting for a Visa" (1935-36), and is reinterpreted in *Bhimayana* by Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand. The visual storytelling is brought to life through the distinctive artwork of Subhash Vyam

and Durga Bai Vyam. Although it captures only a segment of Ambedkar's life, *Bhimayana* stands out as a significant work of graphic non-fiction, merging powerful visuals with a compelling narrative to illuminate the experiences of untouchability.

Structured into four chapters—"One Day," "Water," "Shelter," and "Travel"—followed by a final section written by Anand that delves into the book's production process, the narrative traces Ambedkar's harrowing encounters with untouchability from his childhood to his early adulthood, illustrating how these experiences influenced his perspective on society. Throughout the book, Ambedkar faces the indignities of being denied access to basic necessities like water, shelter, and public transportation. The portrayal of such atrocities inflicted upon marginalized communities, rendered through the lens of a minor art form rooted in another marginalized group, is a fitting approach to capturing these profound injustices. This intersection of narrative and art not only highlights the systemic oppression faced by Ambedkar but also underscores the shared struggles of different marginalized communities, creating a powerful commentary on social exclusion. The title **Bhimayana** serves as an ironic reinterpretation of the **Ramayana**. The book presents two intertwined narratives: the historical account of Ambedkar's life struggles and a contemporary collage of reports on caste-based atrocities. This dual narrative structure is non-linear and fragmented, moving fluidly between past and present.

The first chapter, titled "One Day," begins with a conversation between two individuals waiting at a bus stop in an Indian city. One of them, frustrated with his current situation, blames his unsatisfying job on the caste-based reservation system. His companion, sitting beside him, counters by highlighting the inherent unfairness of the caste system itself and discusses the harsh realities faced by Dalits, referencing recent news reports that detail these injustices. She then shifts the conversation to recount the life and struggles of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, intertwining historical insights with contemporary events. The setting, with its unspecified time and location, reflects the ubiquity of such discussions about caste in modern urban India. The characters, who are educated, English-speaking, and belong to the upper caste, represent a segment of society that often engages in these debates. The woman, in particular, plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between the historical experiences of Dalits and the present-day realities. By moving seamlessly from discussing recent news to narrating Ambedkar's life, she connects the dots between the past and the present. Through this dialogue, the chapter offers a deeper understanding of the ongoing struggles faced by Dalits. It not only sheds light on the historical context of these issues but also underscores their relevance in contemporary society. By linking Ambedkar's life and legacy with current events, the book invites readers to reflect on the enduring impact of caste on Indian society and the continuous fight for equality and justice

The chapter titled "Water" is about how Dalits are denied access to primary water sources. It begins with the discrimination faced by Ambedkar as a child in Satara. As a Mahar, he had to sit apart from his classmates in school. The teacher laments about how the British government's policy to allow untouchables into school disregards age-old customs of the country. It underlines the discrimination Dalits face in the pursuit of education. The ten-year-old was not allowed to drink water from the school water tap lest he pollute it with his touch; neither would any clerk or peon in the school give him drinking water. The Vyams portray little Bhim's thirst by drawing a fish inside his stomach. The swelling of the fish expresses the intensity of his thirst. Little Bhim is placed at the corners of each page. One or two among these are drawn in such a manner that only half of his body is visible and the other half does not exist.

The chapter,"Shelter" vividly illustrates Ambedkar's struggle to secure a place to stay upon his return from his academic pursuits abroad. After completing his studies at Columbia University and the London School of Economics, Ambedkar travels by train from Bombay to Baroda. There, he is set to begin his role as a probationer in the Accountant General's office, to repay his debt to Maharaja Sayaji Rao of Baroda. The train journey, characterized by its winding path, metaphorically mirrors the twists and turns in Ambedkar's thoughts as he reflects on the slim prospects of untouchable finding accommodation in the city, regardless of his qualifications. His troubles commence when he seeks refuge in an old Parsi inn, mistakenly believing that the Zoroastrian faith is free from the prejudices of untouchability. Upon revealing his Hindu identity, he is informed that the inn caters exclusively to Parsis. Although there are empty rooms available, he is told he may stay only if he assumes a Parsi identity. When the inn's occupants discover his untouchable status, their hostility erupts; they

berate him, threaten violence for defiling their premises, and forcibly eject him. Attempts to seek assistance from government authorities are fruitless, and even his friends offer no support. Their reactions are depicted as sharp, piercing arrows directed at him. Isolated and despondent, Ambedkar considers returning to Bombay, coming to the painful realization that, despite his education and accomplishments, Hindu society will persist in viewing him as inferior and denying him a dignified existence. In the chapter titled "Travel," Ambedkar recounts a significant event from 1929 during his visit to Chalisgaon. The villagers, overjoyed by his presence, invited him to stay overnight after his return from Dhulia. Their delight is vividly illustrated, likened to the exuberance of a dancing peacock. However, Ambedkar faced a grave challenge when all the tonga drivers refused to transport him due to his status as an untouchable. In response, a family from the untouchable community in Chalisgaon sent their nephew to help Ambedkar, arranging for his journey home in a tonga. Tragically, the tonga met with an accident due to the driver's lack of skill. Both the driver, who sustained a broken arm and ribs, and Ambedkar, who suffered serious injuries, were left in a precarious state. The Dalit community of Chalisgaon came together to provide care and support, nursing Ambedkar back to health.

The use of speech balloons in the narrative is also noteworthy, each style conveying a different emotional tone and character. The speech balloons for those who advocate for justice are shaped like sparrows, symbolizing their victimhood and struggle. In contrast, the speech bubbles representing those who express hostility towards Dalits are designed with a scorpion tail motif, reflecting their venomous and hostile attitudes. This thoughtful design choice enhances the narrative, visually distinguishing the varying sentiments and perspectives within the story. In Gond art, thought balloons are uniquely depicted through eyes, symbolizing the mental process of thinking and introspection. Characters are rendered with clean, bordered outlines and adorned with intricate patterns of dots or lines, creating a distinctive visual style. Anatomical distinctions between genders are blurred; female figures lack explicit breast features, while male figures often feature exaggerated round buttocks. This treatment results in figures that appear highly androgynous, exuding a gentle, calming presence. The understated and serene portrayal of Gondi figures transports the storytelling from the harsh realities faced by Dalits into a more tranquil, dreamlike realm. Gond art thus offers a sanctuary, allowing the Dalit community to momentarily escape and find solace from their challenging circumstances.

In stark contrast, upper caste figures are depicted with symbolic distortions that emphasize their perceived moral failings. Often, these characters are illustrated with animal-like features such as tails emerging from their trousers, which serves to undermine their dignity. For instance, a casteist station master might be shown with a cat's tail protruding from his pants, while Dalit figures might be depicted with a mouse emerging from theirs. This cat-and-mouse imagery reflects the ongoing antagonism between the upper castes and the untouchables, illustrating a deep-seated conflict rooted in Gond cosmology. Through these artistic choices, Gond art critiques societal hierarchies and reflects the enduring tensions between different social groups. In traditional comics, readers follow a zigzag path from one panel to another, moving left to right. However, *Bhimayana* diverges from this convention by not utilizing standard panels. Instead, it employs a variety of visual cues to guide the reader through its narrative. These visual indicators help navigate the broad sections, which are delineated by both digna (decorative elements) and open spaces. Throughout the book, fragmented depictions of hands, fingers, and feet are used to represent individuals, creating a unique form of visual storytelling.

In conclusion, **Bhimayana** utilizes Gond art to create a powerful and immersive graphic narrative that challenges conventional storytelling methods. The use of dismembered fingers as narrative tools, acting like a third-person perspective, not only guides the reader through the story but also vividly illustrates the moral judgments within the narrative. The portrayal of Dalit characters as animals, such as the depiction of Ambedkar's bus journey transforming into a four-legged creature, further underscores the marginalization and dehumanization faced by Dalits. By juxtaposing the biographical details of Ambedkar's life with contemporary reports of Dalit oppression, **Bhimayana** weaves a linear narrative that brings clarity and focus to scattered historical events. This fusion of visual and textual elements highlights the critical role of Gond art in enhancing the storytelling experience, making the narrative both visually compelling and deeply resonant. The artistic choices in **Bhimayana** not only empower the narrative but also reinforce the importance of imagery in shaping and conveying the complex realities of social injustice.

References

Anand, S. A Digna for Bhim. *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, Navayana, 2011.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. The Forest of Enchantment,Harper Collins, 2019.

Dutt, Gurusaday. Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal: The Collected Papers. Seagull Books, 1990.

Haimendorf, C.V. F. "Pardhans: The Bards of the Gonds." The Gonds of Andhra Pradesh. Allen and Unwin, 1979.

Kent Puckett. Narrative Theory:A Critical Introduction, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Kumar, P. P. The fascinating world of retellings: Retellings of the Indian epics.

Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL), 2016: Vol. 4, No. 2, 793-797.

Matsuoka, Kodai, and Bhajju Shyam. Origins of Art: The Gond Village of Patangarh. Tara Books, 2019.

McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics. Harper Perennial, 1994

Millet, Kate. Sexual Politics, Columbia University Press, 2016