The Vast Potential of Graphic Narratives in Shaping Conversations Surrounding Socio-Political Issues

I sat in silence, stunned, and slowly shut the book. I held it to my chest for a moment before immediately flipping it open and leafing back to some of the most striking parts in an attempt at reliving the discovery of the story again. Malik Sajad's graphic novel *Munnu* captures the turbulence and grief of a childhood against the backdrop of a conflict in Srinagar, Kashmir, while remaining at its very core a poignant bildungsroman.

Graphic narratives are a hybrid format using an interplay between words and images — this results in an intimate medium that can unpack the layers of a complex story and contribute to visual-verbal literacy.

Credit: Munnu by Malik Sajad

With a visual concept crafted along the lines of Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* — in which Nazis are depicted as cats and Jewish people as mice — the characters in *Munnu* are a combination of humans and hangul deers, the species of Kashmir stag [at risk of extinction](#) due to the political instability in the region, habitat destruction and poaching. An evocative narrative depicts the life of a young Kashmiri boy growing up in the most densely-militarised area in the world: a world entrenched in violence. "It is only by sharing stories that a place like Kashmir begins to exist," Malik Sajad [told](#) Scroll. "On one hand, people are seeking out the medium, and, on the other, the authorities are trying to choke it," [cartoonist Suhail Naqshbandi](#) — who [released](#) his powerful cartoon strip *Locked* to mark the first anniversary of [the abrogation of Article 370](#) and has faced [intense media censorship](#) in the past — tells us. "Looking at this, I see graphic narratives as a big movement in the making. And by the end of next decade, I hope it will be one to reckon with."

While the superhero genre of comics is what people most popularly associate with the medium, alternative graphic narratives have also served as an ode to the unsung heroes of history — subverting the dominant narrative constructed by those in power and highlighting discrimination and abominations against marginalised communities to give voice to histories of the subaltern. The medium has the potential to skilfully convey the tales of those whose experiences are often cast to the margins, even though it has been upon their backs that society has been built.

"Graphic narratives give us the opportunity to understand the depth of hard-hitting topics — be it xenophobia, the effects of conflict on society or a multitude of milieus," says Gautham Ashok, a risk analyst and comic fan. "Comics often serve as a way to prick the subversive subconscious in all of us."

While on a global scale, graphic narratives like *Maus,* Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis,* Guy Delisle's *Burma Chronicles* or Jason Aaron and Cameron Stewart's *The Other Side* depict the fusion of the public and private spheres in a way that '[allows](#)for the realistic representation of socio-political history', I found myself craving more books from the subcontinent that have a similar effect on the reader.

Where are the graphic narratives that depict the impact of national upheaval on common lives? The ones that draw us into an immersive universe, shedding light on realities that many of us — in our own urban bubbles — might never otherwise have access to? Where are the graphic narratives that give voice to feminist, queer and marginalised communities in an otherwise polarised media landscape?

Some titles I'd read over the years came to mind such as [Orijit Sen](#)'s pioneering work *River of Stories*, a riveting tale woven around the Narmada Bachao Aandolan, [Sarnath Banerjee](#)'s charming *[Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers](#)* (although it was his debut [Corridor](#) that broke new ground in 2004 by introducing mainstream publishing to Indian graphic novels) and *[Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back](#)* by feminist publisher [Zubaan Books](#). Other inspiring discoveries include [This Side, That Side : Restorying Partition](#), [Disaibon Hul](#) by [adivaani](#) and [Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability](#). But I won't deny the level of research that this article took, nor the investment it demanded. For such an impactful medium, the graphic narrative movement here has remained painfully slow and niche. Thankfully, there are a few creators and collectives who have taken cognisance of this gap, and stepped up to attempt to bridge it.
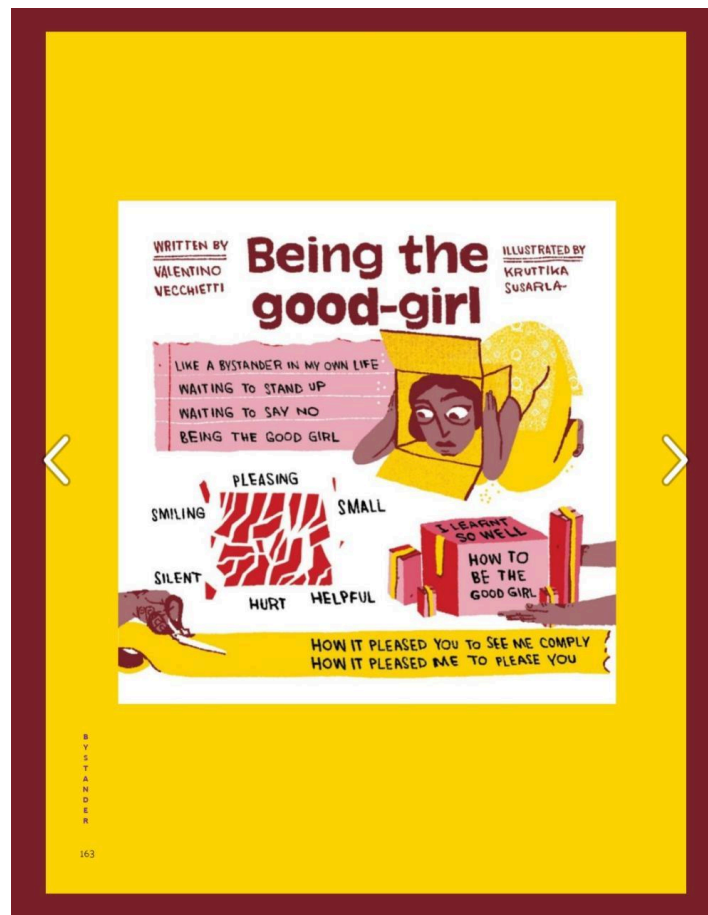
Credit: Bystander Anthology

"There was a certain dialogue and community missing that gave rise to [Kadak Collective](#)," shares Aarthi Paratharasarathy, a member of the collective of South Asian women, non-binary and queer folk who work with graphic storytelling. "It formed in

2016, and it was — at that point — a group of women, queer and non-binary artists talking to each other about certain things that weren't there in the comic illustrations of India. Kadak started off as a community of eight people."

Kadak showcased their work through travelling exhibitions and pop-up reading rooms and the community has grown many fold since. One of the most exciting releases of this year in the Indian graphic narrative space, in fact, has been the fiercely independent *Bystander Anthology*, entirely crowdfunded and self-published.

"Crowdfunding this entire anthology was a very big task," Aarthi tells us. "There was a lot of groundwork involved — from conceptualising and designing the campaign to working out proposals for prospective co-publishers. All the work that the publisher does, but in a collaborative form."

A collection of graphic narratives about geography and gender, identity and self, boundary and exclusion through the lens of the experience of the 'other' — the bystander — it features the work of over 50 curated artists from over 13 countries. This includes two contributors who were a part of *Drawing Power*, a comics anthology that won the prestigious Eisner Award for 2020.

Is it only through colossal — and almost audacious — efforts like these that a plurality of perspectives can be included? Brainded India, an independent wing of Brainded International (a nomadic collective of international artists started in 2003 in Amsterdam) curated by Appupen, Catherine Rhea Roy and Natasha Rego, is a similarly independent effort that aims to be 'that island of independent thought in the agenda-driven current of the branded mainstream'. The platform showcases artists who use comics and humour to encourage independent thought, dissent and diversity. Don't miss out on Sthree Sthree September, featuring Indian female superheroes such as Bai-sexual, Ninja Nani and Moh-Maya, in response to Brainded India's open call in August 2018.

The webcomic has certainly become a gateway to the universe of graphic narratives for many, but what about those of us who treasure holding a physical copy of a comic or graphic novel in our hands? As a reader and fan, it struck me that access and price point are certainly factors at play that might indicate why graphic storytelling has remained niche — especially in print. I was, myself, only able to afford the books I needed to research this article thanks to the generosity of my friends.

"Distribution was and remains a big challenge for English-language Indian comics and graphic novels," says Vidyun Sabhaney, writer, editor, and illustrator of graphic narratives and comics, who runs Captain Bijli Comics. The independent comics publishing project was born of a desire to push the kind of content that was being created in comics at the time of its inception, as well as to expand networks for distributing graphic narratives.

"I think a readership has developed," Vidyun says, on whether there is a more accepting market now for creators from marginalised communities. "Social media has played a big role in enabling authors that would otherwise be excluded from traditional platforms. There are now a number of independent festivals and fairs, such as Gaysi Family and the Gaysi Zine Bazaar. Progressive independent publishers like Zubaan, Navayana, Tara Books and Yoda Press have also brought out a number of volumes over the years. So there has been concerted effort from multiple spaces, and that has led to a welcome change in comics."

Vidyun incidentally worked on an anthology called *First Hand: Graphic Non-Fiction from India Volume 1*, that was conceptualised with Orijit Sen. It started out as a short experimental publication of non-fiction comics based on first-hand accounts of fieldwork or research done by a few writers and artists. The stories that are depicted generally find little space in mainstream media, and the visual details that they have used take the reader straight back on-ground with the creators.

"In October, 2014, we decided to turn the book into an anthology instead, and issued an open call for applications," Vidyun tells us. "From then on, it was First Hand Volume 1, which — for me — was a masterclass in what it means to be an editor. Working with Orijit on this was fantastic because of his experience, and I learnt a lot from the process."

Orijit Sen's *River of Stories*, of course, is popularly regarded as the first English-language Indian graphic novel, published by the NGO Kalpavriksh, which set the ball rolling for socially-committed work in the genre. He has been extremely generous with his time, knowledge and library of comics over the course of researching this article.
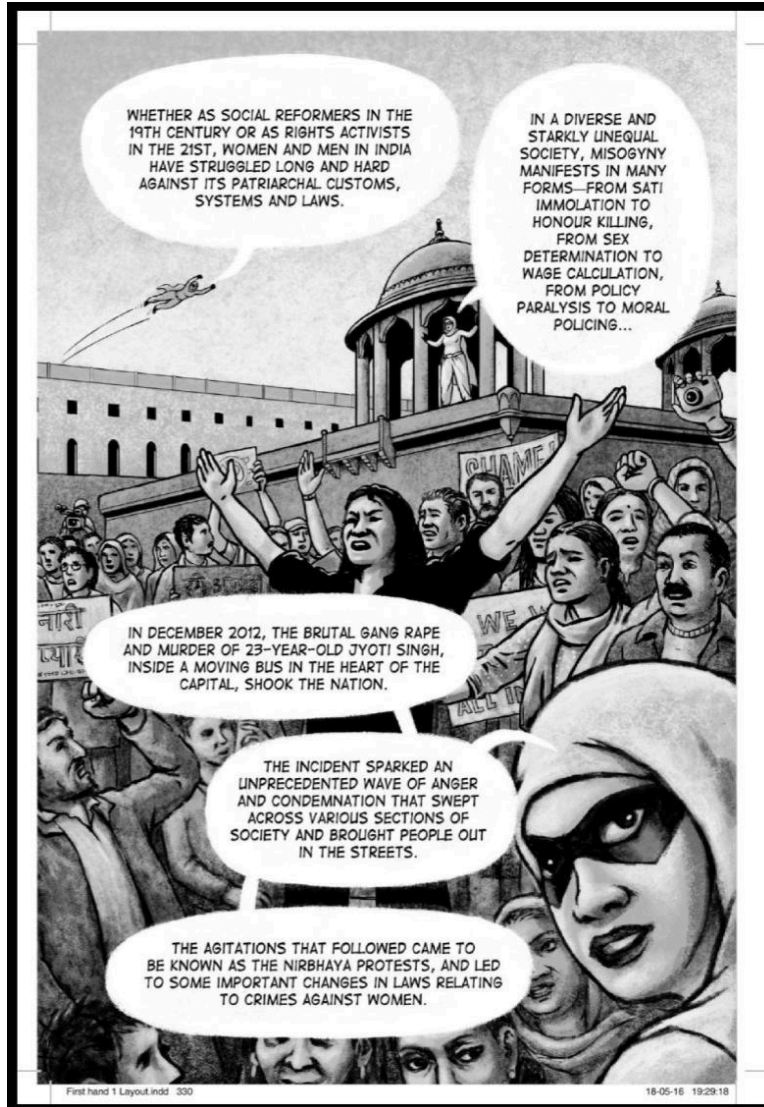
Credit: The Girl Not From Madras by Orijit Sen & Neha Dixit - from First Hand: Graphic Non-Fiction from India Volume 1

On the publication process of *River of Stories* back in 1994, he says, "I was involved with a few NGOs that raised some money from the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change of the Government of India. I said that we were bringing out environmental literature; my book is a complete attack on government policies, but they didn't look at that. We were able to publish *River of Stories* with that small grant."

While the book only published 1, 000 copies at the time and went largely unnoticed except for a review by Khushwant Singh, it marked a watershed moment for Indian comics and Orijit's work has inspired an entire generation of artists, including Sarnath

Banerjee and Vishwajyoti Ghosh. The history of graphic narratives goes back much further, though, especially if you look at folk art across different states, a point that pannapictagraphist Arun Prasad and Aarthi of Kadak Collective highlight and expand upon in their research on the evolution of comics — something which no doubt deserves a separate article in itself.

"It is widely regarded that it's only in the 1960's that the first few comics in India came up," Arun Prasad tells us. "But sequential art and graphic illustrations have existed in the traditional way of storytelling through the Kavad in Rajasthan and Pattachitra in Odisha and West Bengal. In South India, we had illustrations drawn on leather planks and leather sheets. Coming to the modern form, the book form, we've had graphic narratives — one-panel or multiple-panel cartoons — starting from the 1920's."

Arun cites cartoonist Pratulchandra Lahiri, often referred to as PCL, as a pioneer who published comics on Mahatma Gandhi and Subhash Chandra Bose as far back as the 1940's. In the late 1950's, a pedagogic comic book was published on the ambar charkha. "This was actually a remarkable book," Arun marvels. "It was used as a tool for education to propagate the idea of handloom and handwoven clothes. This is all in a fully comic format, but a far cry from the superhero genre."

As far as the economics of publishing graphic narratives in India go, Orijit Sen remarks that he hasn't seen a significant difference since the 1990's. "Artists are just going to have to do it out of sheer love; there is no support system or school of comics. They teach this abroad but not here."

He mentions his work with Pao Collective as an exception. Another admirable effort at building solidarity in the comic community, it involved five established artists mentoring the next generation of comic creators to bring out the Pao Anthology; the first time a mainstream publishing house like Penguin offered comic creators an advance, an otherwise standard practice in publishing.

Credit: Mir Suhail

If we were to speculate on the prospects of the medium, there is a range of exciting possibilities. The cultures of storytelling and visual reading are both evolving at breakneck speed, and there is far more potential in the digital space for exploring avenues like interactive art, something we got a glimpse of in the *Bystander Anthology for the Web*. Interest in longform graphic narratives, however, seems to be dipping; something several of the creators I have spoken to have mentioned as well.

Digital is definitely one of the ways forward, thanks to the relatively democratic nature of social media. Artists like Sanitary Panels, Mir Suhail, Jamun ka Ped, Bakeryprasad and Appupen are carrying forward the legacy of political cartooning and satire in their respective ways.

"There's a quote by Charlie Chaplin that says — take your pain and play with it," Mir Suhail tells us. "I relate to it deeply, especially with what's going on in Kashmir. We

don't have joy here, we have only known conflict. I feel like a cartoon is very powerful because in an instant, it can convey so much. When you criticise a bullet shape or the state of freedom of press, the essence and fear surrounding it gets diminished. That's how powerful art can be in changing the conversation around socio-political issues."

Credit: Jamun Ka Ped

"Because news media is an aggregator, and focuses on numbers and statistics more often," Meher Manda, writer of Jamun Ka Ped, tells us. "We sometimes tend to lose focus on the individual, and how their life has been affected. With Jamun Ka Ped, we try to really humanise the names that get branded as "anti-national" or "seditionists." Working on this has also made me very aware of the palpable fear associated with speaking out in India right now."

To amplify the voices of the silent majority, Sharad Sharma conceptualised the idea of Grassroots Comics as an alternative mode of communication. He took the art of cartooning and comics to the rural hinterland of India and other parts of the globe, and has also introduced the concept of grassroots comics as a teaching-learning tool at school and as comics journalism in higher education. His graphic medicine workshops

at AIIMS with medical practitioners have also helped to improve doctor-patient communication.

"Unlike the mainstream comics, these comics are not drawn by the artists but by the people themselves," Sharad tells us. "This makes the medium participatory and engaging. During the workshops, participants understand the fact that they are there to share those issues or incidents they feel strongly about, or they have a personal connection with. When participants are encouraged to think along those lines, they would come up with issues we qualify as social issues."

Collectives working in solidarity like the ones I have mentioned above are another way forward; a means of achieving common goals and ensuring diverse and inclusive graphic narratives. Aarthi of Kadak Collective says, "Arun Prasad and I are working on a project to make the medium more accessible. We are looking to build an online space and, eventually, a comic museum."

We come back to [Orijit Sen](), who has been drawing comics since childhood, for the last word. In 2017, he created *[Mapping Mapusa Market]()*, a breakthrough game-based installation at the popular Friday market in Mapusa, Goa. A blend of graphic narration and socio-historical mapping, the walk-through experience brought art straight to the streets for the people.

"If I can obtain enough space and support for producing something new," Orijit says. "I've looked at how to interpret comics-making in a spatial way — to create comics for space, rather than for a book. That's something I see myself doing more of in the future. Although it is still an idea best suited to a gallery, I would rather be able to create comics in public spaces."

With so many promising possibilities, the hope is that digital platforms can slowly become a sustainable means for creators, a way to vault over the distribution issues the medium has faced in print and to lead to the emergence of new formats and expressions.