



REVIEWS

Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability

Art: Durgabai Vyam, Subhash Vyam; story: Srividya Natarajan, S. Anand

Navayana

395 Indian Rupees, 108 pages

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REVIEWED BY [PRAJNA DESAI](#) APR 18, 2012

Here and there in the time-travelling narrative, we confront the Khairlanji syndrome. In May 2008, a dalit man was hacked to death for daring to dig a well on his own small property. Earlier in Jan 2008, after decades of fighting for water, dalits earned the right to use a village pond. But caste Hindus — in a uniquely Indian way of saying *eat shit* — fouled the same pond by channelling the village sewer to it. In November 2007, two dalit women, new mothers, were physically assaulted before eviction from a government hospital. They died soon after.

Horrific regardless, these stories also outdo Ambedkar's humiliations, not least because they date within the last five years, or 60 years into free India's alleged ban on untouchability. Led by Ambedkar's force, the ban along with the enactment of protection of dalits and tribals (India's indigenous people) under the Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA) was enacted by the Indian Constitution in 1947.

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Since Ambedkar is more or less a messiah among dalits, today totaling between 165 to 170 million, or about 17% of India's population, *Bhimayana* fawning over him would have been more than okay. Instead, the revival of the hero, who is typically under-acknowledged in mainstream textbooks and popular media, takes place through factual reference and energetic prose. The litany of humiliations is compelling because the writing is talky, the pitch even. Little Bhim's acumen for unwitting irony mixes nicely with Ambedkar's calm eye, cut with the man and woman's dialogue. Include the steady tide of harsh news clippings flowing through the narrative and you have an all too necessary social history boot-camp.

If sections of the text keep your heart pumping, the graphic patois slows the looking, giving reason to sort out why a stick that beats is sighted like a panopticon, or why a water pump seems to want to burst into tears.

We can guess that the stick with eyes, a striking theme, is the social CCTV monitoring untouchable life, and the personified water pump is unhappy at Bhim left thirsty at school.

Overall, the drawing is formally busy. Dots, speckles, and mesh-like lines power the images, mainly done in black with the occasional color spread. But the images are always focused, tweaking the plot, making a comment, or leading the eye to wander into intended asides. Some pages insistently evoke Ambedkar's mental convolutions when confronted by social prejudice, like where he's on a train headed to Baroda. His groomed person, well-spoken manner, and general sophistication disguise his untouchability.



Ambedkar on the train to Baroda.

The entire journey, rendered as a live, swirling thing, becomes a game of hide and seek wherein Ambedkar must keep up with the false assumptions of his train companions to ensure the journey goes smoothly.

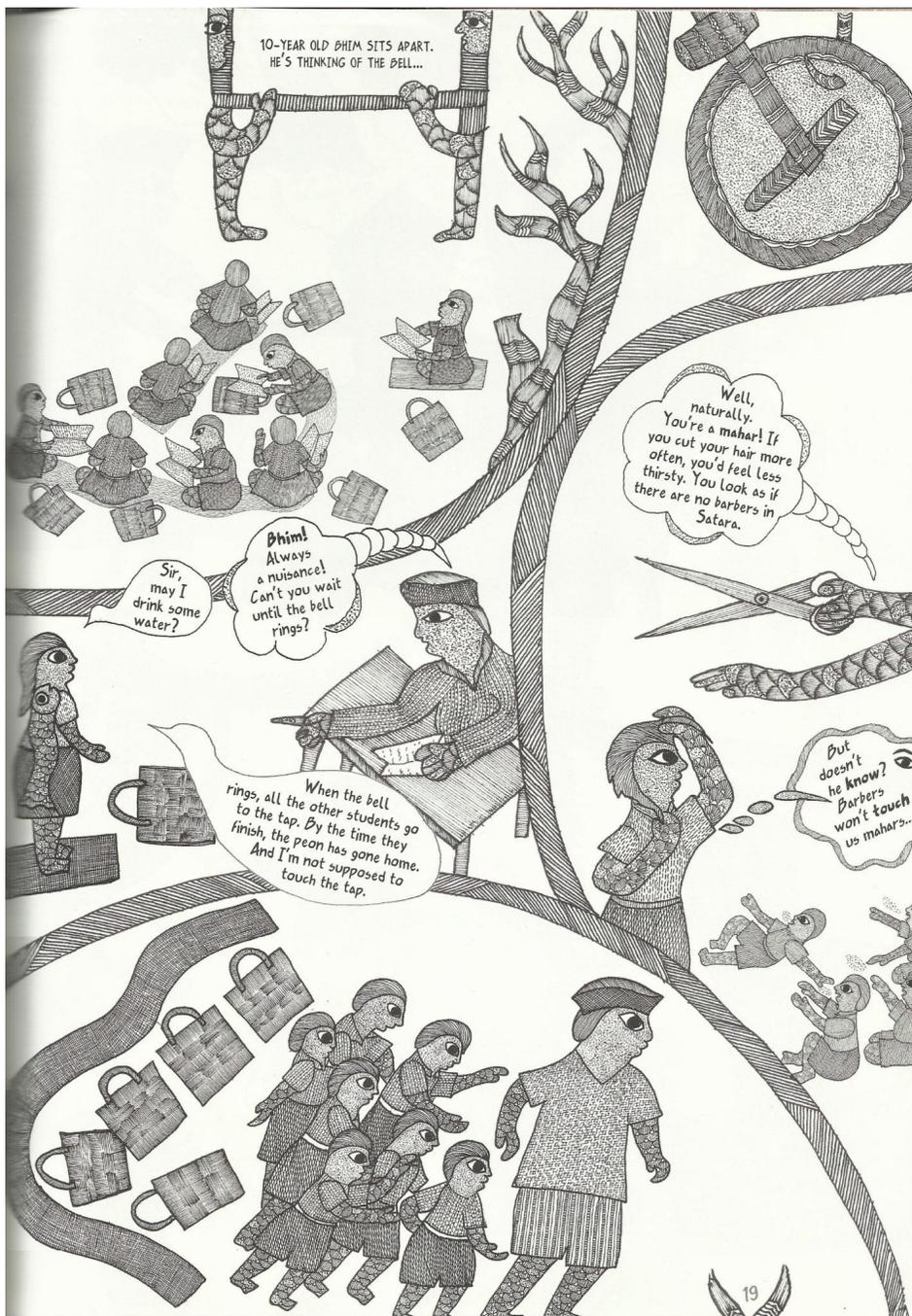
Many images are set within quasi-panels distinct from the traditional sequence of the sequential panel frame. You might say they have a mind of their own, perhaps even hinting at Ambedkar's own brand of nous, but the styling is collaborative. Where the tempo and method of the telling the story is largely novelistic, the artistic approach is typically Gond, which is a graphic shorthand for legends and genealogies produced in solo illustrations.

Now, *Bhimayana* is neither a compilation of single-sheet pictures nor a straight out linear narrative. There's oodles of plot and loads of elaborate scenes, but there's also heaps of asides, iconic freezes, and historical digressions to warrant chucking the sequential panel frame for something fresher. Like the Gond digna perhaps, a double-edged frame containing allusions to grass and grain, running and whirling water, and paling reeds.

In the book, digna take the shape of broken circles, fan-like insets, and natural forms like fish and hilltops. They let you savour images in bits and pieces and only sometimes link in clear sequence. When they appear to push against one another it's a signal. The story is on the move again, as in the opening spread of *Water*.

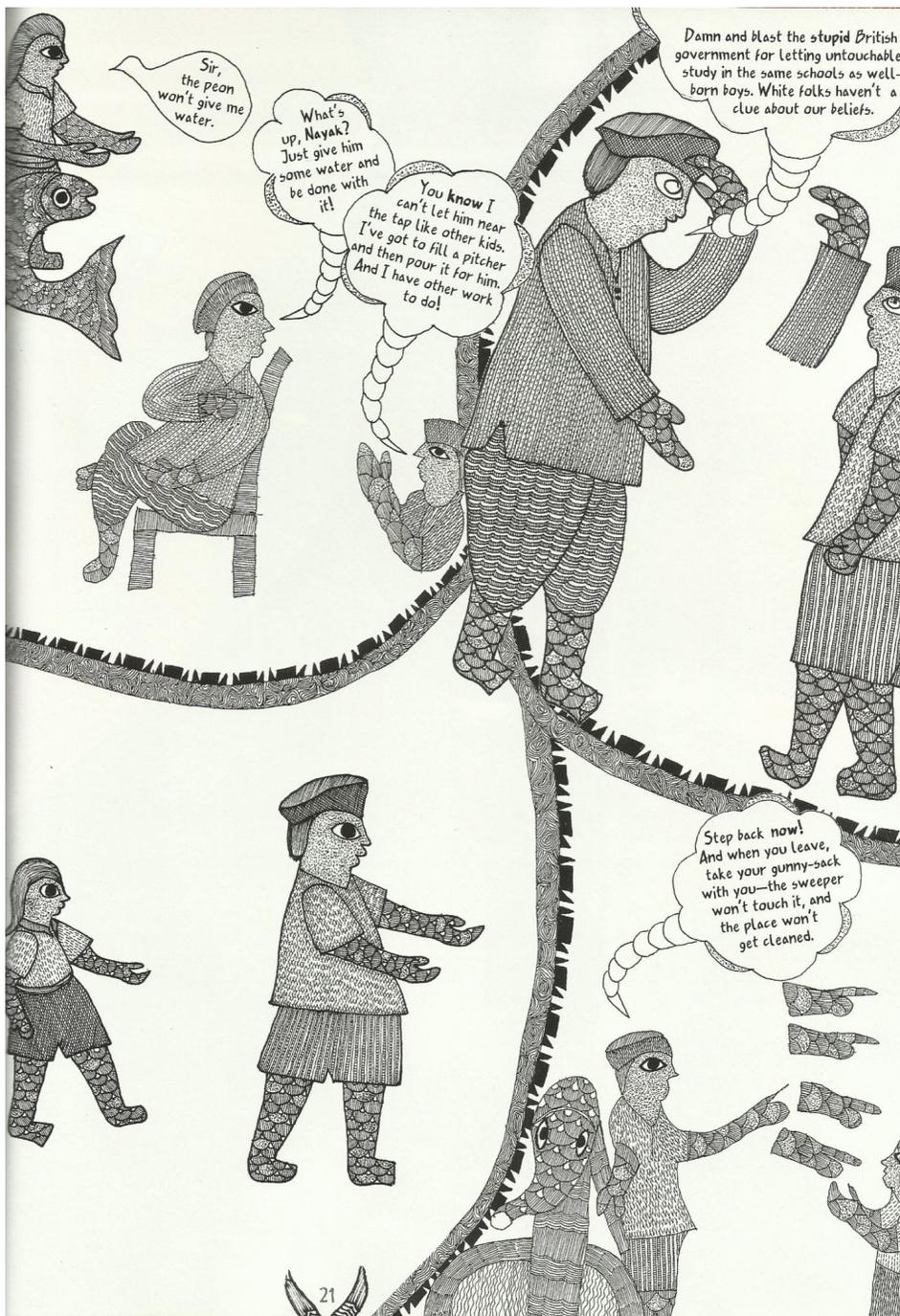
Pintsize Bhim knows all about the dos and don'ts of his station. A split perspective page quickly prospers into multiple digna. The bumpy pace of Bhim's questions about caste inequality shines through half-arc digna roughly intersecting. Over time, the digna trail sinuously, run jaggedly, or press symmetry on a page. But all over, the reading order, mildly headachy, maps the trespass of an untouchable's life. His life was no walk in the park. Neither is reading about it.

We get to feel for Bhim in other ways too.



The blackboard spelling out Bhim's thirst and the fish strapped on his side.

A personified blackboard spells out Bhim's thirst and the fish shape on his side turns dehydration into tangible cargo. The fish motif, as both desire and injustice, repeats wherever untouchables are shown struggling to access to water. Mingled everywhere are polarised speech balloons.



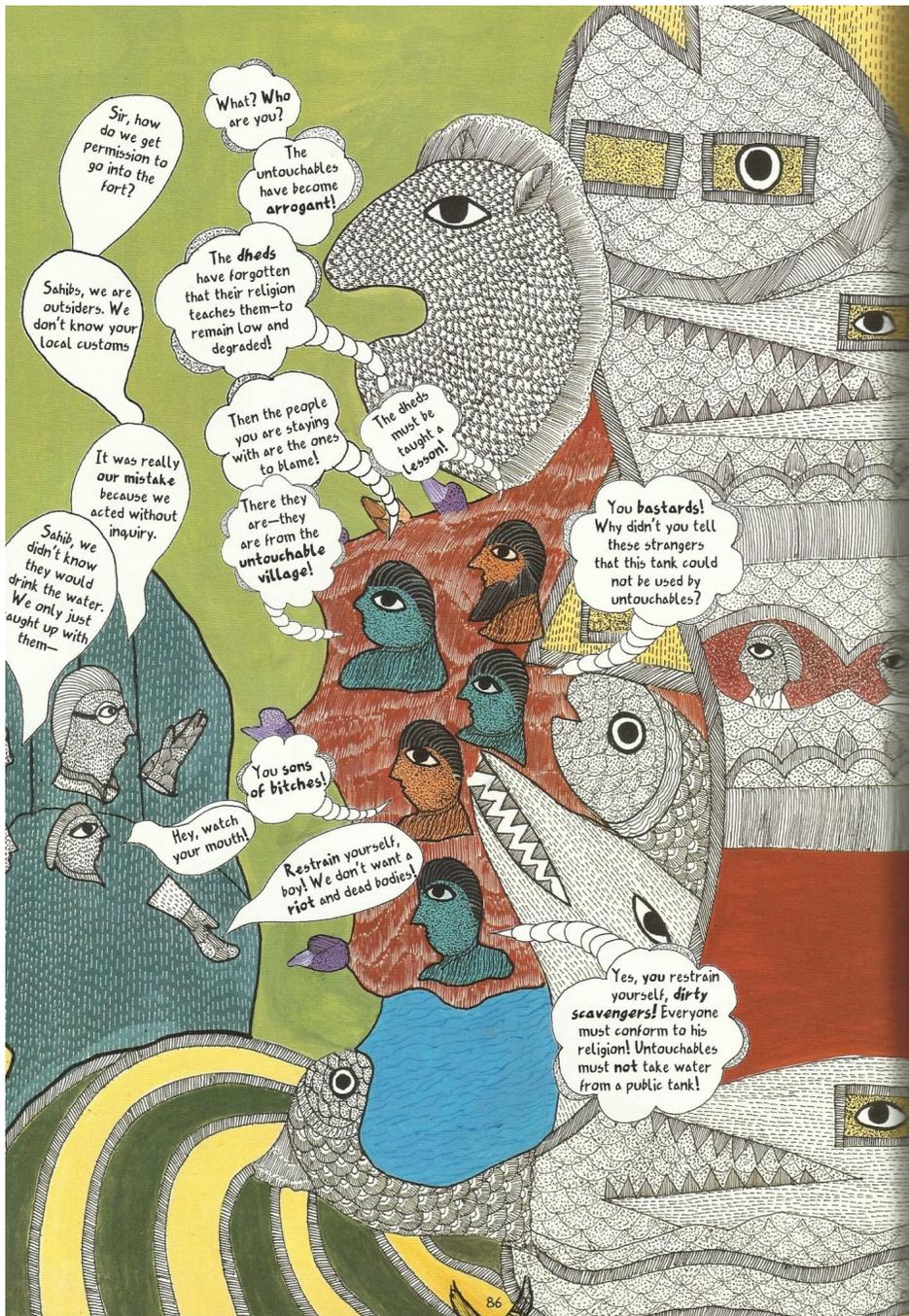
Personified speech balloons.

Bird shaped ones are for reason and good people. That would be Ambedkar and his social set. The scorpion stinger shaped ones are reserved for irrationality and bad folks. These are people who subject untouchables to humiliations. Everywhere they appear, the scorpion stinger inflects the atmosphere with contempt. This we might understand was the very air untouchables breathed.

Still, Bhim is not without some ecstasies. The first explicit visualisation of this inner landscape is the image of a train with sprightly whiskers straddling two forest-filled digna. This marks the beginning of episodes in which four children, including Bhim, are on their very first outing 'abroad' to the city. No wonder the train evokes the spring and coil of a fantastical feline-reptile. Quaint lines, possibly the text's only moment of

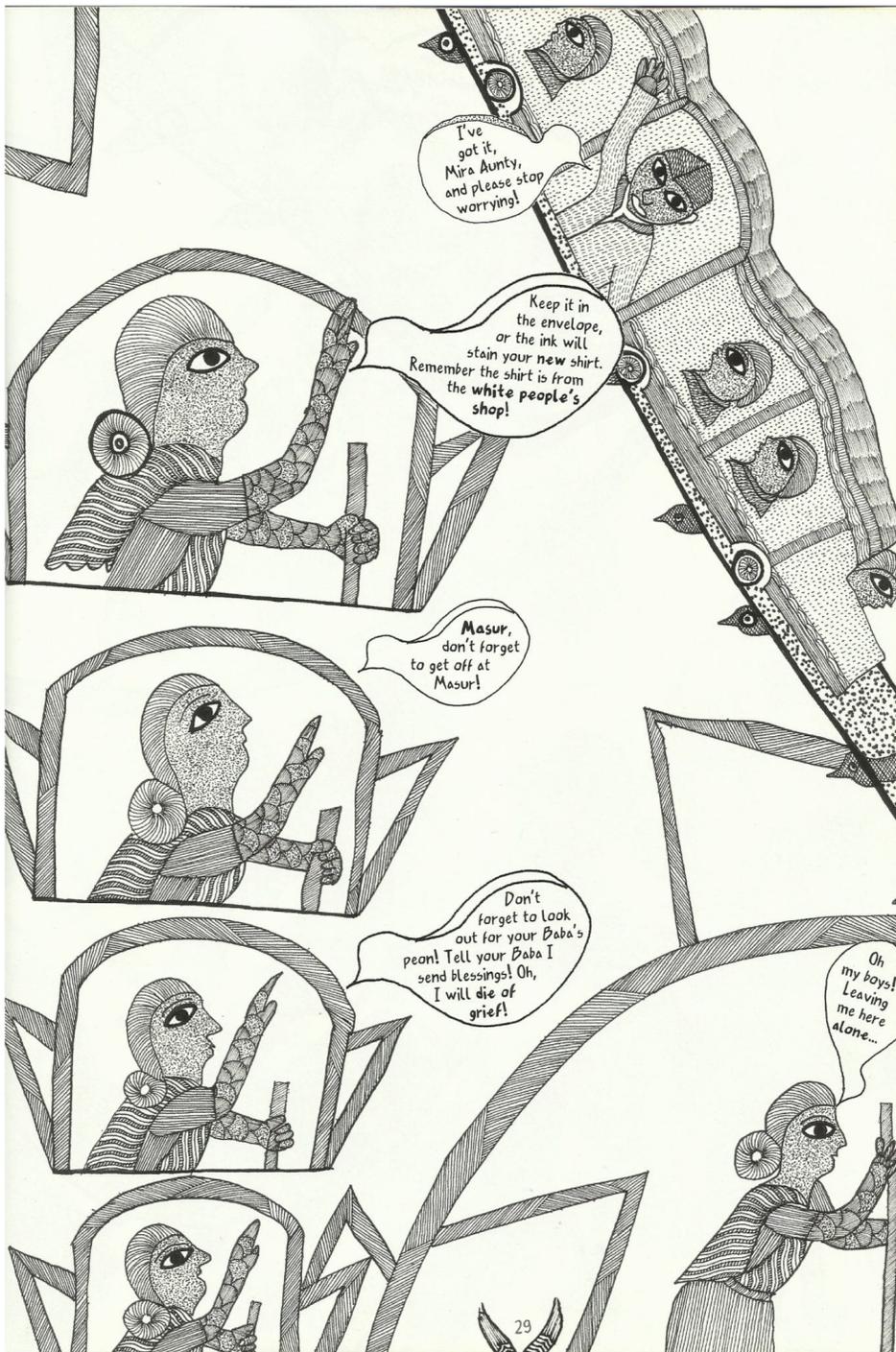
poetic weakness, headline this page. Black ink sings the fresh green of trees. Yet nowhere is the implicit assumption that we all share a common sea of feeling. One is given an image to contemplate and the writing overlaps Bhim's feeling but does not reveal what he feels. It does not dilute the status quo of an untouchable's exile from ordinary dignity.

Though vivid and engaging in its details, the drawing is equally standoffish about pouring out its heart. It's got none of the routine sensuality that one might expect from a story filled with pathos. Figures and faces especially are marionette-like, or at any rate generic. Some wear functional insignia. Ambedkar is marked with glasses. Muslims have little beards. Brahmins have puny tufts of hair poking out from shaved heads. Characters neither smile nor frown. Shiftless pupils pin bovinely sedate faces. And everyone looks like they've had a ball with the eyeliner, so every face is equally striking, or nondescript.



Angry Muslims confronting Ambedkar and his colleagues as they try to access a community water tank.

Instead, the main prompt for mood and feeling is gesture, icon, and (oddly) chin contour. For instance, Ambedkar's speech at the Mahad satyagraha bursts out as fresh blue water through loudspeakers in the shape of spouts. The murder of a dalit farmer for digging his own well magnifies in the menace of a giant floating hand plough. Elsewhere, the sadness of Bhim's aunt, who waves goodbye to him and his cousins, graduates across her mercurial chin. It goes from plump to soft, then drawn in and pointed, all this on an otherwise impassive face.



Bhim's aunt waving goodbye to her nephews.

To hint at and not elaborate is typical in Gond art. In *Bhimayana*, it translates as art that doesn't give a toss. The book doesn't coddle the expectation that awful narratives should make you 'feel'. It seems more interested in stunning reality checks. That might explain why the preface's dialogue is dourly upfront about a basic equation: Stating that affirmative action isn't fair is claiming that Khairlanji and its innumerable cousins are. It might also explain why this is the narrative's one and only reference to affirmative action.

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Reservation or affirmative action for dalits in public education and jobs has been around since 1943, though the semblance of proper

implementation didn't happen until the mid-1960s. Since then, many upgrades to strengthen the reservation system tacitly confess the state's failure in proper application. To this, some would say, serves the dalits right. Anti-reservationists, who number in rabid hordes and behave accordingly, claim that quotas lower the quality of education and government service. Their argument is predictably racist: "Dalits genetically lack merit."

Elsewhere, Anand Teltumbde, dalit activist and author of *Khairlanji* (2008), while absolutely in favour of the quota system describes it as "a graveyard of dalit aspirations." This is why urban dalits, aching for a leg-up into mainstream society, have been teaming with right-wing Hindu groups, the old foes of dalit emancipation. This new alliance is bad news for the 89% of dalits who are rural, half of whom are landless, only some of whom farm, the rest of whom are unemployed artisans. Most dalits are looking for better primary, not higher, education, sanitation, vocational training for non-farm work, and improved land distribution. Instead, the state has displaced dalits and forced migrations to appropriate their land for mega-projects and global investors, making rural dalits among the country's poorest, who Human Rights Watch slot with most pervasively degraded people in the world.

This might explain *Bhimayana's* eagerness to shed, not the reservation issue, but the Khairlanji syndrome, which forces one to consider Ambedkar's utopian oomph in light of atrocities against dalits, such as being coerced to eat each other's excreta (in the southern state of Kerala in 2003), as if the Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA) simply doesn't exist. Indeed, Ambedkar was a radical, a believer in socialist reforms like better land distribution, which few dalit leaders now broach for fear of being labelled communists, unquestionably the dirtiest word in India's mad race towards privatisation. To its credit, the book repeatedly underscores his radicalism and its potential to change dalit life without watering down dalit desperation.

It tells us that dalits are perhaps as, and sometimes more, vulnerable than in Ambedkar's time. Its biographical encomium, however ridden with human corruption and social depravity, doubles not so much as an elegy but as a serious wake-up call. Like the voice of reason, the dialogue between the socially-conscious woman and the blinkered man, another homage to Ambedkar's fight against patriarchy, refreshes the alarm at regular intervals—that one person's givens are another's death-wish.

To be published in French, Korean, Spanish, Tamil, Hindi, Marathi, Telugu, Kannada. Already available in Malayalam. Worldwide English edition to appear through Tate Publishing.

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Prajna Desai says:

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ERRATA posted by the author:

Navayana Publishing was founded in 2003, not 2006.

The acronym for the Prevention of Atrocities Act is PoA, not POA. The PoA was enacted in 1989, not 1947. The specific rules for the act were framed in 1995. Prior to the PoA Act was the Protection of Civil Rights Act, or the PCR Act, enacted in 1955, eight years after Indian gained independence in 1947. The PoA Act, mentioned in the review, was designed and enacted because the PCR Act was found to be too feeble and ineffective.

Dr Ravindr Singh says:

at

It is nice. Young graduates will draw some aspiration from the life and work which he did. Pople are not being told mor about him. It is the land of Some for some.

Akansha says:

at

each and every picture of book opens many doors to think ,,,

Riddhi says:

at

Bhimayana is a small attempt to address the anamoly of casteism. I was never too familiar with Gandhi's wrong side than I am now. Gandhi was concerned with the independence of India by silencing minorities, while Ambedkar was working for the transformation of Hindu Society. Gandhi had to travel all the way to South Africa to experience a taste of what Ambedkar encountered as a 10 years old child in a small presidency of Bombay, India.

Sujoy Majumdar says:

at

Eradicating the caste "power" hierarchy perhaps makes Dr. Ambedkar a bigger "freedom fighter" than Gandhi.

India really needed development in grassroot level to dispose all odds (caste structure) before an attempt to drive

the intruders away. It is sad that even in the year 2008 (noted from above incident) Dalits are suffering.

This undoubtedly puts the attempt of Ambedkar towards a query of "big futility.

