

**From the Margins of the Anthropocene; Re-reading the Intricate Boundaries of  
Environment, Dalit, and Art in *Bhimayana*****Shruti Dugar**

M.A. Sem IV

Shri Shikshayatan College

**Abstract**

Environmental criticism, which officially began with Rueckert's *Literature and Ecology* (1978), has extended its arms, nonchalantly to intersect with various relevant disciplines and theories in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of them being – dalit ecologies. Spivak's theory on the Subaltern had given an added edge to the postcolonial understanding of the dalits in India; dalit ecologies, gives an added edge to the recent understanding of environmental issues globally. Herein lies the aim and soul of this paper – to navigate the re-readings of *Bhimayana* – a subversive graphic narrative based on Ambedkar's autobiography *Waiting for Visa*, in analyzing the formulating concepts of dalit ecologies, and a step ahead, eco-casteism. Through a detailed textual analysis of the selected text, and a thorough examination of the critical debates surrounding the text, and the ideas mentioned, the paper will proceed to further argue against the anthropocentric ideals that suggests Man as a superior 'part' of the Nature; as well as, ironically, superior to certain specific class, caste, race and gender.

**Keywords :** Anthropocene, Dalit, Environment, Graphic, Subversion**Introduction***"The well belongs to the landlord**The water belongs to the landlord**The fields and the harvest belongs to the landlord**Then what is ours?*

*The village?*

*The city?*

*The nation?"*

(Om Prakash Valmiki. Translated by Daak)

Having considered the emerging frontiers in the scholarly debates of humanities and cultural sciences, it appears to be a daunting task this paper attempts. Dalit literature has been an integral part of the Indian English mainstream canon since the hey days of colonialism; and Environmental criticism, having officially begun with Rueckert's essay, *Literature and Ecology* (1978), is a yet evolving concept. Multiple re-readings of Indian classical texts, including that of the vernacular literature, quite intriguingly, illustrates, or rather, opines on different ideologies concerning the subaltern group in Indian society. Many are, to further argue, debate on the question – how is Nature in its most pristine form; in its most untamed form 'represented'. However, very rare do the critical reader find a seamless blend of the two different perspectives; one pinnacle with the essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak* (1988), by Spivak, the recent awardee of the Holberg Prize, 2025; the other, of which the seed was sown by Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring*, and was 'officially' penned down by a group of thinkers that included Rueckert, Glotfelty, and Buell – all paving a path against the Anthropocene, towards what they acknowledged as Environmental criticism, or eco-criticism.

Rueckert in *Literature and Ecology* (1978) had defined eco-criticism as the "application of ecology and ecological concepts to literature" (Rueckert). Today, this ordinary definition, and terminology has gradually extended its arms nonchalantly to various other disciplines. From gender studies, to ideas of colonialism and imperialism; from diasporic literature to ideas of casteism and racism, Environmental strands are analyzed and understood along every possible literary theory. These ideas are so recent in the area of scholarly research, that it appears to be quite difficult for the critical reader to locate its trajectory and the nuances on which they were built. A response to the perpetuating idea of anthropocentrism, the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, now seems to hold mankind responsible for the environmental hazards the planet and

the natural ecosystem is encountering. Man, or rather, Human is not the centre of the universe who have born rights over the natural resources; humans though have a shared responsibility towards the ecosystem, which quite unfortunately, is being realized after un-altered changes are done. And, it perhaps of this reason and realization that new terms are being connected to, accept the façade of superiority, over Nature, over ‘other’ fellow human species.

Herein is the backdrop for a thinker like Mukul Sharma to explicate the term, dalit ecology. Indulata Prasad in “Towards Dalit Ecologies” writes, “Dalit Ecologies is proposed as a critical framework for examining caste based segregation, dispossession, dehumanization, appropriation of dalit labour and ecological knowledge and the various ways the global ecological crisis disproportionately impacts Dalit communities in India”. Prasad continues, “The need to incorporate Dalit viewpoints on environmental degradation and climate change stems from Nathan Hare’s assertion half a century ago that a solution to the ecological crisis cannot come without fundamental changes to unjust socio-economic system” (Prasad). A similar stance is also observed to be shared by Sharma in “Caste, Environment Justice, and Intertextuality of Dalit – Black Ecologies” while contextualizing, in his broad articulation of his research, his four principal keys; the first being “the expansion of environmental justice movements of color and low-income communities in the United States, and how these can be useful in framing dalit responses, and for conceptualizing their environment struggles against protean forms of eco-casteism”. While navigating through this aspect, Sharma continues, and therefore notes;

“The Bhopal Gas Disaster of 1984 raised new issues related to the impact of toxic contamination on individuals, where the heavy burden on the poor was also realized. The study claims that the sensibility of environmental justice has been a central meme in Indian environmentalism since the 1990’s. However, the criticality and specificity of caste and dalits in accessing natural resources and ecosystem services has remained on the fringes in such studies. Through historical and comparative perspectives, which encompass gender and class, environmental authors have argued that the varieties of environmentalism in South Asia originate in social conflicts over access to control over natural resources. Yet, the authors treat struggles for environmental justice

by various social groups as separate from Dalit issues, and they elide or subsume the caste question.” (Sharma)

What appears intriguing at this juncture comes along the methodology of this paper. Very seldom did the critical reader could assemble information based on the keyword searches that included ‘dalits’ and ‘environment’ together. Perhaps, one can conclude, after reading what Prasad says in a similar situation is the “dominant assumption”, that dalits, unlike the Adivasis; do not have a pure ecological base. Quite paradoxical it had seemed while skimming over the ‘well-known’ dalit narratives, only to find one point in common against all; the association of dalits with the environmental concept of pollution. The translated verse of *Kuan Thakur Ka*, mentioned at the very beginning of the discussion, points to a similar direction. Denying the dalits of the basic necessities of water, food and land – the organic natural resources that has existed on the planet called Earth since the beginning of time, in itself connects and links the two. And, since the green ecologies have always been a subordinate under the anthropocentric human; man; a man of a higher status, race, caste, class, thereby, one introduces Nature, not only as a pillar to the less privileged, but a silent mouthpiece to mirror the horrors of the human façade.

### ***Bhimayana* – What Does It Subverts?**

A quick glance over the critical debates on *Bhimayana* suggests a probable presence of an intricate ‘system’ that reveals, quite intriguingly, new layers (from the previous ones), faultlessly, in every possible re-reading. Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*, in the process to ‘define’ a comic connects few words – “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (McCloud). In the selected graphic narrative, which is visually evoked and illustrated at the blurred horizons of art, and historiography – how far this “deliberate sequence” is understood through the “juxtaposed images” is a critical standpoint. Nandini Chandra in “Ambedkar Out of Frame” writes, “The Vyams refused to be influenced by the suffocating boxed art of the graphic novels that Anand had brought along. They needed their characters to breathe in *khula* open space”. Chandra continues, “It’s like a *katha*, a story telling session. The multiple eyes shining like stars seem to suggest a watching-over, or a silent witness. This kind of

animistic excess and fluidity of morphing forms tells us something about the nature of imagination in Gondi artwork, in contrast to void-fixated imagination defying Vedic cosmos” (Chandra). Pramod K. Nayar in “Towards a Postcolonial Literacy; *Bhimayana* and the Indian Graphic Novel”, in this context, remarks, “One could think of the visual language of *Bhimayana* as a convergent design, where moments stories and episodes sit adjacent to each other on a page but not in any linear sequence at all, suggesting a mixing and a merging rather than by ordering” (Nayar).

Nayar and Chandra, in their respective researches, proceed towards a discussion on the treatment of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic elements that contribute ineffably to what the graphic narrative intends to, or has achieved along the critical lines. However, what appears intriguing to the critical reader is the underlying idea of dalit ecology that has surfaced in the recent readings of the given text. The selected narrative of *Bhimayana*, therefore is not only a potential subversion of a graphic form; of the Vedic (more explicitly) order; of documented historiography, but also of anthropocentrism, as one identifies the deepening layers of environmental criticism.

Mukul Sharma in *Caste and Nature; Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics* writes, “Environmental academicians and activists have focused on increasing alienation and displacement of the poor from the resources and the unequal burdens imposed on them for the development and modernization of the country. Feminists and anthropologists have raised critical questions about ‘naturalness’ of the natural order, and pointed out how layers of power work within gender, caste and nature. However, nature and its social history have rarely been seen from a caste angle. The politics of caste in India in the realm of nature, and its implications and meanings for Dalits, have been a blind spot” (Sharma, 2017). *Bhimayana*, as it appears to the critical reader, speaks for that blind spot. Much of the research that has been concerned with the whole concept of dalit ecologies, which appears quite intriguing, has been predominantly occupied by the discussions of Brahmanical standpoints, and the deprivation of basic amenities to the lower caste communities, including pure and clean water; proper nutritious food; and, hygienic and uncontaminated surroundings. Caste issue is a historical issue; but this hierarchy

calls for immediate attention, when one understands the environmental injustices that are both ecologically, as well as, in terms of human welfare – exploitative, only benefitting the one who feels tinges of superiority, while existing amidst various forms, and parts of Nature, divided by class, caste, race and gender.

### **Dalit And Ecology In *Bhimayana***

Punnya Rajendran in “The Aesthetics and Politics of the Abstract Line in *Bhimayana*; *Experiences of Untouchability*” writes, “In the opening pages of *Bhimayana*, the space of the village is described as rigidly segmented based on caste. The complete lack of ambiguity and confrontations in the absence of any alternative and equally powerful system is hinted at in the descriptions of the village life where everything is in its ‘proper’ place, that is, always already segregated. Thus, relative spatial locations are key to such descriptions in the text” (Rajendran). The “one day in the recent past, in a bus stop in an Indian city”, therefore, is equally significant as is the town of Satara in 1901; the city of Baroda in 1917; and the tourist location of Daulatabad in 1934. It appears quite intriguing that although, the initial detailed glances over the narrative, concluded with a much clearer understanding of the conflicted elements of art and history; of nation and untouchability, however, what appears more intriguing is the subtle, nuanced voices of environmental injustices that peeps in through the *digna* patterns on significant and specific moments, or in this context, perhaps pages, surfacing on them a very significant question – is not the caste system prevalent, determines access to ecological resources and green spaces.

A section prior to the said argument, there has been a brief discussion, on the absence of relevant keywords in academia that would connect the ‘dalit’ and the ‘environment’, only to find one point of commonality – ‘pollution’. Bhim was perpetually denied of Water, in his days of innocence, in his days of experience and maturity, to take care the natural water remains unpolluted, as one understands from the words of a local man at Daulatabad, upon witnessing the untouchable tourist’s drinking water from the local water body – “You restrain yourself, dirty scavengers! Untouchables must not take water from public tank” (Navayana, 86). One gets reminded of the Introductory segments of the frame level narrator who informs in “recent past”,

the identity of being untouchables – the ones who are “living on the edge of the village”, “going to the village everyday to clean out its filth”, “doing labour for which they could expect no payment”, “buying spices and oil at Hindu shops standing outside the door”, “collecting leftovers at the backdoors of Hindu houses” (Navayana, 15). Mukul Sharma in “Caste, Environment, Justice, and Intersectionality of Dalit-Black Ecologies” writes, which the critical reader observes quite aligned to the experiences of untouchability, “Some of the fundamental themes of environment and social justice – Dalit’s access, ownership, rights, and participation in land, water, forests, and commons – have appeared frequently. A large number of environmental conflicts and violence against Dalits in India are found to be related to land, water, forest and sanitation issues”. Sharma continues, “Commons – land, forests, waterbodies, ponds, groves, parks, pavements, streets – have a distinctive valance for Dalits. These are places, spaces, sites and regions of social conflicts and political protests, domination and resistance, construction and destruction, exclusion and violence. From a dalit perspective, commons have multilayered environmental, economic and social importance” (Sharma).

The theoretical discussions on Dalit ecologies, in recent critical debates, have been majorly concerned with two prominent aspects; the environmental injustice in relation to caste based oppression, the other being, the Brahmanical and religious framework. In *Bhimayana*, as the critical reader skims over certain specific moments, it appears that the green space, ‘common’, as Sharma has also asserted, to various forms of existence, is more than an ‘assisted’ medium of expression. In Book 1, Bhim was denied of the basic humane requisite of water; in Book 2, the “probationer in the Accountant General’s office” was denied of land to shelter himself; in Book 3, the critical readers, not only are informed about the denial of medical attention, but also observe, and read how dalits and untouchables are equated with ‘scavengers’ – the category of animals which consume on dead remains. More significant is the recurring instance of Water being deprived to the untouchable and dalit community, in particular Bhim, all along the three books. It is perhaps, for this reason that the Artists chose, water as a pertinent medium to express the relevant concerns of Ambedkar, in the form of water sprinklers that function as loudspeakers, or megaphones on Page 48; or on Page 93, which illustrates various forms of existence which are a ‘part’ of the green space immersing in the faith of Buddhism, only to note the meticulous art of

the Vyams, questioning history directly, voicing ecological concerns subtly – the environment speaks for every being excluded, the environment is for every being included on the planet, as one takes note of Meheebub Sahana in “Hindu Nationalism, Climate Reductionism and the Political Ecology of Dalits on *Char Islands*: Does Caste Matter for Climate Resilience in India”, who writes,

“Indian dalits have faced centuries of economic and social exploitation evolving across the various socio-economic contexts. The persistence of the caste system in India, is notable, continuing from an agrarian society through the industrial era, colonial rule, and into the post-colonial, commodified market-based economy. Climate change and environmental degradation have further exacerbated the marginalization and victimization of Dalits, intensifying question around climate resilience. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s vision for social justice incorporated principles of environmental stewardship and sustainable development, advocating for equitable access to resources for all, including dalits, to foster environment justice” (Sahana).

### **The Ecological Space, The Art And The Anthropocene**

Shweta Basu in “The Hindu Comic of *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Bhimayana*, the Epic Tale of the Dispossessed: A Comparison of Empowerments” contextualizes, “The irrelevant style of Pradhan Gond art helps facilitate a certain de-iconising, by making Ambedkar’s individuality as inseparable from the collective destiny of his caste people.” Basu continues, “He is one with the nature that surrounds him. The organic style of the form that hems in animate and inanimate objects as part of a living, breathing universe, in its richly textured lines, a curious admixture of the scientifically precise lines...do not create a claustal atmosphere like of the westernized comic art” (Basu). The ecological space abounds on the pages of the graphic narrative, to add cherries on the artistic cake, does the Vyams infuse anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images. The peacock’s neck extended to be a road, the serpentine coiled loop of the train, the crying harvester machine, only to mention a few.

Environmental Criticism, or eco-criticism was a retaliation against the perpetuating ideologies of anthropocentrism. By illustrating Ambedkar one and unified with the ecological space renders to

the critical debates, much of what has already been discussed. What appears intriguing is that the graphic book is narrating from the autobiography of Ambedkar, yet, it is the art that gives life to the said experiences of Ambedkar. What appears more intriguing is the earthly colour palette as the base of certain specific segments, and the use of “dhan (grain, page 60), kodo (mustard), moa grass (pg 34) etc. The borders that frame an image are inspired by fences in a field” (Navayana, 97). Therefore, subversion, is at every level of *Bhimayana* – it defies against the conventions of graphic narratives; it defies against history; it defies against power and politics; it defies against anthropocentrism. Thus giving the dalits the ecological base and defy the “dominant assumption”. Each segment that calls immediate critical attention in the selected text features an extremely well-thought intersection of art, and environmental justice, be it the illustration of the higher-caste men, as it appears from the secondary identity markers, defecating the water body meant for the dalit and untouchable community, or be it the illustration of Mahatma Gandhi with an axe, an instrument which is used to deforest the green space. To note, further, there has been, a coalesce of history and present timelines to determine the similar intersection. Dalits killed for digging their own well; the ‘untouchable’ bodies dumped into a canal; dalits not given required medical attention, the same being borrowed from authentic and cited sources, including news clippings, only to conclude for the critical reader that the “one day, in recent past, in an Indian city”, is yet as recent as the timeline the narrative features.

## **Conclusion**

Caste system has always been a prevalent traditions that remains deeply seated in the vast canvas of Indian beliefs and customs. However, to perceive it with an yet, very significant field, that undeniably demands immediate and critical attention, provides an unfiltered layer against human centric models and ideas. Dalit ecologies, and eco-casteism, are such branches, that not only aim to improvise the circumstance of the marginalized communities of our society, but also bring on surface the need to re-think on sustainable development, and equitable distribution of ecological resources. *Bhimayana*, then can be said not only as a *katha* that challenges histories pushed to peripheries, or acclaims the lost art of the Pradhan Gond form, which too, is standing at the

margins in a evolving digital world, but also caters to and responds to environmental issues and relevant concerns on climate justice that the age now should ponder upon.

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