

# Graphic Novel in India

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**Abstract:** The graphic novel has emerged as a distinctive form of cultural expression that bridges visual art, literature, and social commentary. Rooted in the evolution of the comic strip and comic book, the medium has been redefined in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries through theoretical insights and critical recognition. Scholars such as Will Eisner and Scott McCloud established the theoretical vocabulary of sequential art, while more recent critics like Hillary Chute and Frederick Luis Aldama have emphasized its role in feminist, postcolonial, and multicultural contexts. In India, the graphic novel has developed in dialogue with indigenous storytelling traditions and contemporary social realities, producing innovative works such as *River of Stories*, *Bhimayana*, *Kari*, and *Delhi Calm*. This paper combines historical overview with critical analysis to show how the graphic novel has evolved into a medium of both entertainment and social critique. This paper draws on such perspectives to examine the development of graphic literature both globally and in India. It argues that the graphic novel should not be understood merely as an extension of print culture, but rather as a cultural form deeply tied to debates around identity, politics, and social resistance.

**Keywords:** Graphic Novel, Sequential Art, Indian Comics, Visual Storytelling.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Graphic novels occupy a complex space between popular entertainment and serious literature. For much of the twentieth century, comics were dismissed as children's reading or pulp entertainment. Over time, however, the form has undergone a process of critical reassessment. Will Eisner's influential definition of comics as "sequential art" was crucial in establishing the artistic legitimacy of the medium (*Comics and Sequential Art* 5). Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* provided a systematic exploration of how meaning is created through images, panels, and the gaps between them. Building on this foundation, Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women* demonstrates how graphic storytelling can grapple with difficult subjects such as trauma, memory, and identity.

## II. ANTECEDENTS OF THE GRAPHIC

The comic form developed alongside the rise of mass print culture in the nineteenth century. These early visual narratives reveal how print culture created new opportunities for humour, satire, and storytelling to reach wider audiences. The spread of literacy and the popularity of newspaper meant that the reading public was curious not just about the lives of the rich and the famous but also about the means in which to improve their condition. This influenced the themes of the early comic strips which illustrated domestic scenes, social interactions and social commentary even as the comic strip attempted to entertain the reader through witticisms and hilarity.

Satirical drawings and caricatures became popular in newspapers and periodicals, such as the *Glasgow Looking Glass*, often regarded as the earliest illustrated magazine. This fortnightly magazine, which was later renamed *Northern Looking Glass*, was published from 11 June, 1825 to June, 1826. It is an example of topical graphic journalism and focused on events in Glasgow and Scotland. For this reason the Scottish language is often found in the commentary of the art work. The magazine was published by John Watson. Willaim Heath, the artist, satirised contemporary political issues and figures, made fun of current fashions and pursuits and took an irreverent view of the times and practices. Every issue imitated the format of contemporary newspapers with the difference depicted pictorially in a satirical manner. For instance in the section in the

magazine concerning local news titles 'Domestic Intelligence' the art (Vol 1, No 2, 25 June, 1825) work titles 'Home sweet home' depicted a chaotic, messy room to suggest the trials and tribulations of family married life. Similarly in vol 1, no. 2 (9 July 1825) the art work 'The Parents happy whilst the daughter drowns' depicts a blacksmith and his fighting in a smithy while their daughter drowns unnoticed in a tub. Early issues were produced by lithography while later instalments were etched. While cheaper version with 'common' impression were available for one shilling, more expensive coloured versions were available for six shillings.

Most of the art work, even if it could be slotted into running categories, was independent of the art work published in earlier issues and were one-off illustrations. However, some of the illustrations appeared in multiple issues similar to strip cartoons. 'A Regular Row' (vol 1, No 14, 9 January 1826) published in the *Northern Looking Glass* is the fifth 'cartoon' which continued a 'story' a drunken brawl in a street in Glasgow. Illustrations like these gave the magazine a sense of continuity and also encouraged readers to buy further issued so they could find what happened to the 'story.' As mentioned earlier, the desire for self-improvement through reading and attending lectures etc was also a major feature of the age. The magazine printed records of the same: the 'Rival Lectures' drawings (vol 1, no 10 14 November 1825) depict the lectures given in two institutes patronised by the different social classes. The accompanying text refers to the fear of the 'betters' that the 'lower orders' would soon overtake them. The magazine also depicted other contemporary issues like air pollution ('consumption of smoke') and, the grave robbing and exhumation of the dead in search of cadavers, the questionable morals of medical students in the series 'Essay on Modern Medical Education'.

French artist Cham's witty illustrations during the 1840s are also notable. Talking about him the playwright Halevy said "One should not solely have talent, one should have his talent." He produced more than 4000 drawings in his lifetime wherein he satirised politics, travelling, trends and parodied popular novels and plays. Some of his works are *Historie de Mr Jabot* (1839) and *Monsieur de Lamelasse* (1839). *Impressions de Voyage de Monsieur Boniface* (1844) is unique in the techniques of art work employed. One can witness the influence of the camera in his art work which is characterised by close-ups, wide shots, jump cuts, visual effects, different camera viewpoints and contrasts in lighting. He achieved the latter by making the panel black. In addition to this he use the standard typeface captions for the first time in this work. In prior works the captions had been handwritten. This would go on to become the norm in the comic and graphic form. In his work one can see small designs (six to twelve) arranged in a page according to a single theme, or in a narrative sequence, or spread over a few pages. The focus of the work was on creating a witty reading experience by combining picture and text.

In 19<sup>th</sup> century the art form developed as *bande dessinée* (drawn strip/BD) in France, in Italy as *Fumetto* (little puff of smoke), and in Spain as *historieta*. The *bande dessinée* were humorous sequential multi-panel cartoon narrations with captions and dialogues below the panel. Similarly, the *fumetto* were cartoons and illustrations targeted at young readers for educational purposes and in other satirical publications. *Il Giovinetto Italiano* (1849) and *I Fanfulla* (1872) are examples of both categories. These would evolve into sequential stories with distinctive word balloons that contained the dialogue. The *historieta* were comic strips with small picture showing different stages in a journey or adventure. As Roger Sabin points out, the growth of comics in this period reflected a broader "democratization of visual culture," where art and satire were no longer restricted to elite circles but became part of popular discourse (*Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels* 12).

The comic strip, a crucial development in this trajectory, introduced a distinctive mode of sequential storytelling. Typically organized in horizontal rows, the strip relied on a combination of images and text, often placed within balloons, to convey dialogue and narrative progression. This chronological narrative was characterised by an economy of line wherein the background and the narrative was minimised. The focus of the art work was on visual and verbal wit conveyed through facial expression and silhouetted images. Often these comic strips were so successful that they outlived their creators and were syndicated. The famous *Punch* comic strip and *The Katzenjammer Kids* series which was syndicated into the 21<sup>st</sup> century are some examples. Scott McCloud describes this form as the "juxtaposition of pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence," emphasizing that readers play an active role in connecting panels and constructing meaning (*Understanding Comics* 63). He refers to this interpretive act as "closure," a process in which readers mentally bridge the gaps between panels to produce a continuous story. By establishing conventions of sequential art—such as panel arrangement, word balloons, and visual humour—the comic strip set the foundation for the later rise of comic books and graphic novels. The move from comic strips to comic books marked an important shift in the development of graphic storytelling. Comic books allowed for longer, more coherent narratives than the brief instalments of daily strips. They began as collection of strips which told a single story or part of a continuous story. When they became popular they were published in book form. Since its very inception the comic book engaged with themes of political and private morality, military terror,

political satire, domestic comedy and action and adventure. The Swiss artist Rodolphe Töpffer is often cited as a pioneer of this form and ‘father of the modern comic’. His innovative use of simplified lines and dynamic motion, rather than detailed three-dimensional realism, helped shape the artistic style that would define later comics. Often the protagonist of his work is an absurdist antihero who struggles against either fate, nature or a mechanical society. He abandoned three dimensional drawing and as Thierry Groensteen notes, Töpffer’s work anticipated the modern aesthetic of comics by emphasizing movement and expression over visual accuracy (*The System of Comics* 45).

### III. THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

By the early twentieth century, comic books had gained a wide readership, with works like Windsor McCay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1913) showcasing both artistic ambition and imaginative storytelling. Comic books extended the possibilities of narrative pacing, allowing for dreamlike sequences, elaborate fantasy, and sustained story arcs that surpassed the brevity of the comic strip. The 1960s saw yet another transformation with the rise of underground comics, or ‘comix.’ These publications broke away from mainstream restrictions, tackling political, social, and personal themes that traditional publishers often avoided. Charles Hatfield observes that this movement marked a decisive turn toward “personal, political, and experimental storytelling” (*Alternative Comics* 33). The underground scene expanded the boundaries of what comics could address, paving the way for their eventual recognition as a serious artistic medium and setting the stage for the emergence of the graphic novel. The thematic focus of these ‘comix’ were a sharp critique of the Vietnam War, and a mockery and rage against authority. Other iterations of the form can be seen in the popularity of the “adult comic strips” in Europe, the repackaged comics in book form and the “picture novels” in the same period.

The distinction between comics and graphic novels is not limited to page length; it also involves questions of cultural value and artistic intent. While comics were often serialized, marketed to children, were published weekly or monthly, were available in newsstands and comic book stores, and were accompanied by advertisements or puzzles, the graphic novel emerged as a format that aimed for literary seriousness and mature audiences and was available in hardbound or paperback form in bookstores. However the graphic novel often presents a known story in a new manner and repackages the comic for an older audience who may not wish to read a ‘comic’, as evidenced in the success of *The Dark Knight* (1986). Today the genre is a staple of popular culture. Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God* (1978) is often cited as the first self-identified graphic novel. With this work, Eisner not only introduced a new label but also argued for the legitimacy of the form as a vehicle for exploring complex themes of morality, faith, and urban life. In *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner insisted that sequential art is a distinctive mode of expression, fully capable of addressing the same emotional and intellectual depth as prose or film (7). Building on this foundation, Scott McCloud analyzed how graphic novels manipulate time, perspective, and reader engagement. He emphasized that the gaps—or gutters—between panels invite readers to actively participate in shaping the story (*Understanding Comics* 104). This demand for reader involvement contributes to the richness of the medium, making it particularly effective for conveying layered narratives. Hillary Chute adds that this interactivity makes graphic novels especially suited to representing trauma and memory, as the form allows for both fragmentation and continuity (*Graphic Women* 21). By the late twentieth century, landmark works such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986) and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1987) demonstrated the power of graphic novels to handle historical, ethical, and political subjects with sophistication equal to that of traditional literature.

### IV. THEMES IN GRAPHIC NOVELS

Graphic novels occupy a distinctive position at the intersection of popular culture and political critique. Their hybrid form—combining words and images—enables them to tackle complex social issues while still reaching broad audiences. Frederick Luis Aldama observes that graphic narratives often function as multicultural texts that destabilize dominant versions of history (*Your Brain on Latino Comics* 66). By doing so, they amplify perspectives that have been marginalized in mainstream cultural discourse.

In the Indian context, this dynamic is especially visible. Works like *Bhimayana* highlight Dalit struggles against caste oppression, while *Kari* gives voice to queer identities often erased in public culture. *Delhi Calm* confronts the silences of authoritarian rule during the Emergency, and *Kashmir Pending* foregrounds the lived experiences of conflict in one of the world’s most contested regions. Even *Hush* (2011), a wordless graphic novel, confronts the trauma of child sexual abuse, proving that silence itself can become a powerful form of storytelling. The structure of graphic novels makes this kind of political engagement particularly effective. Scott McCloud’s concept of “closure”—the way readers fill in gaps between panels—suggests that the audience becomes an active participant in meaning-making (*Understanding Comics* 63). This

participatory quality is especially powerful when dealing with trauma or memory, where absence, silence, and fragmentation are as important as what is shown. Hillary Chute notes that such features make graphic novels ideally suited to representing traumatic histories and personal struggles (*Why Comics?* 110). Indian creators have also blended global conventions with indigenous traditions. This aesthetic hybridity allows Indian graphic novels to resist cultural homogenization while retaining global appeal. By drawing on local art forms—such as Gond painting in *Bhimayana*—Indian graphic novels assert cultural specificity even as they participate in an international literary form. Through these strategies, graphic novels in India demonstrate their capacity to serve as both cultural commentary and political intervention, offering stories that challenge dominant narratives while creating new spaces of representation.

## V. THE GRAPHIC NOVEL IN INDIA

In India, the history of comics has evolved through a dynamic interplay between indigenous visual traditions and global influences. Long before the modern comic strip, narrative art existed in forms such as temple murals, scroll paintings, and textiles, which used sequential imagery to tell stories. These practices show that sequential art is not alien to India but deeply rooted in local cultural expression. The *phad bachanas* where entire storylines are painted on a fabric are some examples of the same. During the colonial period, political cartoons became a powerful means of commentary. Publications like *Delhi Sketch Book* (1850) and *Avadh Punch* (1877) used satire and caricature to critique authority, blending humor with resistance. In the art work one can see early attempts to convert a Western medium to Indian stories. These cartoons laid the groundwork for visual storytelling as a tool of cultural and political critique in India. After independence, comics grew into an essential part of children's culture. *Chandamama* (1947), published in multiple languages, introduced generations of readers to mythological and folkloric tales. Later, *Indrajal Comics* (1964) brought global heroes like *Phantom* and *Mandrake* to Indian audiences. But the most significant development came in 1967 with the founding of *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) by Anant Pai. By retelling stories from Indian mythology, history, and folklore, ACK aimed to educate young readers while also shaping a sense of national identity. As Pramod K. Nayar argues, ACK played a central role in “mythologizing the nation” for postcolonial audiences (*The Indian Graphic Novel* 54).

While these early comics were enormously popular, they often avoided contentious issues such as Partition violence, caste discrimination, or gender inequality. The transition to the graphic novel format later enabled Indian creators to confront these complex social and political realities more directly, giving rise to new forms of storytelling that were both artistic and critical. While India's comic tradition laid the groundwork, the graphic novel format opened new possibilities for artistic innovation and critical engagement. Indian creators began to adapt the global form of the graphic novel to local realities, blending indigenous aesthetics with pressing political, cultural, and social issues. Graphic novels first appeared in the early 2000s in the country and dealt with environmental issues, urban life and identity, mythology caste and gender experiences to name a few. Liquid Comics publish mythological content, like the *Devi* series, with a futuristic setting and employed technological advances to explain the prowess of heroes. In a similar vein Campfire Graphic novels on the classics, mythology, history and biographies abound which through a “unique combination of high quality text and illustrations help students grasp the core elements of a text while reinforcing memory with imagery”. One can find graphic novels in Indian languages as well which depict the popularity of the genre: *Uud Bilaw Manus* (2011) figures a Bhojpuri speaking hero. Several landmark works illustrate this trajectory.

### *River of Stories* (1984)

Often considered India's first graphic novel, Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* engages with the controversy surrounding the Narmada Dam project. The narrative contrasts the self-sustaining lives of indigenous communities with the disruptive forces of large-scale development. Through the character of Malgu Gayan, a village singer, the work highlights displacement, protest, and cultural survival. Ghosal describes *River of Stories* as an “eco-graphic narrative,” where visual storytelling amplifies ecological and political critique (191). By combining journalistic documentation with mythological references, Sen established a precedent for socially conscious graphic novels in India. The novel refers to mythologies of the indigenous people who are being displaced.

### *Kashmir Pending* (2007)

Written by Naseer Ahmed and illustrated by Saurabh Singh, *Kashmir Pending* explores the Kashmir conflict through the perspective of Mushtaq, a former militant. The work uses a documentary style, often drawing on photographs, to create a scrapbook-like representation of violence, beauty, and memory. Chute describes such works as “documentary comics,”

where the blending of art and reportage creates a layered representation of reality (*Why Comics?* 103). The dark color palette and shifting perspectives—from close-ups to wide shots—underscore the fragmented and contested nature of memory in a conflict zone. These shifts in perspective indicate that the event and not the individual experiencing subject is important. As the story progresses the gutters darken to emphasise the visual intensity and horror of the unfolding events. Often the mute pictures contrast with cacophony on the streets.

*Kari* (2008)

Amruta Patil's *Kari* stands out as one of India's first queer graphic novels. The story follows Kari, a young lesbian navigating alienation, heartbreak, and survival in a bustling metropolis. The work opens with an attempted suicide, immediately framing the protagonist's search for identity within a hostile social environment. Chute situates *Kari* within the growing tradition of feminist graphic narratives, noting how Patil uses visual metaphors to capture experiences of gender and sexuality that prose alone cannot convey (*Graphic Women* 135). The interplay of gutters, fragmented panels, and full-page illustrations mirrors Kari's fractured sense of self, making the form itself a reflection of her inner struggles. Gutters are used effectively in the book. There are entire pages without gutters which foreground the visual aspect of the text. The presence of gutters reflect Kari's sense of closure. The size of the gutters in the book is also important: small ones indicate that events are unfolding quickly while larger ones indicate Kari's abstract thoughts and dreams. The art work, which mirrors famous pieces, draws the reader into the story.

*Delhi Calm* (2010)

Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* revisits one of India's most politically turbulent periods—the Emergency of 1975–77. Through allegory and stark visuals, the graphic novel critiques censorship, authoritarianism, and the silencing of dissent. Arjun Appadurai argues that works like *Delhi Calm* illustrate the paradox of globalization: while adopting a global form such as the graphic novel, they tell deeply local stories that resist erasure (*Modernity at Large* 45). By visualizing suppressed memories and offering a platform for dissent, *Delhi Calm* demonstrates how the medium can recover histories that are otherwise marginalized.

*Bhimayana* (2011)

Published by Navayana, *Bhimayana* tells the story of B.R. Ambedkar, one of India's most important social reformers, through the visual language of Gond art. The illustrations, created by artists Durgabai and Subhash Vyam, depart from Western panel conventions, favoring fluid and organic forms. Hillary Chute notes that the work “rejects the rectangularity of Western comics,” offering instead a visual grammar that foregrounds collectivity and fluidity (*Why Comics?* 88). Nayar argues that this approach represents a form of “visual resistance,” where the very structure of the narrative resists caste hierarchies (*The Indian Graphic Novel* 116). The result is a work that is not only biographical but also formally innovative, reclaiming the comic medium for Dalit storytelling. The use of open spaces wherein the figures aren't ‘forced’ into boxes as well as the lack of photorealism which allows the same figure to be depicted differently creates greater spaces for this storytelling.

Together, these works show how Indian graphic novels move beyond entertainment to confront social, political, and cultural issues. By adapting a global medium to local concerns, they have created a hybrid form that is both innovative and deeply resonant.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The graphic novel has emerged as one of the most dynamic forms of contemporary storytelling, bridging the gap between visual art and literature while engaging deeply with questions of history, identity, and politics. What began as mass entertainment in the form of comic strips and comic books has been redefined through both critical theory and creative innovation. From Will Eisner's idea of sequential art to Scott McCloud's exploration of visual narrative and Hillary Chute's work on trauma and memory, scholars have established the graphic novel as a serious artistic and cultural form.

In India, the medium has taken on a unique trajectory. Building on earlier traditions of children's comics and mythological retellings, Indian graphic novels have expanded the scope of the form by addressing pressing social issues—environmental struggles in Orijit Sen's *River of Stories*, caste and discrimination in *Bhimayana*, queer identity in Amruta Patil's *Kari*, authoritarian politics in *Delhi Calm*, and conflict in *Kashmir Pending*. These works illustrate how the graphic novel has become a vehicle for stories often left out of mainstream narratives. Graphic novels are more than a hybrid of words and

pictures; they are cultural texts that interrogate structures of power while providing new ways of seeing and understanding. In their ability to combine immediacy with depth, and entertainment with critique, graphic novels ensure their continued relevance as both art and social commentary in the twenty-first century.

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