

Is the Novel *Bhimayana* a Step Towards Redefining Identity: A Study in the light of Existentialism in the Cultural Context of Post Revolutionary Mexico

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Abstract:

Bhimayana is written and drawn in the mnemonic idiom of modern Gond art (as practiced by the central Indian tribal people called Gonds). It is a graphic account of Ambedkar's crusade to eradicate untouchability. Beyond this graphic pedigree, the book is also dispersed with several thumbnail descriptions about present day caste prejudice, violently rampant in villages, but invisible to most urban Indians. This robust expose about caste incites me to write this paper in order to prove that the crusade started by Ambedkar was infact an effort to redefine and thereby reestablishing dalit identity. In order to prove the point, the paper has taken the reference of existential views of Martin Heidegger and Jose Ortega Y. Gasset in the cultural context of post revolutionary Mexico. In Mexico, porfirio Diaz's dictatorial regime imposed French and English nineteenth-century liberal values, which dismissed the traditions of Mexico's primarily indigenous population. The notions of reason, science, order, utility and progress were prioritized over social justice, democracy or human dignity. Thus, Mexican revolution was started by the intellectuals who were greatly influenced by the existential thinkers like Ortega and Heidegger. Their notion- to avoid programmatic essentialisms, and to live authentically as a being-in-the-world of socialized others has been employed to achieve the objective of the paper.

Keywords: Untouchability, Existentialism, Identity, Being.

Bhimayana is written and drawn in the mnemonic idiom of modern Gond art (as practiced by the central Indian tribal people called Gonds). This book is the joint effort of the writers Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand and Gond artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam. The book employs visual aide-memoires in the form of Gond drawings which are mainly two dimensional and rich in natural motifs. Both dalits and tribals like Gonds are protected people of India called Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/STs)

It sounds very much like *Ramayana*, a sacred Hindu text that portrays the exile of the high-caste mythical god prince Ram from everyday royal luxuries. *Bhimayana's* account of everyday expulsions from ordinary civic dignities — water, shelter, and travel — presents an alternative epic of heroism (Prajna, The Comics Journal) *Bhimayana* is a graphic account of Ambedkar's crusade to eradicate untouchability. The drawing below clearly depicts the essence of this book. Implicitly, it is asking the question: Why is there social stratification in

our society when the sky above all animals and human beings is the same. This drawing reminds me of the famous poem “No Men Are Foreign” by James Kirkup. It says:

Remember, no men are strange, no countries foreign
Beneath all uniforms, a single body breathes
Like ours: the land our brothers walk upon
Is earth like this, in which we all shall lie.
They, too, aware of sun and air and water[...]
Are fed by peaceful harvests, by war’s long winter starv’d.

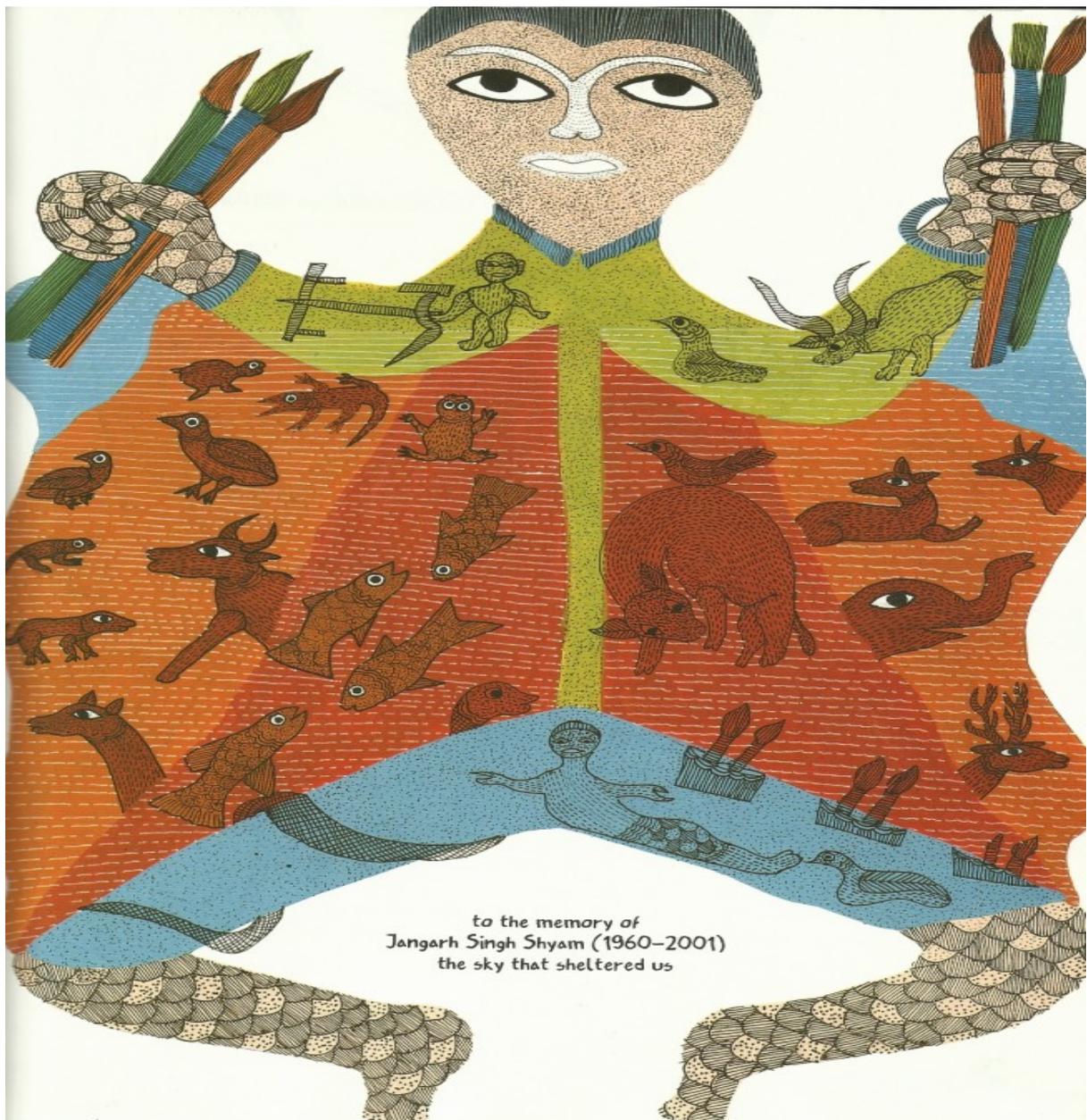


Fig.1, Bhimayana. Newdelhi. 2011;5

Beyond this graphic pedigree, the book is also dispersed with thumbnail descriptions of present day caste prejudice, violently rampant in villages, but indiscernible to most urban Indians. This appalling exposure about caste which is still existent amongst us drives me to write this paper. It attempts to prove that the crusade started by Ambedkar was an effort to redefine and thereby reestablishing dalit identity. In order to prove the point, the paper has taken the reference of existential views of Martin Heidegger and Jose Ortega Y. Gasset in the cultural context of post revolutionary Mexico.

Heidegger and Ortega are the two major figures of twentieth century. They urge that one should avoid programmatic essentialisms, and live authentically as a being-in-the-world of socialized others. According to existentialism, there is no essence bestowed on man by God, and there is no intrinsic meaning. There is only “free will” and human beings are “free agents” (Thomas). Ortega says that an individual should live in an actively and disclosing way. That is, an individual should basically understands his or her own being, which is unique to each individual and is not related to common life of man in general. The individuation of the individual's being is that which identifies what he or she may become. Thus, a choice must be made with respect to the variety of possibilities which arise out of the “circumstances” of the individual. Ortega asserted that in order to create his destiny so that he may become “the novelist of himself,” the individual “must choose among these possibilities.” Therefore, he argued, “I am free. But understand it well, I am free by coercion, whether I want to be or not.” The conditions of freedom evolve within given alternatives and freedom of action, and thereby results in the ability to choose and to act under whatever confronting circumstances that may arise. Thus, for Ortega, how an individual constitutes himself or herself becomes determined very much by the way in which he or she allows for the possession of either being. This life that is given to us is empty, and man has to go on filling it for himself, occupying it. Such is our occupation. This is not the case with the stone, the plant, and the animal. Their being already given to them is predetermined and resolute (Stanford Encyclopedia). Heidegger also dwells on the question of Being at length. According to him, the truth of being can be defined as the openness, the free region which always out of sight provides the space of play for the different determinations of being and human epochs established in them. The truth of being, its openness, is not something which we can merely consider or think of. It is not our own production. It is where we always come to stand. We find ourselves thrown in a historically conditioned environment, in an epoch in which the decision concerning the prevailing interpretation of the being of being is already made for us. Yet, by asking the question of being, we can at least attempt to free ourselves from our historical conditioning (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

This notion of existentialism is very well reflected in Ambedkar’s attempt to bring dalits into the national mainstream. He tried to move up in the social stratification system by relegating the position historically assigned to dalits.

The status of dalits in India can be very well compared with that of the native inhabitants of Latin America who were given the status of ‘other’ in their own country. In the beginning of nineteenth century, there was an outbreak of the Mexican Revolution. It was a

cultural and intellectual revolt against the positivist ideology of Porfirio Díaz's dictatorial regime. This ideology was based on French and English nineteenth-century liberal values, which dismissed the traditions of Mexico's primarily indigenous population. The notions of reason, science, order, utility and progress were prioritized over social justice, democracy or human dignity. Díaz's close ministers and intellectuals were called *los científicos* who did not have any interest in the well-being of the people of the country, instead, they plunge the country into a political and economical oligarchy benefitting from foreign industry. This attitude was clearly reflected in the literature of that time. Federico Gamboa's *Santa* (1903) shows that the values regulating individual lives are determined by a functionalist spirit that justifies existence strictly as an ability to adapt to society's material progress. *Santa*, the girl from a village on the outskirts of Mexico City, fatally fails to assimilate the opportunities and dangers of the metropolis in a process that seems to be in the nature of progress itself. *Santa* is abducted in her village, discriminated and absorbed by the big city as one more object for material exchange (Manuel).

During the last years of this dictatorial regime the cultural revolt prompted a change of course in Mexican intellectual life. It started with the launch of the magazine *Savia Moderna* in 1906; the *Sociedad de Conferencias* in 1907 and the birth of the group *El Ateneo de la Juventud*, 1909. *Savia Moderna* was short-lived but it worked to organize a new generation of young intellectuals. Among these young men were Alfonso Reyes, Antonio Caso and Pedro Henríquez Ureña. Henríquez Ureña was the inspiration of a new generation of writers. With the purpose of promoting an alternative to the official discourse, they offered open talks about "modern" themes of philosophy, art and literature, while keeping rigour and originality. They were greatly influenced by Henri Bergson's new phenomenological theory of creative evolution. It states that "Matter is, a descending movement, a falling; life is a reaction, a movement opposite to the fall; it is impulse that tends to loosen itself from material laws." Vasconcelos proposed that Bergson's creative evolution enables us to see our lives as continuous self-creation as we crave for being ourselves (Manuel).

It is worth mentioning that these tensions are still present in Mexican politics. Even after one hundred years, at the bi-centennial celebrations in 2010, a similar tension was visible between the State's decree of "order" (and a correspondent nationalism) and an anti-positivist call for understanding Mexicanness in alternative way (Manuel).

As in Mexico, there was a tussle between the legacy of Porfirian positivist ideology and crusade for rethinking Mexican identity and the meaning of existence, in *Bhimayana* also, Ambedkar envisioned that India should first free itself from Brahminism, which he equated with "the negation of liberty, equality, and fraternity." It was observed by Ambedkar that Brahminism was the very pathology of Indian bigotry ingrained even in non-Hindus, including Muslims, Christians, and Parsis that he foresaw migrating poisonously in low-caste Hindus who history allowing would assume the role of Brahmins. For example, at *Khairlanji*, it was low-caste Hindus, not Brahmins, who lynched the dalit *Bhotmanges*. They were lynched for educating their only daughter, protecting their land from encroachers, and living with the maximum poise their finances would allow, basically exactly what *Manu* forbids

untouchables to covet in the *Manusmriti (Laws of Manu)*. Ambedkar became a leading voice in slowly organizing dalits for movements seeking social justice. Thus, it is seen that in both the cases it is a struggle of the 'being' to free itself from the historically conditioned environment-colonial legacy in case of Mexico, while for dalits, it is an ancient Hindu text 'Manusmriti' written by the founder of the universe, Manu, who advises torturing untouchables, forcing them into poverty, and subjugating women (Desai).

Bhimayana portrays not only Ambedkar but also the undignified and debasing life of dalits in Ambedkar's time. In *Bhimayana*, a boy named Bhim experiences the world through violence. Bhim is a Mahar, an untouchable. Formerly, untouchables were considered outcasts placed outside the four-level Hindu caste structure with brahmins (priests) at the top. They were considered impure and relegated to the rank of those who should not be touched. Historically, dalits were assigned to perform jobs which caste Hindus found polluting. They handled dead people and animals, soil, and waste respectively as cremators, cobblers, potters, gardeners, sweepers, and scavengers. They were not entitled to receive education. Primary schooling became possible only because of British law. Using wells, temples and building imperishable houses were beyond their rights. Verbal humiliations, thrashings, and fatal threats were quite common- "dheds", "dirty scavengers", "sons of bitches", "bastards", "The untouchables have become arrogant!", "The dheds must be taught a lesson!" etc. are some of the examples (Natarajan, Anand 86).

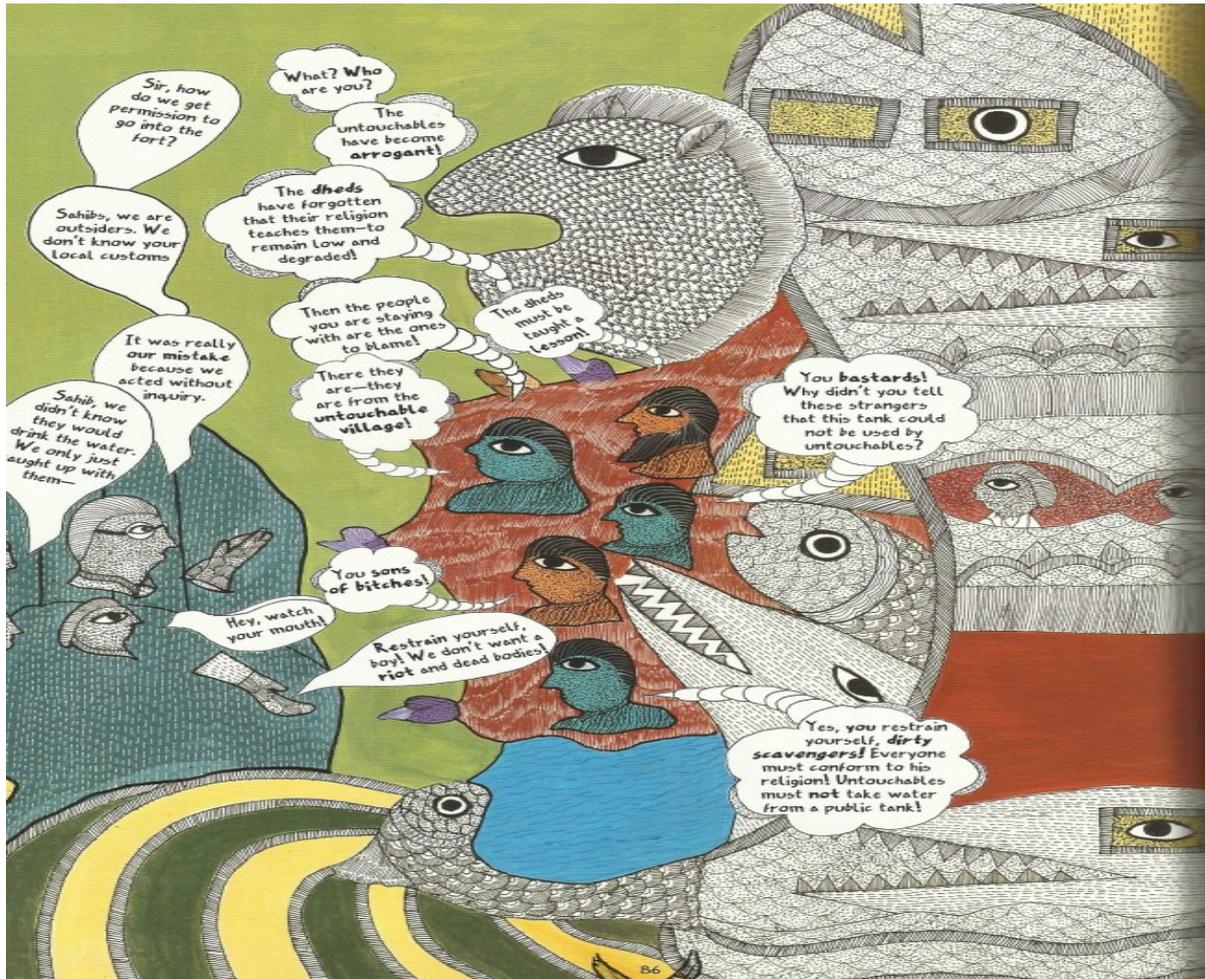


Fig.2. *Bhimayana*. New Delhi. 2011; 86

The book *Bhimayana* consists of three books:

Book 1: Water is set in 1901. It was a year when Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, initiated educational reforms to help Indian students find better jobs. This was a great opportunity for the rich, who could afford higher education. But back in Satara, Bhim was set apart in the classroom. He had a tough time just getting a glass of water. From the school water pump to the village well, untouchables were denied access at every turn. At one point, a teacher farcically blamed Bhim's thirst on his long hair. The child himself would love a trim, but from whom exactly? Barbers didn't touch untouchables. These mental sufferings made Bhim lament over his status of being an untouchable. He expressed his disgust in simply being dalit: "Animals enjoy more freedom" (Natarajan, Anand).

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. These stories in fact go beyond Ambedkar's humiliations, because they happened within last ten years of free India which assumes itself to be free from this social stigma.

Thus, it is seen that in both the cases there was a blossoming of anti-rationalistic tendencies that neglected reason as the essence of man and questioned the traditional definitions of culture. According to some historians, the roots of the Mexican revolution are found in the distant colonial period (c.1521-1821). The multiethnic population of Mexico is the result of colonial rule. Though Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821 but this colonial legacy was soon overlaid with new features which were acquired during the thirty-five year rule of Porfirio Diaz. These ideas were also part of an international context of paradigm shifts in philosophy. In case of Mexico, intellectual changes had an extra catalyst as politics and philosophical renovation mixed at the brink of the Mexican Revolution. What started as a rejection of Porfirio Díaz's liberal-positivist regime in the form of philosophical romanticism, turned into widespread cultural revolt in the search for Mexican identity. As Malas suggests, this movement was a kind of romantic resistance (from the Germanic tradition) where "Mexican philosophers waged a campaign to nationalize meaning, reason, and existence, at the same time as Mexican politicians nationalized industries." In this way, the reinvention of Mexican identity after the revolution mingled nationalist outcry, anti-positivist (and therefore anti-rationalistic) spirit and existential (also anti-rationalistic) philosophy (Manuel). In India also, Ambedkar challenged the traditional status of dalits. He burned a copy of the *Manusmriti* (*Laws of Manu*), a Hindu text that contains the words of the universe's founder Manu who advises torturing untouchables, forcing them into poverty, and subjugating women. Ambedkar tried to retrieve "human personality," or "being" and hence gave a call to "educate, organize, and agitate" which became an epitome for his movement for social justice. Ambedkar became a leading voice in slowly organising dalits until finally, in 1927, a protest march of 3000 walked peacefully to a town called Mahad where they drank from a tank so far reserved for caste Hindus. This event is known as the First Mahad Satyagraha of 1927. After 1974, when a militant anti-caste movement led by the Dalit Panthers (inspired by the Black Panthers) was crushed by right-wing Hindu political parties working for the state, dalits gave up Gandhi's benevolent jargon of 'harijan' because being linked to a Hindu god meant more Hindu bondage. In October 1956, about six weeks before his death, Ambedkar adopted Buddhism along with an approximate 500,000 followers. Considered to be the largest single conversion in human history, it inspired many dalits to voluntarily adopt monotheistic faiths. They became Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs, though conversion did little to dissolve the stigma of untouchability. However, this was an attempt on the part of dalits to free themselves from the historical conditioning and exercise their choice in order to reclaim their "being".

Thus, it is seen that both the Mexican revolution and revolution started by Ambedkar follow the existential thought of Ortega, and Heidegger. They provided philosophical ground

for Mexican revolution and provide a ready tool for finding alternatives to the official-national views on the Mexican and Mexicanness. Though it seems that Ambedkar was not aware of these concepts but still they are very much evident in his actions and thoughts. Thus it would not be wrong, if criticism which Ambedkar received as a result of his radicalism is shifted in favour of his thinking to liberate “being” of dalits from the clutches of “historical conditioning” to which they had been earlier subjected. This motive of Ambedkar was clearly evident during Mahad satyagraha when Ambedkar said that “We are going to the tank to assert that we too are human beings like others” (Natarajan, Anand 48).

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