

## Graphical India: The Nation and its Performances in Shaheen Bagh

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**Abstract:** The paper examines the ways that nation can be represented using the affective qualities of graphic novels. The visual element of the graphic novel, coupled with the ways that the panels can meld, merge or recede mirrors the myriad ways that the Nation peers into its performative aspects. The paper analyses the graphic novel *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* in terms of the ways that it uses memory and the female body to create a Nation. The ways that women-led protest movements have actually led to policy changes on the ground is also discussed here.

**Keywords:** Shaheen Bagh, Graphic Novel, India, Azadi, Ita Mehrotra, *Hum Dekhenge*

The rise and relevance of the graphic narrative is a well-documented area of study, especially in terms of the flexibility it lends to the stories it seeks to tell. Considered an evolutionary descendant of the comic book, graphic narratives present a very different ethos. The author of the Pulitzer Prize winning graphic narrative *Maus* told the *Comics Journal*, “It seems to me that comics have already shifted from being an icon of illiteracy to becoming one of the last bastions of literacy” (qtd. in Bernard-Donals, 147). *Maus* depicted the Holocaust in all its grit,

misery and inhumanity. The allegorical portrayals of the characters made the work even more potent, in terms of the impact it had on the reading public. Interestingly, the jury of the Pulitzer was in a quandary regarding the category in which *Maus* could be slotted into- finally deciding to award it under the Special Citations and Awards. To the New York Times Book Review that had categorized *Maus* as fiction, Art Spiegelman, the creator of the graphic narrative wrote:

If your list were divided into literature and non-literature, I could gracefully accept the compliment as intended, but to the extent that 'fiction' indicates a work isn't factual, I feel a bit queasy. As an author, I believe I might have lopped several years off the thirteen I devoted to my two-volume project if I could have taken a novelist's license while searching for a novelist's structure (qtd. in Doherty 69).

This statement by Spiegelman opens up very interesting thoughts about the position that graphic narratives occupy. The initial nomenclature of the graphic novel was generally looked upon with disfavour precisely because it did not leave much leeway for a more interpretative treatment of the idea of a text. Hillary Chute points out in *Comics as Literature: Reading Graphic Narrative* (2008) that she uses the term 'graphic narrative,' "instead of the more common term 'graphic novel,' because the most gripping works coming out now, from men and women alike, claim their own historicity—even as they work to destabilize standard narratives of history. Particularly, there is a significant yet diverse body of nonfiction graphic work that engages with the subject either in extremis or facing brutal experience" (92).

The fresh perspective that the graphic narrative offers in terms of reimagining what a text is and expanding the possibilities of the constituent parts of a narrative has very contemporary significations. At a time when communication and narration can happen through the limited characters on Twitter or as TikTok videos, Snapchats, Instagram, Facebook stories, YouTube shorts, the borderlessness and visuality of graphic narratives are a very important cultural discourse. The elasticity of the medium allows the illustrations to be without text as well. The absence of words, thus creating a participative, conversational reader, who is free to fill in the gaps, understand the situation and even move on to the next panel in silence.

Graphic narratives are very tactile and voluble in that they can turn a panel or a page into a riot of colours and collages of diverse objects. The cultural swirl that graphic narratives are capable of, the mimicking of brain processes that can traverse from thinking about one's job to suddenly thinking about platefuls of food can all be presented in the graphic narrative without breaking the conversation. In India, the last decades of the twentieth century saw a virtual proliferation of comics across languages. The *Bobanum Moliyum* comics in Malayalam, the Indrajal comics, Diamond Comics and the *Amar Chitra Katha* series brought a sense of vitality not just to children's literature, but also formed the bedrock of cultural modernity in the cultures it catered to. The social commentary of the Malayalam series, the foregrounding of science, the negotiations of power and the need for an amicable solution as represented by the *Chacha Chaudhri* comics, the need to fight against 'anti-national' and supernatural elements that proliferate the jungles and waterways of the country such as Indrajal's *Phantom*- all grappled with the ideas of a changing world and cultural order.

In 1994, Orijit Sen created what is possibly the first graphic narrative in India, *The River of Stories*. Sen, who has become one of the best-known names in Indian Graphic narratives, illustrates the vital issue of the cost of development by taking up the issue of the building of the Narmada Dam, locally known as the Rewa dam in Ambarkhan. The Rewa Dam, a thinly veiled reference to the Narmada or the Sardar Sarovar dam has impacted the lives of thousands of tribals and rendered them homeless and in a precarious state. Sen employs mythology, in this case, the tribal narrative of how the world came into existence, to bring a connect between the Universe and the Earth and the idea of co-existence. The goals set by the Nation and its dreams for a brighter tomorrow mean nothing to the tribals. This developmental 'anxiety' experienced by the nation that it wishes to extend to all people in lieu of considering them its citizens can only end in further alienation.

The graphic narrative in India has grown out of the chaos of the postmodern, globalised, and now post-truth space that public discourse finds itself in today. The political and narrative consciousness that the graphic narrative radiates makes it a very important segment of Indian

Writing in English. In *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique*, Pramod K. Nayar views:

...the graphic narrative as adding to the existing corpus of texts in IWE a new representational mode that re-invigorates the canon, the form and the themes. The Indian graphic narrative demands a new literacy, a new pedagogy and a new interpretive frame. Further, the graphic narrative takes the tensions, dilemmas and concerns of traditional IWE and discusses these in a popular medium, offering, therefore, not only a democratizing of forms of socio-political commentary but also a democratizing of the language of cultural analytics (7).

He feels that the possibilities of presenting different ways of telling the story- as a documentary, a sarcastic autobiography, a traumatic reality all adds to different ways of seeing as well. The graphic narrative also provides a break from the various narrative stages that Indian Writing has been going through and the influence of which has continued to resonate through the ages. Nayar continues:

In the nation's longing for form, the graphic novel represents a whole new formal apparatus that mixes and matches multiple strategies.... The graphic narrative, with its verbal-visual and critical literacy, is the medium India needs to address contemporary concerns and provide a politically edged cultural critique. 'Critical literacy' embodied in the graphic narrative enables us to see texts as situated within unequal social fields of caste, patriarchy, capitalism and demands that the reader becomes alert to the position he or she takes vis-à-vis not just the text but the social domains represented in it (8).

The ontological and epistemological situatedness of the graphic narrative allows it to interrogate vital questions of history, identity, modernity, capitalism, and the tool of narration itself. Space is one of the fundamental aspects of the graphic narrative. It is not only the space that the text as a physical entity occupies, the space that resides within and outside the text also is a relevant participant in the narrative. In *The River of Stories*, the river, while not being an active component in the narrative, flows into and out of the narrative through the contemporary and cultural value of sustainability and mythology. The spaces depicted in the graphic narrative need not be

monochromatic or even polychromatic; they can be blank spaces that mirror thought, speech, emotion or absence. As Sonya J. Nair points out, “The form of the comic book when deployed as a narrative, has an immense potential for generating subcultural spaces. This signifies the spaces between the panels or the very absence of white spaces with immense subcultural value” (558).

Critical literacy is what informs the graphic narrative and also entrusts the reader with a degree of awareness to catch on to the relevance of the narrative at hand. The presentations in works such as *Tianmen* (1989) by Morgan Chua, *Persepolis* (2000) by Marjane Satrapi and Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (1993) require an interactive reading involving interrogating identities, histories and ideologies. The presentation of human and non-human rights, climate refugees, political violence, human trafficking, the challenges of loneliness, legal rights and disability- ask the reader to determine their position within and outside the text. These interrogations cause ruptures at fundamental levels of textuality, semiotics and ideology. The spaces created by such ruptures renders the seemingly monolithic structures of nation, society, rituals, customs and ideology unstable. In short, the Nation is rendered fragile through the many subnations that come to be portrayed and presented.

This instability is what is generally feared regarding the graphic narrative- the incomprehensibility, not just of the genre, but also the very contemporary modality of its presentation. It is like graffiti on paper. It can be called better than graffiti, as it is certainly more mobile and like graffiti, it can take on more meanings, though it cannot be painted over.

Perhaps, it is the mediated presentation of History that often creates such opposition to graphic narratives. The histories presented in graphic narratives are rarely populist. They deal with the less familiar, the little-known. The lines of the personal and the political histories are often blurred. But what is to be inferred from such a presentation of history is that there is no such thing as an official history and that history is always narrated and represented. In *Comics as Literature: Reading Graphic Narrative*, Hillary Chute points out:

The graphic narrative accomplishes this work [of the textualization of context and contextualization of text] with its manifest handling of its own artifice, its attention to its

seams. Its formal grammar rejects transparency and renders textualization conspicuous, inscribing the context in its graphic presentation...The most important graphic narratives explore the conflicted boundaries of what can be said and what can be shown at the intersection of collective histories and life stories (458-59).

The graphic narrative genre in India is a very vibrant one, with the subcultural vibe extremely dominant. There is a sense of the forbidden and underground that many graphic narratives such as the *Mixtape* series exude, with their brown covers and deliberately stapled book binds. Such books draw inspiration from the Zines, yet another variation of the graphic narrative that emphasizes creative content like poetry and short story, or sometimes, a set of illustrations. Graphic narratives also come as Zines and their appeal lie in their limited editions, which are often produced by hand and cost very little. These Zines, of course, took their inspiration from the Little Magazines that often published lesser-known voices. These publications have immense subcultural value for the interim space they occupy between kitsch, art and collectibles. More often than not, the Indian graphic narrative is a psychedelic, schizophrenic space that is occupied by a series of characters seeking to narrate their histories and constantly bending and breaking the various versions of history narrated to us since school or by our neighbours or national television. This mediated aspect of history is made obvious by illustrating the impact events of 'national' importance such as the Partition, the Emergency, the CAA on the lives of individuals. For instance, in Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010), the character listens to the radio and understands that an Emergency has been declared.

There is a case to be made for the female character whose perspective of the city and its spaces must be a vital point of articulation. *Kari, Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back* (2015) – an anthology and *Shaheen Bagh* (2021) by Ita Mehrotra (which this paper discusses in detail) are vital presences in the visuality of these narratives. The narrative in *Drawing the Line* literally draws lines around the characters so as to show the precarity of public spaces that do not seem to understand the notion of a female outside her house. Artists such as Kaveri Gopalakrishnan draw their concept of a world without boundaries that does not take notice of women going to office without a bra or having the luxury of simply scratching in public or constantly checking her

appearance. These liberties in themselves seem negligible especially in a megacity that is attractive for its anonymity. However, this anonymity is always mythical as there are always people who know you or keep tabs.

In her essay, *Graphic Novels and Delhi: Contested Spaces in the Popular*, Sangeeta Mittal points out:

The Graphic Novel with its legacy of negotiating trauma, nostalgia, marginalisation, memory, and identity makes possible the representation of the relationship of the city-zen with the lived space of the city in its characteristic de-centred and irreverential manner. Whether it is a city grappling with oppression and exploitation or a site of postmodern trials and tribulations, Graphic Novels make and represent the counter-city of non-touristy, non-privileged and non-conformist spaces (137).

The stories that the city feeds its citizens is symbolized in the name of Kari's building, Crystal Palace like a pit stop in a fairytale. She imagines it to be a place "Where gold trees with silver boughs bear pomegranates with real ruby seeds. Floors of marble, ceilings of brocade. Place where twelve dancing princesses dance through the night until the soles of their shoes wear out" (Patil 6).

The process of this presentation also presupposes seeing the visuality of the graphic form which is at the crux of its creative identity. The graphic novel is a terrain that reflects the culture of visuality that is integral to the South-Asian culture, as the idea of line of sight is crucial to modes of worship and so is the idea of the evil eye. These visuals that narrate stories thus are significant participants in the narrativizing of histories, especially those histories that have been ignored or not presented in the way they deserve to be. Marianne Hirsch feels that graphic narratives complicate:

...clear differentiations between word and image. With words always already functioning as images and images asking to be read as much as seen, comics are biocular texts par excellence. Asking us to read back and forth between images and words, comics reveal the

visuality and thus the materiality of words and the discursivity and narrativity of images (1213).

The politics of nation and nationalism stands out in Ita Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* which presents the narratives that sprung from the protests against the CAA in India. Coming out of a nondescript settlement comprising mostly of Muslims, the protests from Shaheen Bagh found resonance across the country and the narrative surrounding the protests mirrored much of what passes off as public and official rhetoric in the country. All across the world, students and women have led protests against oppressive governments that have gone on to cause regime changes. The grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the protesting women in Iran, Sudan and Turkey, the indigenous women protestors of South America, the resistance of the women of Manipur- have gone on to be iconic symbols of protests against totalitarianism, toxic, hegemonic and sectarian ideologies. Women-led protests movements have been largely fuelled by an intense historic consciousness and present a solidarity that comes out of a shared and lived experience. They tend to be across spectra and largely deal with the aftermath of violence.

The protestors of Shaheen Bagh were generally Muslim women who have come out initially, to meet and discuss the implications of the CAA on their lives and gradually, these discussions grew larger in scope in keeping with the way that the Government of India went about implementing its plan, putting people in camps and cracking down on student protests against the rallying cry of 'Azadi,' which actually means freedom, is inextricably linked to the separatist calls in Kashmir. The commonality of the call, led to the students in Jawahar Lal Nehru University (JNU) being branded anti-national. The similar protests in Jamia Milia University were also met with brutal resistance.

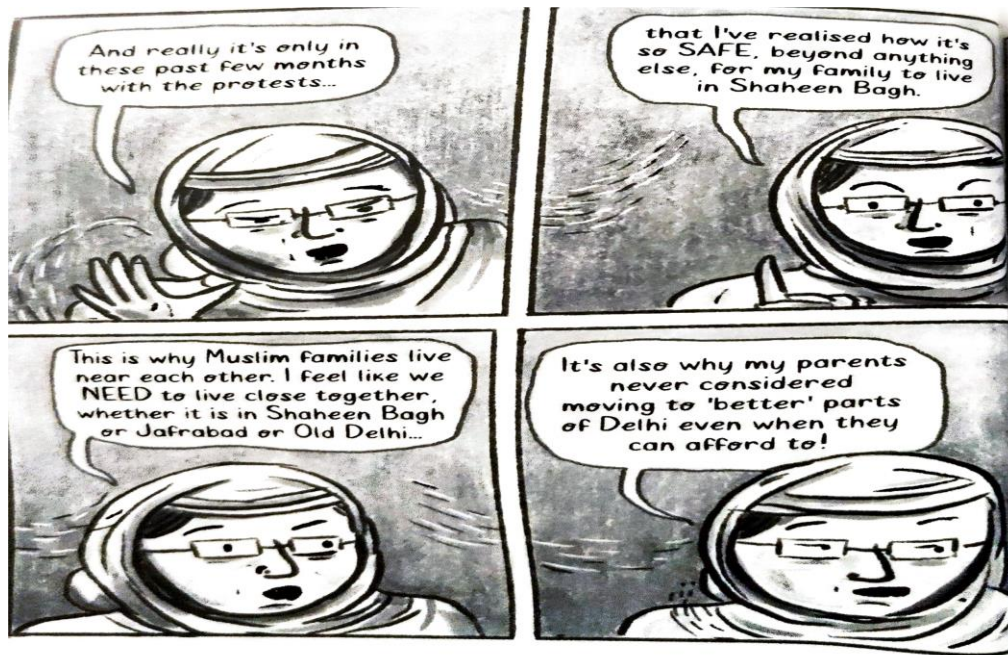
Just as the demonetisation in India made a huge dent in the agency afforded to women, who ran an unofficial economy of sorts, the CAA also affected their own standing in the country as did it affect those of their families. Many women, especially Muslim women from some parts of the country, may not have papers to show as they might have been lost in conditions of extreme precarity- natural or man-made calamities, riots and similar acts of violence. What they do have is a large repository of memory from which they can narrate genealogies, personal and local histories



and the trickle-down impact of progress. Their narration of these is what constitutes the micro-history of the nation. It is in them that the Nation is represented and performed.

Ita Mehrotra opens her graphic narrative with two panels depicting the act of serving and distributing tea. The trope of tea as a unifying, rallying agent in South Asian cultures is a well-known one. So is the act of congregating around a tea stall, which is a largely male performance. The panels depicting tea shift to a group of women which thus shows the shifting of political agency to women. It is they who are the speakers and the motivators of the movement. It is through their memory, their acts of everyday performances that the nature of the Nation becomes apparent.

The authorial voice takes us through the pathways of Shaheen Bagh where at various stages we can discern the sit-in happening at the background of the panel. Mehrotra first introduces us to Shahana, an architect (thus introducing yet another stereotype breaker of the Muslim woman as only a biryani maker or a home-bound woman) who lives in Shaheen Bagh. Through this young Muslim woman's memory of her ancestors who had to give up their tiny parcel of land in Bihar in anti-Muslim riots, one comes to understand the reason for the tendency of Muslims to ghettoise. The idea of security in numbers is what kept two generations of Shahana's family in Shaheen Bagh and now, looking at the prevalent sentiment of the government, Shahana as well.



The preceding panels show the violence Shahana's grandparents faced in the riots and an annoyed Shahana as a little girl pestering her mother to live somewhere else. The mother kindly explains that this is the safest place for them. The panels then shift to focus on Shahana's face in close-up. The face runs through a gamut of expressions such as tired realisation, alertness, alarm and finally, exasperated understanding. There is a gap that comes into narratives that are purely words. The presence of the illustrated character is essential to fully bring out the affective potential and to make one realise what afterwards becomes clear as day. Charlotta Salmi points this out:

It is precisely when prose fails, or there are no words to be had, that the intermedial text bears witness to its failure and presents alternative avenues for confronting state force...Protest movements today increasingly operate within, or in accordance with, the system they seek to challenge. The graphic narrative, similarly, combines complicity and critique in its narrative style and structure. The form's particular history in both commercial art and in countercultural movements, gives it a simultaneously dominant and emergent position in popular culture (171).

The narrative continuously focuses on the idea of unity through numbers, people coming together, protests happening with the participation of a large number of people. It is not only a representation



of the popularity of the cause, but also the ways that people are sticking up for each other. The fight is not just for the Nation, it is also for the individual. These congregating crowds create intermedial spaces that start to represent the nation in our minds and then seek the answer to the question, “If this is the Nation, then what does one call those who oppose them? Ita Mehrotra’s panels occupy this intermedial space, as they attempt to create a historic context for a movement that seeks validation for a significant section of the country. It uses memory as well- drawing on the words of nonagenarian grandmothers who feel the cold in their bones and yet turn up to the protest site to protect not just their homes, but also their country as well. The acidic humour also serves the purpose of de-demonising and de-alienating the Muslim, when a protestor’s placard reads, here, we cannot find last year’s winter caps and they want us to find papers from 1970? (28)

The graphic narrative takes on a documentary, journalistic style as it travels across the country, to places such as Mumbai to look at the way the CAA has started changing attitudes and mindsets. The impact of COVID and the lockdown did nothing to dampen the spirits of the people who left their footwear at the protest site as a mark of their continued presence. Mehrotra lets the vibrancy of the site of protest come through, as she presents words from various songs sung at the site float overhead in the panels.

In her article *Shaheen Bagh (2021): Gender, Affects, and Ita Mehrotra’s Graphic Narrative of Protest*, Pujarinee Mitra points out the significance of the songs in the protest movement.

We see the refrain of Grover’s song floating above a crowd of protestors (Mehrotra, 2021: 86) as the graphic narration informs how Shaheen Bagh’s impact spread far and wide like in Bihar, tracing the reach of empathy. This song, while expressing defiance as one of its affects, is centred on an expression of self-suffering as an acceptable alternative to violence, in order to differentiate oneself from the government’s character. The women are protecting lives and engaging in non-violence by not doing what the opponent are inflicting on them. While the Hindu rightwing seemingly does not value their lives, the protestors do not replicate such sectarianism (11).

Of course, one of the most popular songs to emerge from the Shaheen Bagh protest sites called *Hum Dekhenge*, composed by Faiz Ahmed Faiz- a Pakistani. Yet another is the Varun Grover poem *Kaagaz Nahi Dikhayenge* (We will not show the papers). This creates a carnivalesque location that represents what the Nation is actually like- a free-flowing space where polyphony prevails and where voices speak their mind. The protest had to come to an end at the end of 100 days as forces of the government move in and cause a shut down. The momentum is kept up by Mehrotra through the signs of movement in the panels, the people in motion, their gestures suggesting action, the lyrics floating in the air- as though the Nation is caught up in the heady fragrance of freedom and liberty.

Reading the Nation, especially a nation like India in the present century is no easy task. The multiplicity of stakeholders, the cacophony of ideologies, the relentless drive of the Ultra-Right have created a precarity of sorts for liberal thought and Critical Race Theory which seems not only endangered but also outmoded. This is where “intermedial texts,” as Salmi names them, like Shaheen Bagh make their presence felt as they present a Nation being performed. The various histories contributing to this one moment- such as in the case of the nonagenarian or Shahana- present the nation in great clarity. The protests at Shaheen Bagh and the farmer’s protests in Delhi where, again, women were present in large numbers, present a narrative of the nation which is recorded by women- where their experiences are what construct the Nation. It is on their bodies and their minds that the Nation is inscribed. It is only fitting that the last panel of *Shaheen Bagh* shows women with their arms raised and fingers pointed singing “We will not forget! We will not let you forget! We will not bow down! (117). The Nation is a Memory. Memory is a Nation.

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