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Drawn to Change:
Image-Text Interplay in Indian Graphic Journalism

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Abstract

This article introduces Indian graphic journalism by exploring the general dynamics of the interplay of text and sequential visual narrative within this medium. A close reading of a selected work—a graphic feature on the suicide of the Dalit student Rohith Vemula in 2016, published on the Indian news platform *The Quint*—shows that the genre's success is driven largely by three key factors: the accessibility of images, their captivating nature, and their ability to convey additional layers of meaning. An overview of the current landscape of Indian graphic journalism will contextualize the findings, emphasizing the diversity of genre within the format. The article demonstrates that graphic journalism spans various genres with reportage, feature stories, and opinion pieces standing out as the most prominent within the Indian context. Across these genres, the inherent subjectivity of the drawn image is employed deliberately to challenge dominant narratives and bring marginalized voices to the forefront, giving rise to diverse forms of "visual activism" and creating valuable archives of protest and social commentary.

Keywords: Indian graphic journalism, comics journalism, visual activism, Rohith Vemula, Rashtraman

Indian graphic journalism

On January 16, 2018, the independent Indian media platform *The Quint* published a visual article under the title *What Led Rohith Vemula to Take his Own Life?* (Gopinath and Paul 2018). It served to mark the death of an Indian PhD student belonging to the Dalit community who had committed suicide on the campus of Hyderabad University two years earlier after a prolonged period of harassment and recurring incidents of discrimination. At the time, the tragic incident triggered a nationwide wave of student protests against campus-based discrimination and caste violence. Since the RSS student organization *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* or *All India Students' Council* (ABVP) had played an essential part in the unfolding of the events, the case was also discussed widely against the background of an Indian state that was becoming ever more repressive under a Hindu nationalist government. The article in *The Quint* looks into some of the events in the months preceding Rohith's death by using the format of graphic or comics journalism—"an umbrella term," according to the British graphic journalist Dan Archer, "that covers any approach to reporting that combines words and images in sequential panels" (Archer 2024, 199). Archer emphasizes that panel sequences in graphic journalism differ significantly from comics[1] formats usually found in news media—that is, single-panel cartoons or comic strips that end with a punch line. Graphic journalists research, investigate, and plan their stories like conventional journalists, and their works usually amount to at least "a few pages of artwork with text inside speech balloons or captions" (Archer 2024, 199).

The Rohith Vemula piece, which is a collaboration between the journalist Vishnu Gopinath and the illustrator Susnata Paul, thus presents us with a series of drawings in a comics-like format to be scrolled through vertically. It is an example of a graphic feature—a journalistic genre that emphasizes storytelling over news reporting and allows for greater creative freedom with regard to exploring selected aspects or different viewpoints of a topic. In order to show how graphic journalism works and what the combination of text and sequential visual narrative can achieve in this context, I will, in the following, combine a close reading of the Rohith Vemula piece with references to further examples and an overview of what the Indian scene has to offer.

[1] Following Scott McCloud's definition, I use the term "comics" as a "plural in form used with a singular verb" (McCloud 1994, 20).

I shall show that graphic journalism thrives mainly on three aspects: first, that images are easily accessible; second, that they are, by nature, captivating; and third, that they convey meaning which adds to that of the text.

What led Rohith Vemula to take his own life?

Like most works of graphic journalism published in the context of news media (both digital and in print), the Rohith Vemula piece is presented as a regular journalistic article [fig. 1]: Under a headline and subtitle, we find the names of the creators and—as is generally the case for web articles—the date and time of publication. On the right-hand side, we learn that the article runs under the category "politics" and that it is a three-minute read. Underneath, we are presented with a visual teaser combining a part of the last panel of the article with a drawn version of an iconic photograph of Rohith Vemula. The story itself starts at the end and then unfolds the events leading up to it in a flashback. Thus, in the very first panel, we are made witnesses to Rohith's suicide [fig. 2]; the five inset text boxes present us with his voice through literal quotes from his suicide note that had been made public shortly after his death. After this, at the bottom of the panel, the narrator fills us in on some facts.

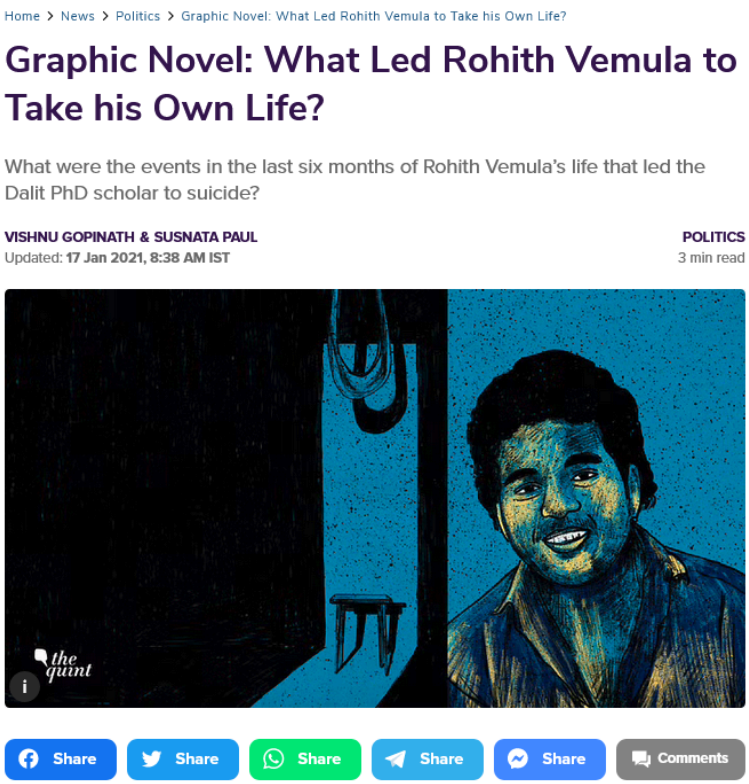

Figure 1:
Screen shot of the first rerun of the story on 17 January 2021, which commemorates the anniversary of Rohith's death; except for the date and time, the content and layout of the article are identical with the first publication in 2018.
© The Quint

Figure 2:
Rohith's suicide. First panel of the graphic feature *What Led Rohith Vemula to Take his Own Life?* by Vishnu Gopinath (text) and Susnata Paul (art), as published on 17 January 2021. © The Quint

Figure 3:
Suspension of five Dalit students from Hyderabad university. Panels 5 & 6 of the graphic feature *What Led Rohith Vemula to Take his Own Life?* by Vishnu Gopinath (text) and Susnata Paul (art), as published on 17 January 2021. © The Quint

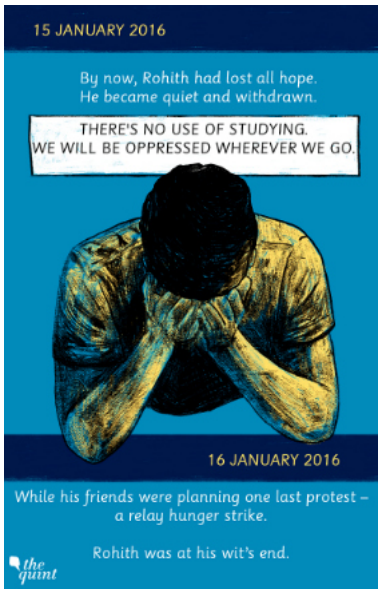

Figure 4:
Rohith in despair. Panel 11 of the graphic feature *What Led Rohith Vemula to Take his Own Life?* by Vishnu Gopinath (text) and Susnata Paul (art), as published on 17 January 2021. © The Quint

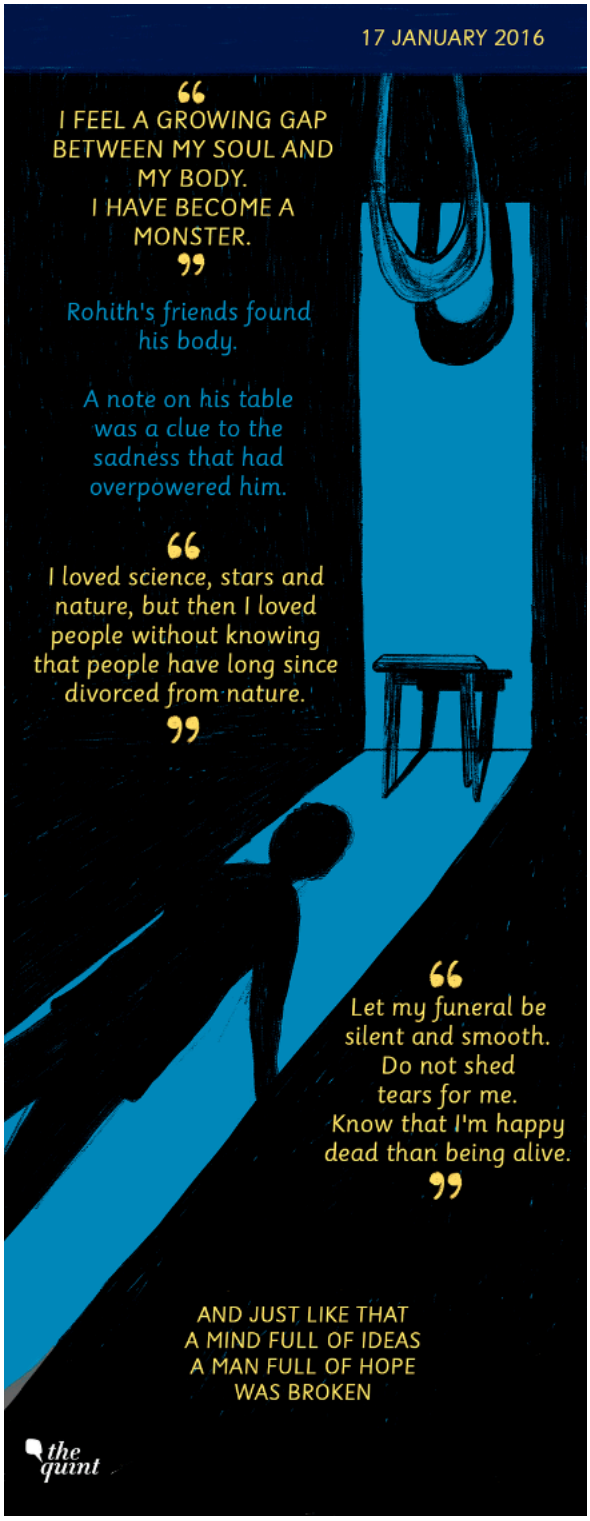

Figure 5:
Rohith's imminent death. Last panel of the graphic feature *What Led Rohith Vemula to Take his Own Life?* by Vishnu Gopinath (text) and Susnata Paul (art), as published on 17 January 2021. © The Quint

In a flashback, we then learn how, in 2015, five Dalit students from Hyderabad University, among them Rohith Vemula, are suspended due to false allegations by a member of the ABVP who claims that he had been beaten up by activists of the *Ambedkar Students Association* (ASA) [fig. 3]. We witness how Rohith loses his monthly stipend and can no longer send money home; the five students have to leave the hostel and put up some makeshift dwellings on the campus. The initial support of fellow students soon dwindles, and as people begin to lose interest, Rohith loses "all hope" and becomes "quiet and withdrawn," as the narrator tells us in a caption. We see Rohith in a close-up from a bird's-eye perspective as he covers his face with his hands in despair [fig. 4]. The narrative ends with the moment in which Rohith enters the hostel room to hang himself [fig. 5]. Corresponding to the first panel, we again hear Rohith's voice through quotes from his suicide note in a yellow font pitched against a black backdrop. The fact that the short passages are literal quotes is, this time, indicated through quotation marks. At the end of the article, the narrator concludes:

> *And just like that*
> *a mind full of ideas*
> *a man full of hope*
> *was broken*

In the weeks and months following Rohith's suicide, reports, features, and opinion pieces on the incident proliferated nationwide. Media coverage has continued ever since, commemorating the incident, reminding us of it in the context of student protests and Dalit identity, or commenting on the controversial closure of the case by the Telangana police. While the discourse surrounding the incident had a strong visual presence from the outset, which I address below, *The Quint* was the only medium to approach the topic through a piece of graphic journalism. In the following, I will show what unique contributions this format has to offer, and what it is that motivates journalists, artists, and comic creators to adopt this form.

Images are accessible

A first point that comes across clearly is that images are easily accessible. Dan Archer has pointed out that images explain things: "Comics are the perfect way of synthesising a lot of complex information in a very easily intelligible and accessible way" (Archer 2011, 1:18–1:25). And indeed, the piece at the centre of this article makes for easy reading and packages a complex story into a "3 min read," as advertised by *The Quint.* The realistic drawings speak to the reader straightforwardly, and in most of them, the information content is boiled down considerably because they omit all backgrounds and unnecessary detail—that is, visual information not needed for an immediate understanding of the intended message of the image. Instead, they concentrate on persons or gestures, mostly set against a monochrome blue backdrop. This capacity of drawings to focus on key information becomes especially clear when we compare images of the article that are visual quotes of press images with the corresponding photographs. A panel, which depicts an ASA protest [fig. 6], thus shows the protest banner

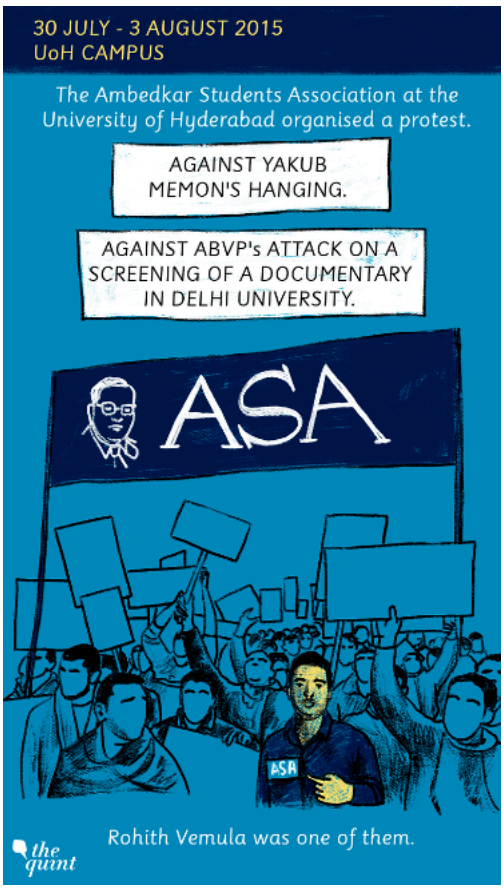

Figure 6:
ASA protests. Panel 2 of the graphic feature *What Led Rohith Vemula to Take his Own Life?* by Vishnu Gopinath (text) and Susnata Paul (art), as published on 17 January 2021.
© The Quint

with only two distinctive characteristics—a stylized portrait of Ambedkar on the left side and the ASA lettering in the center—but omits other mottos usually found on the banner, as seen in various press photographs. Likewise, drawings of Rohith Vemula, which are visual quotes of widely circulated press photos, show him without any of the surroundings pictured in the photographs, thus placing his persona center stage.

As far as the verbal level is concerned, accessibility is ensured by the fact that the text passages are short, and longer passages, like the quotes from Rohith's suicide note, are subdivided visually, as is typical for comics or graphic novels. In addition, alternating voices are presented in different layouts such as a white script on a blue background, using both capital and small letters, or black script on a white background in inset boxes and speech balloons using capitals only. The overall aesthetic of the lettering is rather restless, which is further emphasized by the fact that there is no consistency between the style of lettering and potentially corresponding voices. However, the constant shift between different designs provides variety and dynamism and emphasizes the presence of the multiple voices. Moreover, this variability of voices is employed to highlight a central message: in the initial panel, the narrator's matter-of-fact tone in the comment at the bottom of the image underscores the tragic nature of the incident *because* it is in stark contrast to not only the disconcerting content of the lines but also Rohith's own lyrical speech [see fig. 2].

Alongside such web-based examples of graphic journalism, we also encounter a fair amount of high-quality works in print published in anthologies. Cases in point are the feminist collection *Drawing the Line* (Kuriyan et al. 2015), the anthologies *Longform* and *Longform 2022* (Sen et al. 2018; Sen et al. 2022), or the two volumes *First Hand* (Sen and Sabhaney 2016) and *First Hand: Exclusion* (Sabhaney 2018). The latter work, in particular, is a striking example of how images make information more accessible. Bringing together graphic adaptations and interpretations of academic articles from the *India Exclusion Report* 2015 (Anon. 2016a), the creators state explicitly that they aim to make the topic engaging and approachable for a new, younger, and nonspecialist audience. The crucial role of accessibility of the drawn image is a foundational concept of the work, which presents us with themes like the failure of the healthcare system, communal violence, and the displacement of tribal communities together with original reportages on, for example, working women or ethnic conflict [fig.7.1&7.2.].

The editor, Vidyun Sabhaney, even goes one step further when she explains in the preface:

[The volume "First Hand 2: Exclusion"] is a contribution towards a visual register of inequality and exclusion. It has been produced with the hope that a visual register will make such phenomena easier to identify, critique, and fight (Sabhaney 2018, 8).

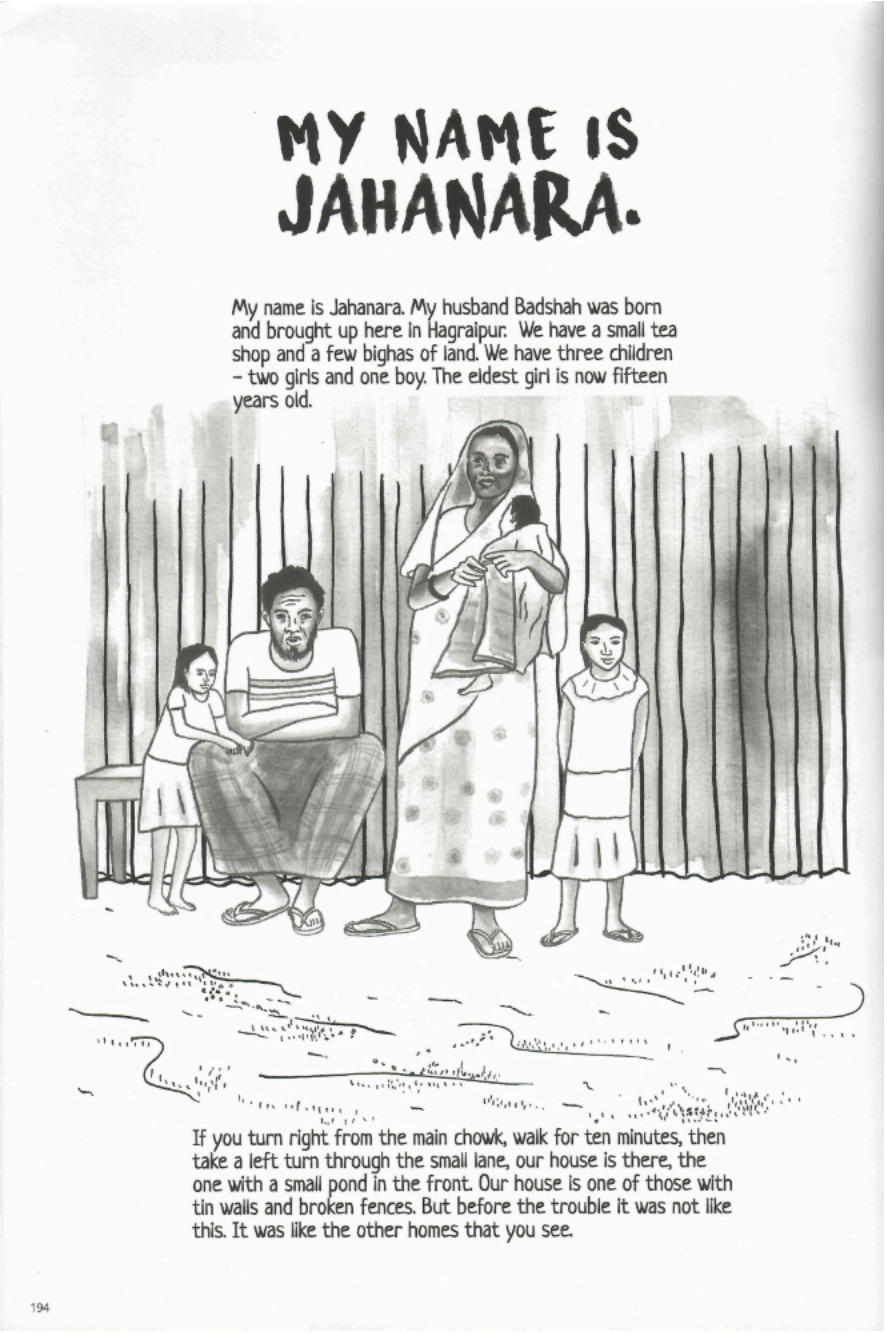

Figure 7.1.:
A page from the reportage *Survivors: Ethnic Conflict in Bodoland* by Amrapali Basumatary (text) and Vipin Yadav (art); published in the volume *First Hand: Exclusion* (Sabhaney 2018). © Yoda Press

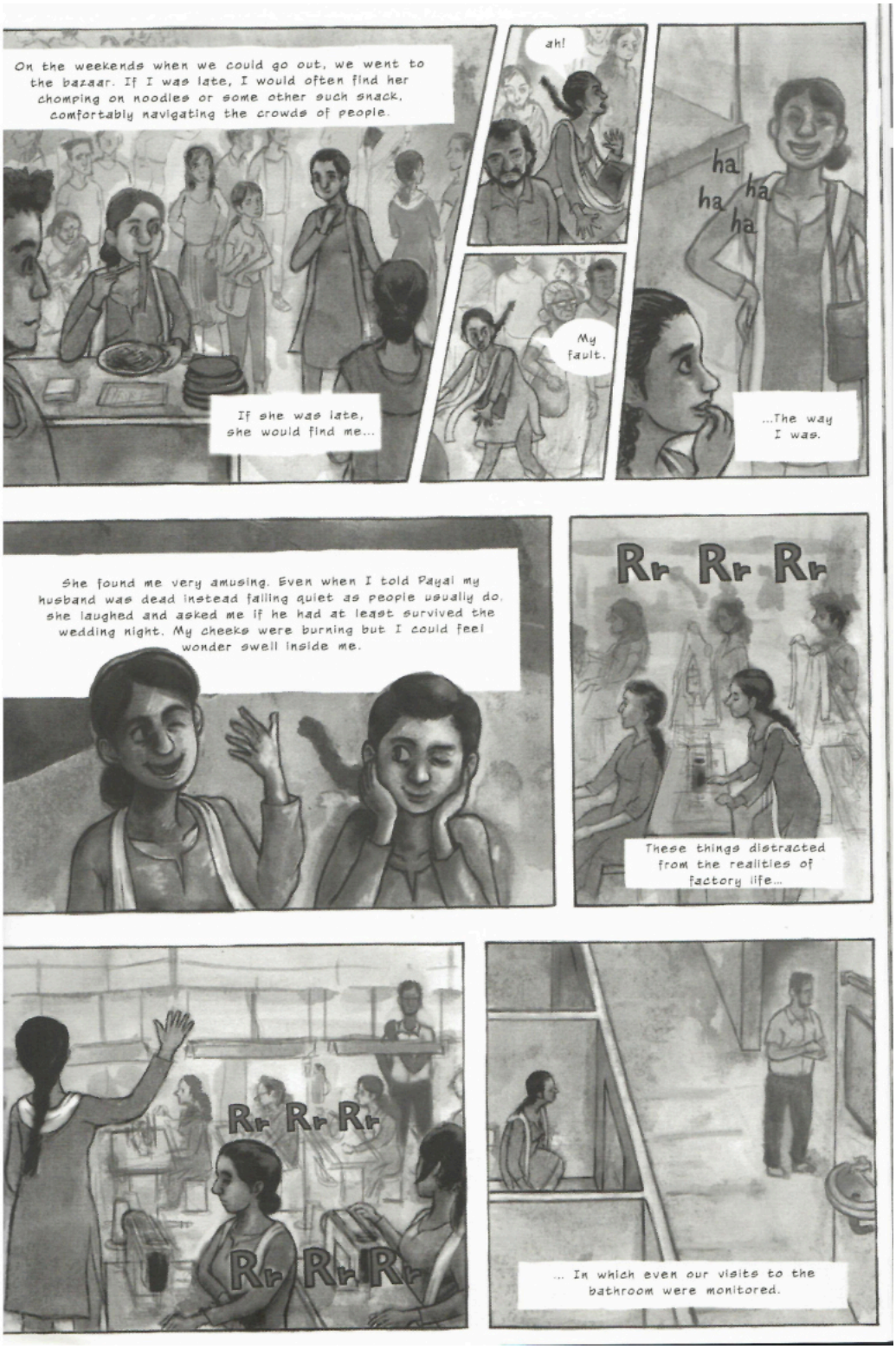

Figure 7.2.:
A page from the semi-fictional reportage *Hard Times* by Vidyun Sabhaney (text) and Shohei Emura (art) on women and work published in the volume *First Hand: Exclusion* (Sabhaney 2018). © Yoda Press

Graphic nonfiction—embodied in various journalistic genres—is employed deliberately for its potential to effect change. Thus, the collection *Drawing the Line* showcases the subtitle *Indian Women Fight Back*, attesting to its spirit of rebellion; and examples like Ita Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh* and Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* have even been read as "visual activism" (discussed below). What unites these works is their reliance on the fact that graphic journalism is "visually compelling," as Dan Archer asserts (Archer 2011, 3:02–3:04): Images draw us into the story, they can create an atmosphere that captivates us, and they give us "access to the places and spaces" narrators and speakers have been in (McNamee and Allen 2021, 328).

The captivating nature of images

In his seminal work *What Do Pictures Want* (2005), W. J. T. Mitchell distinguishes "image" from "picture:"

> *The image has value, but somehow it is slipperier than the value of the picture or statue, the physical monument that "incarnates" it in a specific place. The image cannot be destroyed. The golden calf of the Old Testament may be ground down to powder, but the image lives on—in works of art, in texts, in narrative and remembrance. (Mitchell 2005, 84)*

It is this longevity of the image—its capacity to captivate us and stay with us long after we have turned away from the physical picture—upon which graphic journalism builds. In the Vemula article, this finds excellent expression in the first and last panel, which frame the sequence of events by depicting Rohith's death.

In the first panel [see fig. 2], Susnata Paul illustrates the moment of death by using the potential of comics to convey the passage of time through sequential images, demanding that the reader should fill in the information about what has happened in the gutters between the panels. In three frames superimposed upon the image of Rohith's lifeless body dangling from a fan, we see two close-ups of Rohith's face and one of his feet on the chair. In the upper frame, his eyes are open; in the middle one, they are closed, implying that he has since pushed away the chair on which his feet—shown in the third frame—have still been standing a moment ago. As Rohith's open eyes in the upper frame look straight at the spectator, his glance seems to speak to us directly—vividly and imploringly in this moment of desolation, as the image suggests. Likewise, the last panel [see fig. 5] has us "spy on" a moment of utter loneliness as we

see (presumably) Rohith's shadow falling through the open door into a dark room. In it, a noose and a stool underneath cast eerie shadows on the wall. The image has a cinematic quality and is reminiscent of the aesthetic of a still from a horror movie, indicating imminent danger but also forlornness and gloom.

The *Quint* article distinctly draws our attention to an aspect of the incident, which verbal articles typically encapsulate in brief prosaic statements declaring that Rohith Vemula "hanged himself" (Apurva 2016, Henry 2016) or "committed suicide" (Biswas 2016a)—phrases that fail to convey the gravity of the situation. The artist Susnata Paul, however, creates two visually haunting panels to depict what has remained hidden from the eye: the exceedingly intimate situation of the suicide. By choosing to depict this scene, she draws the reader's attention to the brutality of the moment, evoking a more emotional response than the corresponding verbal descriptions in articles could do, thus attesting to the power of the image. The immediacy of images engages the viewers on a visceral level, bypassing the cognitive distance often associated with reading verbal descriptions. This affective charge amplifies the emotional resonance of the scene, emphasizing the unique capacity of visual art to communicate the unspeakable.

Images convey additional meaning

On another level, images are powerful because, as Mitchell reminds us, they are also "mental things" that can be "highly durable" and assume an immaterial symbolic form (Mitchell 2005, 84, 87). The *Quint* article shows this in two ways: by employing both visual metaphors and visual intertextualities. Both stylistic devices add value and meaning to the narrative but rely on the viewer's interpretation or prior knowledge. With regard to the Vemula article, however, it is important to note that it is not necessary to decipher them to understand the story and its message—true to Gérard Genette's dictum that any text that references a previous text "is invested with a meaning that is autonomous and thus in some manner sufficient" (Genette 1997, 397). As in verbal texts, some of the conventional visual metaphors in the article will go largely unnoticed, such as the empty open wallet indicating a lack of money or Rohith's hands that cover his face signifying despair [see fig. 4]. A more elaborate and eye-catching metaphor is Rohith's fragmented body in the first panel, which mirrors his life being torn apart. Likewise, the use of yellow as signature color for Rohith is a compelling example: It not only makes him stand out from the rest of the crowd in the

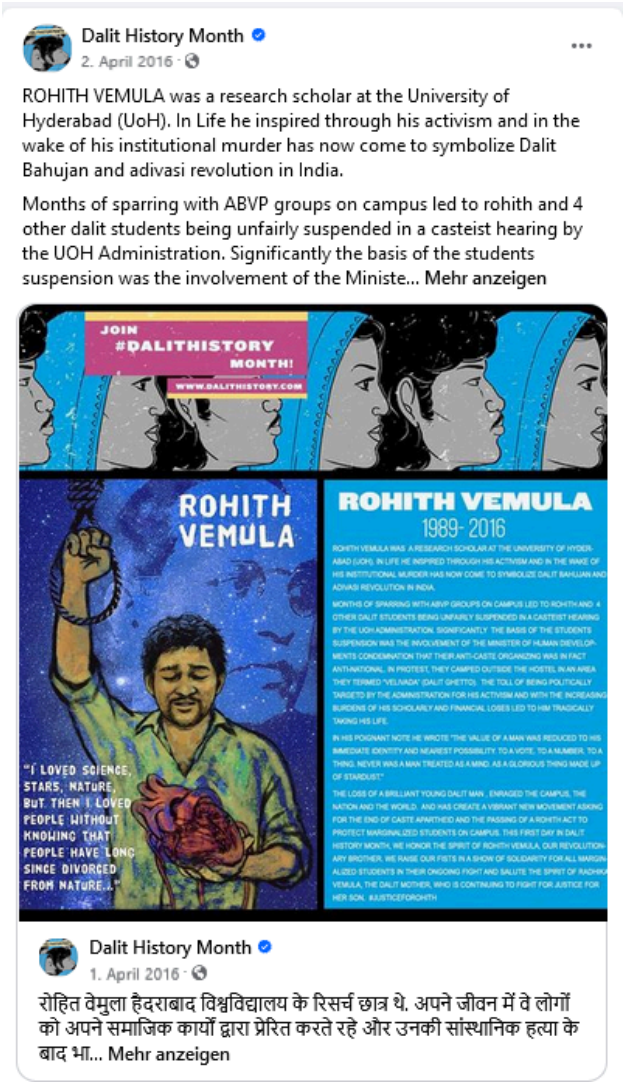

Figure 8:
Screenshot of a commemorative collage on the Facebook site of Dalit History Month. © Dalit History Month

images but—especially against the blue background—also gives him a golden glow, showing him as a bright and warm person.

Another visual metaphor that seems to speak to us rather straightforwardly is the noose in the last panel, which signifies menace and death. Here, however, the metaphor extends into the realm of intertextuality. I have shown elsewhere that visual intertextualities are a powerful means used in Indian graphic novels to create not only surplus meaning but also pleasure for informed readers who can identify them (Sarma 2018). Unlike graphic novels, however, whose largely cultural intertextualities characterize them as an elite medium, the Vemula article references societal and (social) media discourses to establish a connection with relevant movements and their ideologies. "Memes on Rohith Vemula suicide flood […] social media" titled the *Times of India* on January 20, 2016, four days after Rohith's death (Biswas 2016b). In the following weeks and months, the noose becomes a central symbol for "institutional murder" in countless cartoons and memes, especially in the context of Dalit activism. Examples include the commemorative collage on the Facebook page of Dalithistorymonth.com [fig. 8] or a much-shared cartoon from the website Rebel Politik [fig. 9]. The former shows a drawing in which Rohith raises his right fist through a hanging noose in a gesture of defiance set against a well-known image of Ambedkar as

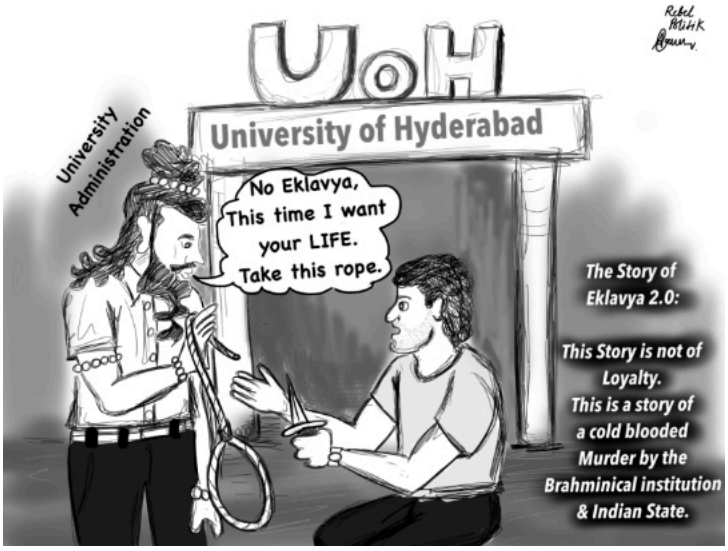

Figure 9:
V. Arun's Story of *Eklavya 2.0: A Story of Murder*; cartoon from the website Rebel Politik, published on 18 January 2016, one day after Rohith Vemula's suicide. © V. Arun/Rebel Politik/CC BY-NC 4.0

a backdrop (Anon. 2016b). In the latter black-and-white cartoon, the story of *Eklavya*[2] is transposed into the present, in that we see a representative of the administration of the University of Hyderabad—identifiable as a "modern *Dronacharya"* through his hairstyle—handing a noose to *Eklavya*, who is about to cut his thumb, asking him for his life rather than only his finger (Arun 2016a).

A second example of visual intertextuality is found in the teaser, which opens the article with the drawn version of a photograph of Rohith [see fig. 1]. As mentioned above, the photograph [fig. 10], which was taken from Rohith's Facebook account right after his death (Chnige 2021, 121), achieved iconic status and has been omnipresent in the surrounding discourse ever since. Along with depictions of Rohith's suicide note, this "image"—rather than the "picture" in Mitchell's sense—continues to circulate in artwork through protest posters and graffiti as well as digitally, and it has been turned into "a key symbol of resistance to the oppression of Dalits by institutions and the state," as Malavika Chnige shows (Chnige 2021, 188). During the months after the incident, the image was, for example, employed as a Facebook profile picture by

[2] The story of *Eklavya* from the *Mahabharata* is a key narrative for the Dalit community to expose caste discrimination and inspire resilience. *Eklavya*, a skilled tribal archer, idolizes the teacher *Dronacharya* and secretly practices archery in front of a clay statue of the guru after being denied formal training. When *Dronacharya* discovers his proficiency, he demands *Eklavya*'s right thumb as *guru dakshina* (teacher's fee) to ensure his favored student, *Arjuna*, remains unrivaled, thus crippling *Eklavya*'s archery skills.

people who wanted to express solidarity with the Dalit cause (Garalytė 2016, 14)—in a visual gesture resembling slogans such as "*Je suis Charlie*" (2015) or "*Ich bin Hanna*" (2021) that soon turned into memes.[3] Chnige further argues that the photograph was quickly amalgamated with the well-known iconography of Ambedkar (Chnige 2021, 118–128). The drawn interpretation of the photograph in the article's teaser is therefore not only employed for its recognizability, but must be seen as both an acknowledgment of, and active contribution to, the visual discourse of solidarity and protest.

Figure 10:
Photograph of Rohith Vemula from his Facebook account (2016).
Author unknown.

Graphic activism and the question of subjectivity

The Vemula article presents an accessible and condensed narrative, but at the same time, the visuals ensure that we are not simply given a skeleton of facts but a piece that offers us depth and a distinctive attitude. The fact that images carry additional meaning allows the artist to enrich and comment upon the narrative. Conversely, however, this also means that artists have to be alert as to the visual choices they make. Graphic journalists are acutely aware of the fact that a drawing is always interpretative and ultimately "reflects the vision of the individual cartoonist," as Joe Sacco, the Maltese doyen of graphic reportage, points out (Sacco 2012a, XII). The graphic journalist, he

[3] "*Je suis Charlie*" became a global meme following the 2015 terrorist attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, symbolizing solidarity and support for free speech. "*Ich bin Hanna*" emerged in Germany in 2021 as academics criticized precarious employment conditions, turning it into a broader symbol for better working conditions in academia. Both phrases were adapted to various contexts, highlighting the power of messages of solidarity in rallying public support.

states, “draws with the essential truth in mind, not the literal truth” (Sacco 2012b, XII). It is, therefore, not visual accuracy but rather pictorial veracity that graphic journalists strive to establish during their work process. Instead of aiming for a faithful representation of observable details, the emphasis lies on the visual communication of a scene’s essence or truth as seen and felt by the artist—for example, by making choices regarding the style of drawing, the perspective (in the literal sense of the word), but also the question of which details from a real-life “canvas” are to be included or omitted. Far from seeing the inherent subjectivity of drawings as a shortcoming, practitioners take pains to emphasize that this is the very strength of graphic journalism. The Lebanese comics artist Omar Khouri, for example, asserts:

> *I feel like comics can be more truthful about the fact that nothing’s really objective. This is all just somebody’s perspective on whatever it is that we’re talking about, and I think that’s the power of comics journalism. (Sanyal and Kelp-Stebbins 2021, 290)*

In order to create a sense of transparency or “honesty” in their works, graphic journalists regularly approach their own positionality proactively—for example, by drawing themselves into the pictures. The US-American graphic novelist Sarah Glidden explains:

> *I really embrace [subjectivity]. I try to make it very clear that this is my point of view, and […] including myself in the work is part of that. […] you can’t forget that this is subjective when my face is in half the panels. (Hubbert and Obert 2021, 96)*

Glidden’s *Rolling Blackouts* (2016) introduces her persona right on the cover page of the book—a reportage on the question of “how journalism works” (14) set against the background of personal stories that show the effects of the Iraq War (2013–17) on refugees in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. On the front cover, we see two reporters interviewing a third person on a rooftop while a young woman—Sarah Glidden, as we learn in the narrative—is leaning against the right-hand balustrade, silently witnessing and drawing the scene [fig. 11]. In the course of the narrative, her persona remains constantly visible, and we see her reflecting on the journalistic process; pondering questions like accountability, truth, and honesty (Glidden 2016, 27); or considering how to portray “people in all of their human imperfection” (Glidden 2016, 43). Glidden sets out to do a reportage rather than a memoir (43), but in a review, her book has nevertheless rightly been called “[p]art memoir, part ethical inquiry and part travelogue” (Cooke 2016).

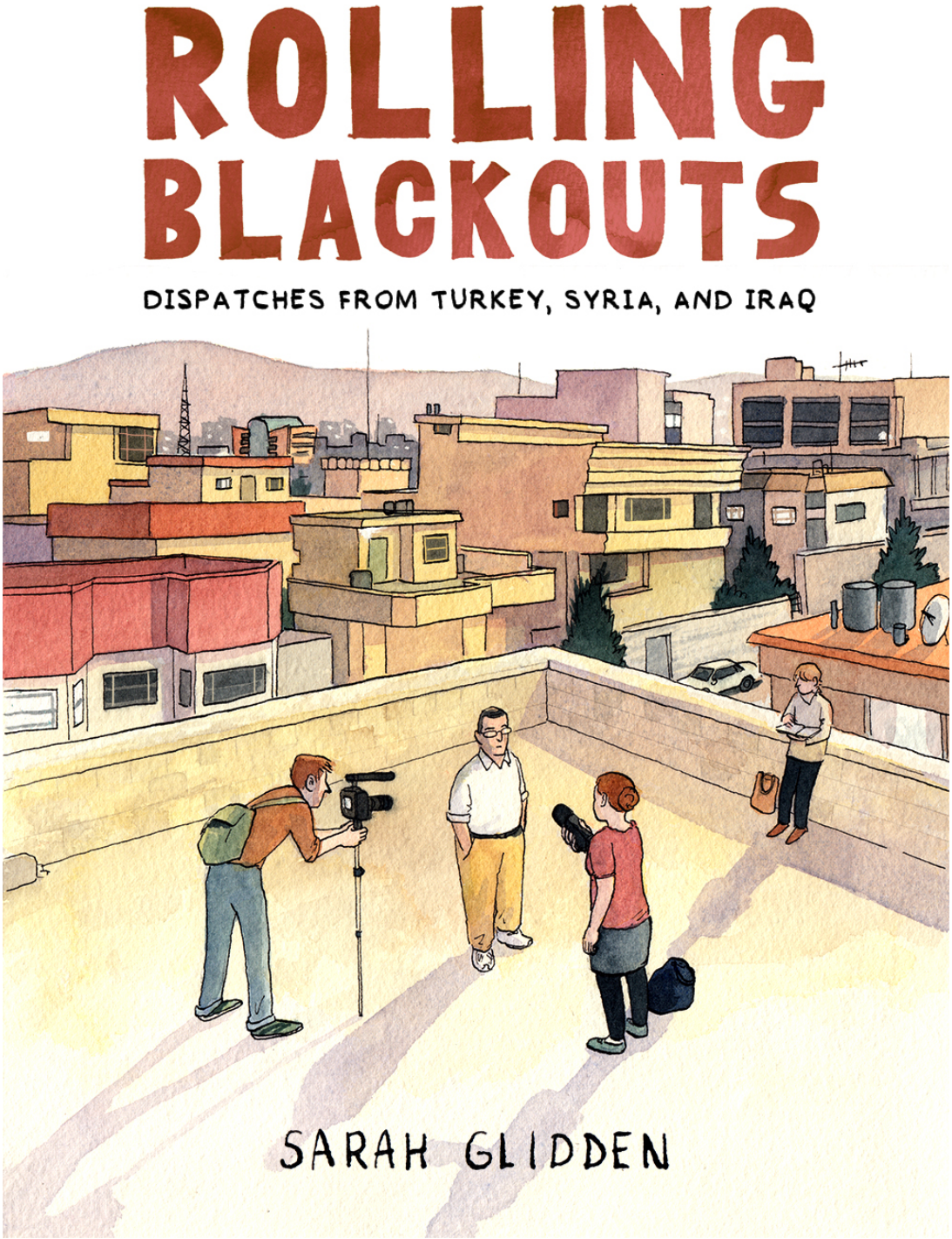

Figure 11:
Front cover of Sarah Glidden's *Rolling Blackouts*.
© Sarah Glidden. Used with permission from Dawn & Quarterly

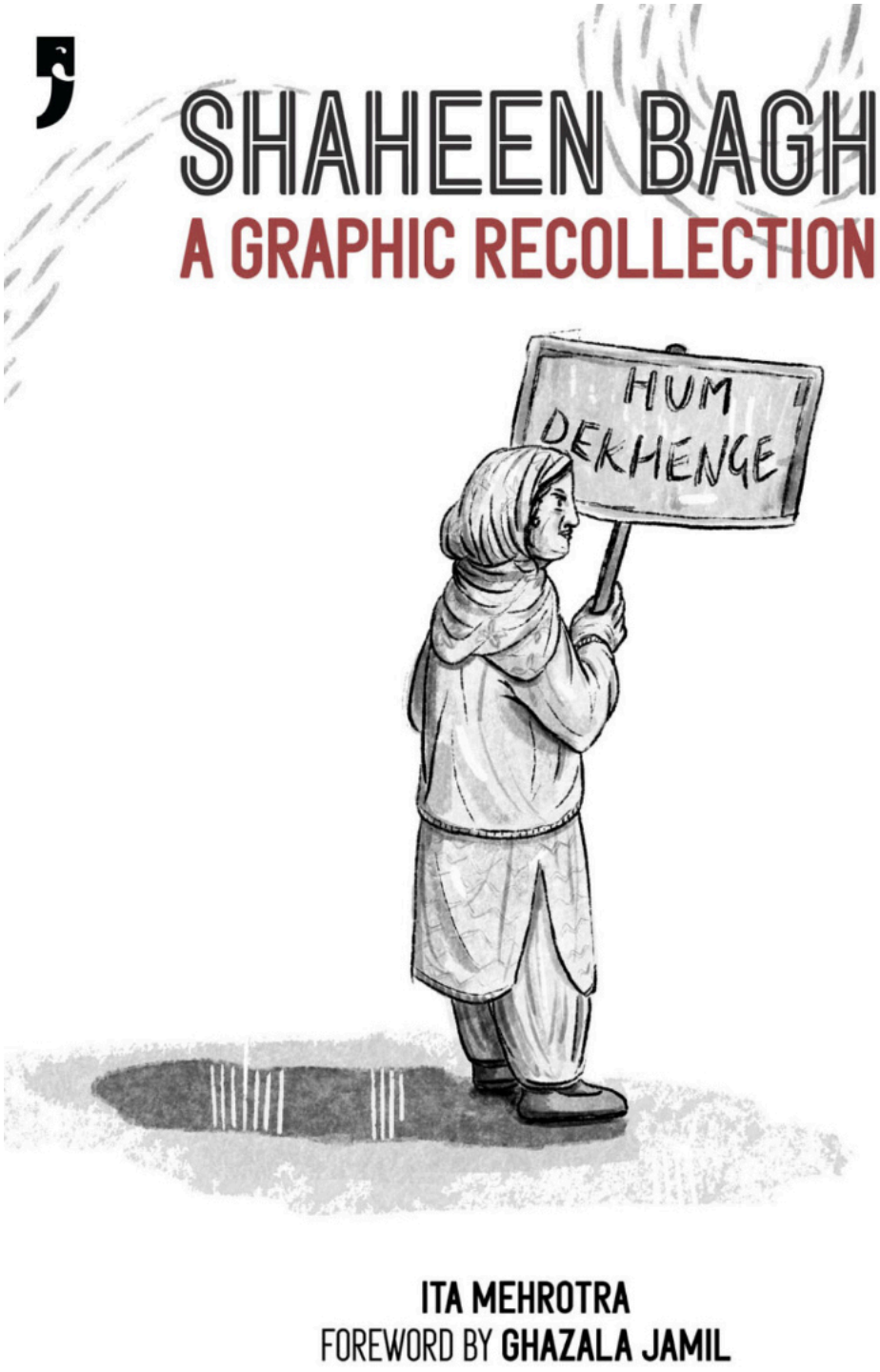

Figure 12:
Front cover of Ita Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh*. © Yoda Press

A similar fluidity of genres characterizes Ita Mehrotra's book-length reportage *Shaheen Bagh*, which deals with the women-led anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)[4] protests in 2019 and 2020 in the neighborhood of the same name in South Delhi [fig. 12]. The subtitle *A Graphic Recollection* heralds a personal narrative with a subjective viewpoint, which also finds expression in the fact that she has drawn herself into the story. Moreover, like many graphic journalists who write longform reportages, Mehrotra employs a first-person point of view for her persona: In the first caption on the second page, she recollects, "I met Shahana in January 2020 at Shaheen Bagh," and then continues to document her involvement throughout the course of the book (Mehrotra 2021, 15). Like Sarah Glidden's "graphic self," Mehrotra's "I" comes as a full-blown character who appears as an interview partner and witness but also uses the captions to address her feelings about the events. A slightly different approach can be found in Vidyun Sabhaney's article *Haq* (*Right*) on women's roles in and perspectives on the farmers' protests[5] in 2021, published on the independent Indian news platform *Scroll* (Sabhaney 2021). Like Mehrotra, Sabhaney writes from a first-person perspective, but she refrains from including herself in the story. Instead, her visuals position us—the readers—as the conversational counterparts of the interviewees, with most women looking straight at us from the pictures while presenting their views [fig. 13]. Sabhaney nevertheless highlights her subjective viewpoint by ending the narrative on a meta-level: While verbally expressing her dilemma as to "how to draw a final panel," she chooses to depict her hand in the process of drawing the last image showing one of the interviewed women, thus unequivocally pointing to her own role as the narrator of the story [fig. 14].

Like the Rohith Vemula article—albeit in a more deliberate manner—Ita Mehrotra's book is part of a visual discourse of protest, but it can also be read as a form of visual activism, as Fritzi Titzmann has shown in an article that examines the ability of art and media to transform and shape narratives of solidarity and resistance (Titzmann 2023). We have seen that the anthologies *First Hand: Exclusion* and *Drawing the Line* are further examples of graphic activism. Another work that must be mentioned in this context is Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994), a fictionalized reportage cum mythical

[4] The protests began in 2019 and were directed against the *Citizenship Amendment Act*, which fast-tracks citizenship for non-Muslim refugees from neighboring countries. Critics argue it discriminates against Muslims and undermines India's secular constitution.

[5] The protests began in 2020 and were directed against three agricultural laws that farmers feared would deregulate crop pricing and weaken their bargaining power. Farmers, mainly from Punjab and Haryana, camped at Delhi's borders for over a year, until the laws were eventually repealed in November 2021.

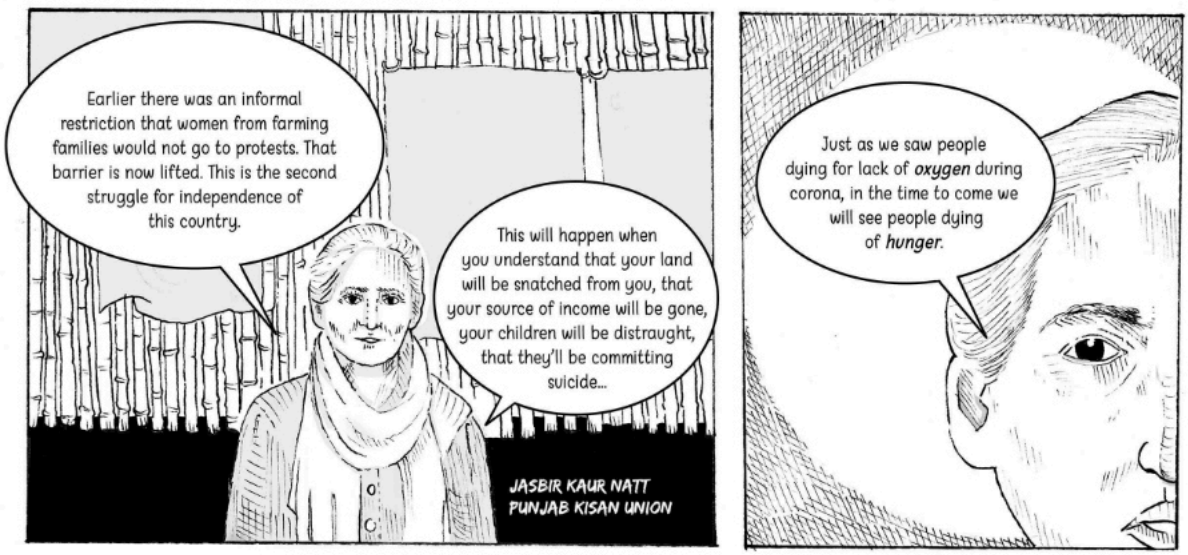

Figure 13:
Two panels from Vidhyun Sabhaney's article *Haq* (right) on the women farmers' protests at Tikri, published in Scroll on 6 November 2021. © Vidhyun Sabhaney

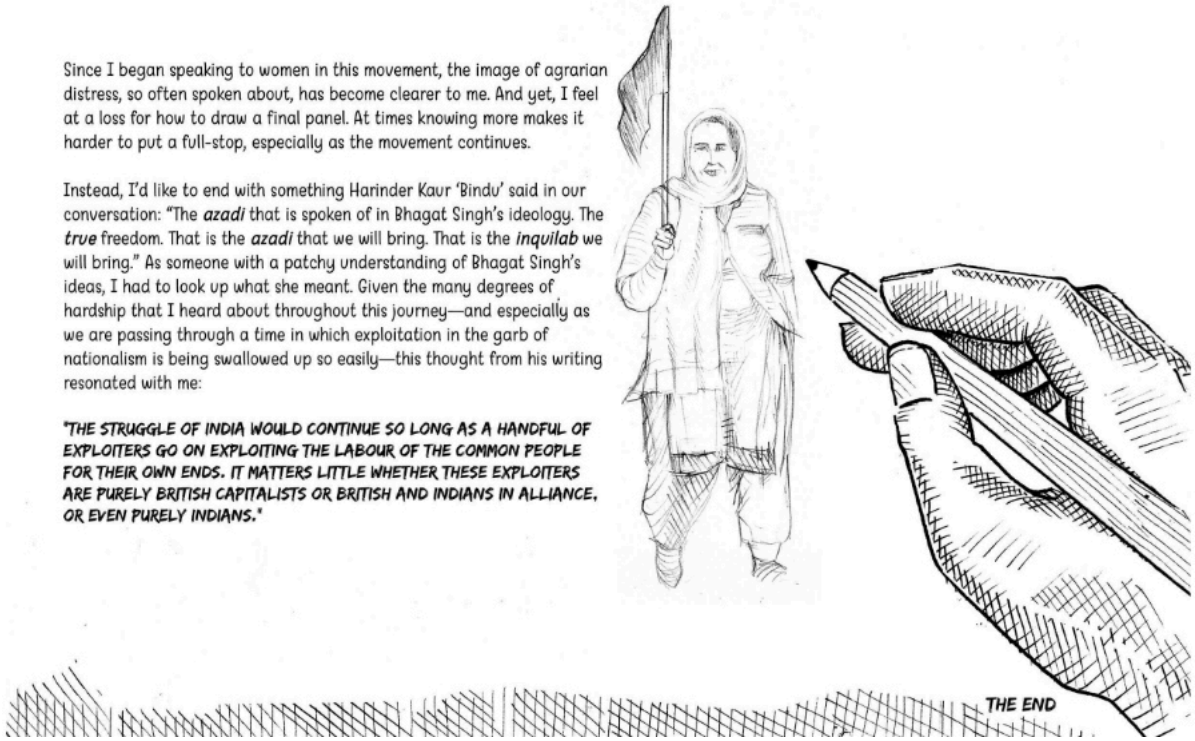

Figure 14:
The last panel from Vidhyun Sabhaney's article *Haq* (right) on the women farmers' protests at Tikri, published in Scroll on 6 November 2021. © Vidhyun Sabhaney

story on the protest movements surrounding the construction of the massive Narmada Dam in West India. Sen's work is widely recognized as the first Indian "graphic novel," but must also be seen as an early work of visual activism: At the time, it was not only meant to articulate the perspective of the protesters but also served to bring the message to an urban audience that had been largely unaware of the project's extensive repercussions. Graphic journalism is perceived as a medium that allows for untold stories to be told—to show "shadowy, invisible sides" of society and portray "socially vulnerable groups," as the Russian graphic novelist Victoria Lomasko states (Sanyal 2021, 175). Much in line with this position, the editorial team at *The Quint* declares that they aim to make "marginalized voices" heard, "humanize big events," and "propel change" (*The Quint,* year unknown). Against this background, it is thus vital to conclude by addressing a further genre that is a staple in Indian graphic journalism: the commentary or opinion piece.

Graphic commentary—archives of protest

Since 2016, *The Quint* has published more than fifty works of graphic journalism on a wide range of themes, mainly historical or (inter)national current political issues including Kashmir violence, LGBTQ themes, or the topic of rape [fig. 15]. Like the Vemula article, most of the pieces are categorized as "graphic novels"—a buzzword used to better market them—because the genres we encounter most often are the feature and the reportage. Both are longform graphic explorations, which dominate the landscape of graphic journalism both within India and internationally. One reason for this choice of genre is that "graphic journalism is slow journalism," as the Dutch comics creator and critic Joost Pollmann emphasizes (Pollmann 2013). It is not ideal for daily news articles that need to be produced rapidly to keep pace with the constant flow of new information. The process of drawing a complex, in-depth narrative, however, takes considerably longer than the process of writing, as Joe Sacco somewhat jealously remarks when asked about the time he needs to create his books: A full-blown reportage of some 200–300 pages, he states, may take as long as three to seven years to create (Lyday and McNamee 2021, 26).

Therefore, in order to address pressing issues more spontaneously, another format has taken root: the graphic commentary or opinion piece. Outstanding examples are the works published in *Mint*, a prominent Indian daily print newspaper, which also runs a digital platform called *Livemint*. Between 2011 and 2014, *Mint* ran a series of weekly

sociopolitical graphic commentaries under the editorship of Dileep Cherian. It was introduced with the following words:

> *Cartoons and caricatures are popular means of visual comment and commentary. It is the rare paper that doesn't have them […]. In an attempt to push the boundaries of what traditionally passed for visual comment, the paper is now delighted to announce the launch of The Small Picture, a full page comic strip op-ed […]. The Small Picture is created exclusively for Mint by Manta Ray, a small indie graphic novel studio. It will appear every Wednesday—a doff of the hat to popular comic book culture where new issues traditionally appear in stores on Wednesdays. (Sukumar 2011)*

Figure 15:
Screenshots of three works of graphic journalism from *The Quint* from top to bottom: *Through Blinded Eyes: A Kashmir Story* by Qadri Inzamam (text) and Susnata Paul (art), published on 4 August 2016; *How a Lesbian Couple is Waging a Fight Against Conversion Therapy* by Meenakshy Sasikumar (text) and Chetan Bhakuni/ Aroop Mishra (art), published on 13 July 2024; and *The Long Road to Justice For Unnao Rape Survivor* by Asmita Nandy (text) and Arnica Kala (art), published on 20 August 2019.
© The Quint

Mint's editor suggests the "op-ed" as a genre that stands for "opposite the editorial page" and usually designates a piece of journalism in which an author who is not affiliated with the publication expresses their opinion. Over the years, *Mint*—in collaboration with Manta Ray—published more than 200 such pieces by over 50 contributors, each spread over one whole page in the print newspaper's "Views" section and addressing issues of immediate concern to the creators. Topics included personal reflections on the disappearance of nature from cityscapes (Patel 2013) [fig. 16] or the iconic Indian Ambassador car (Madhok 2014) [fig. 17], but it is current sociopolitical topics that dominated the series such as the Indian slutwalks (C, Sunando 2011) [fig. 18] or various political scandals (Chakraborty 2012, here referred to in the borders of the iconic image of the first page of the Indian constitution) [fig. 19]. Visual commentaries set out to provoke thought, influence public opinion, and encourage discussion, but when taken together, they also function as rich and intriguing archives of protest.

Popular platforms for graphic opinion pieces, which also feed into these archives, are social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram as well as individually run websites. Even though such examples take us to the fuzzy outskirts of graphic journalism where the borders between journalistic genres and caricature, cartoon, or comic strip become blurred, it is important to consider these formats as part of the tableau of visual activism. As a concluding example, I would like to introduce the indie website *Brainded,* which is run by the Indian graphic novel artist Appupen. On it, he collects his graphic opinion pieces and commentaries, including his delightfully provocative *Rashtraman* series (Appupen 2016 ongoing). The first season of this series also ran in the category "Comicle" on the web-based Indian platform *Newslaundry* (Appupen 2016), which later also featured Appupen's visual column *Dystopian Times* (Appupen 2018). The *Rashtraman* series is a masterpiece of superhero satire that features the iconic cult superhero Rashtraman—"Nationman," in literal translation—who, in Appupen's words, "strides disrespectfully past popular culture, mythology, politics and superhero fantasies on the singular mission of his own popularity" (Appupen 2019). Rashtraman stands in the service of a hypernationalist and repressive nation, "Rashtria," satirically mirroring 21st. century India under a Hindu nationalist government. In an interview, Appupen explains:

> *Rashtraman embodies all that I hate about superheroes and power. Since 2014 we've had an atmosphere of control, surveillance and fear in India too. The Big-Brother like image of the government did the rest. (Mitra 2018)*

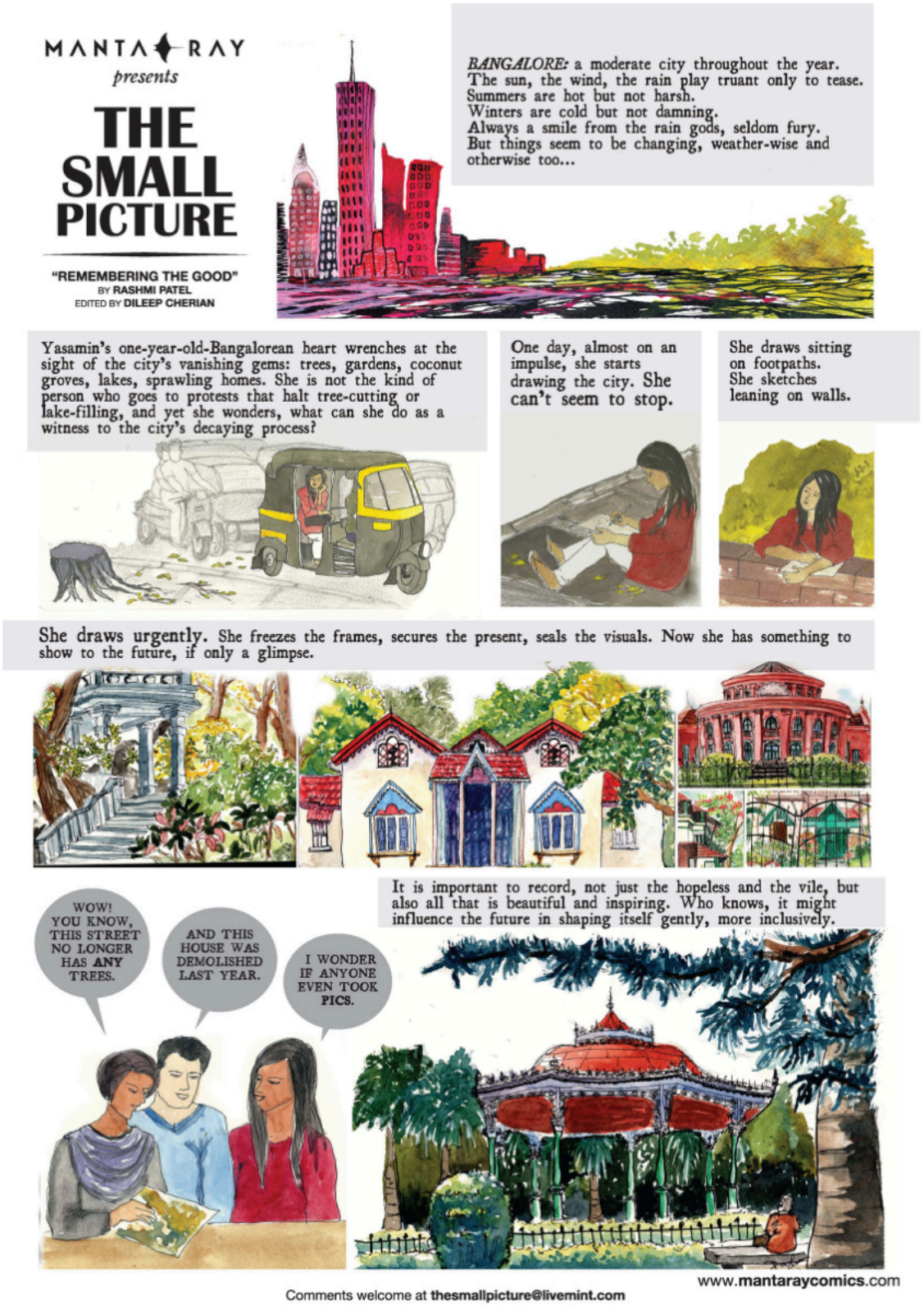

Figure 16:
Rashmi Patel's opinion piece *Remembering the Good* from the series *The Small Picture*, published in Mint on 14 June 2013. © Mint

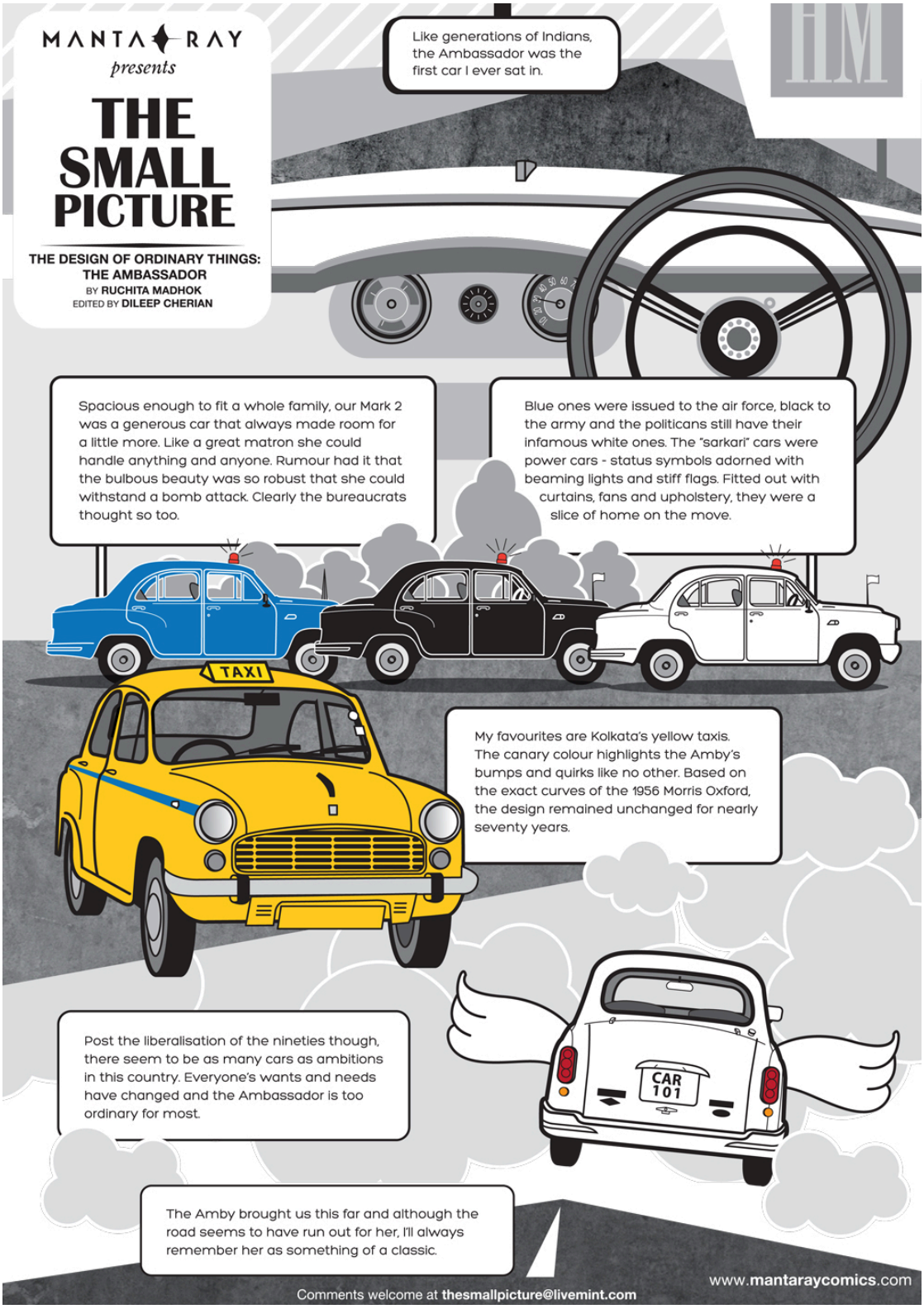

Figure 17:
Ruchita Madhok's opinion piece *The Design of Ordinary Things: The Ambassador* from the series *The Small Picture*, published in Mint on 12 June 2014. © Mint

Figure 18:
Sunando C's opinion piece *Secret Origin* from the series *The Small Picture*, published in Mint on 28 September 2011. © Mint

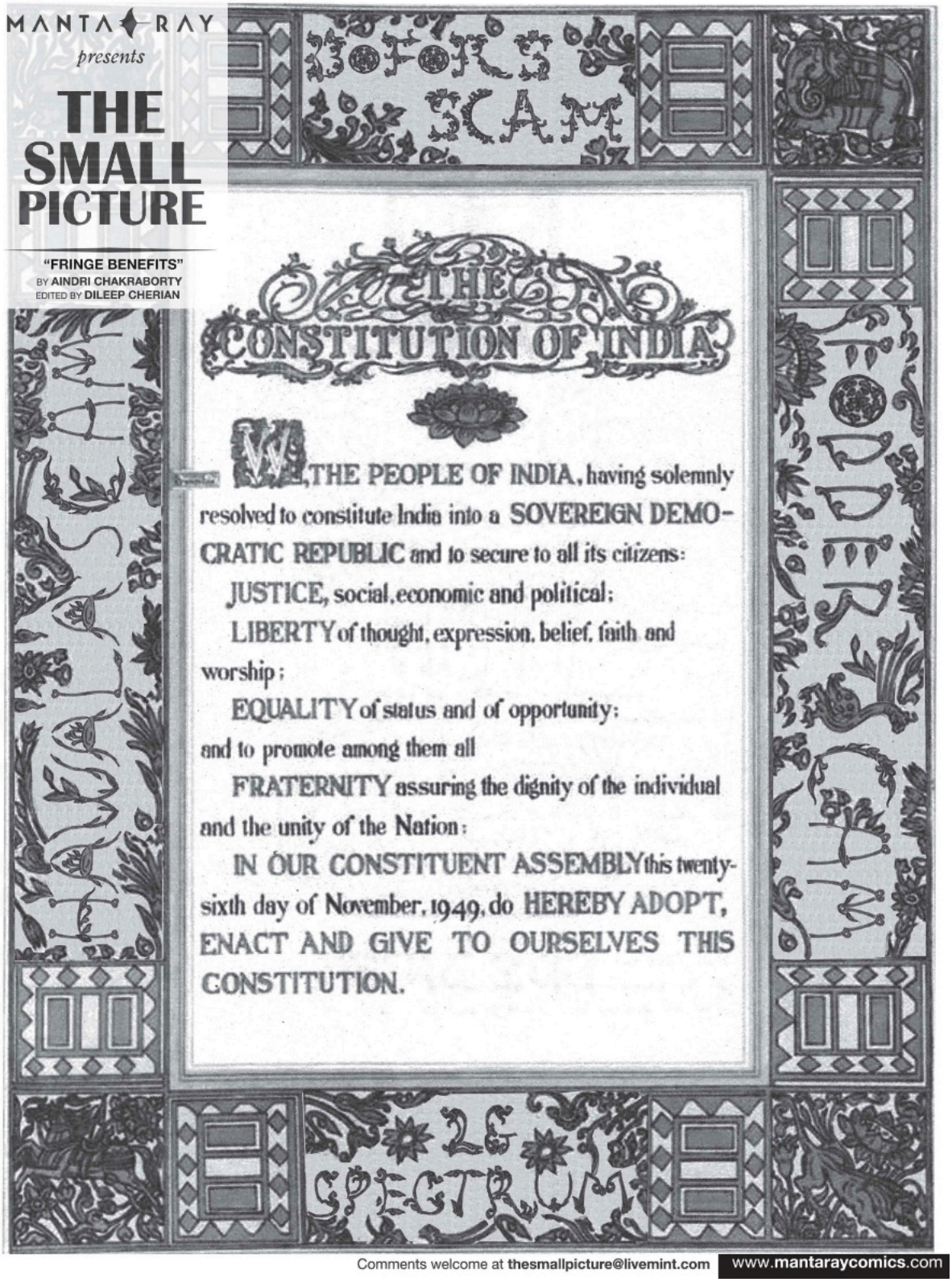

Figure 19:
Aindri Chakraborty's opinion piece *Fringe Benefits* from the series *The Small Picture*, published in Mint on 9 May 2012. © Mint

In solitary panels or brief comic strips of up to six images, we see Rashtraman blurting out bizarre nationalist statements and slogans, propagating whatever it takes to create an atmosphere of anxiety and threat. Appupen either unceremoniously satirizes ongoing political events or, through wild exaggerations, exposes authoritarian attitudes often concealed between the lines of everyday political talk, effectively serving as an interpreter of Hindu nationalist lingo. The radiant colors, unique to this series of Appupen's, amplify its confrontational character. An example is the six-panel narrative *The Art of Believing* [fig. 20] from season one, which exposes the populist strategy of disinformation and the BJP government's continuous attempts to introduce and spread pseudoscience in order to establish India as a nation superior not only to Muslim or colonial society but also to contemporary Western civilization (Saleem 2023). By highlighting how even the most absurd claims, such as the sun revolving around the earth (or, in this case, Rashtria), spread like wildfire and find ready followers, Appupen mocks the proliferation of nationalist pseudo-knowledge and warns that while repeating lies does not make them true, it can eliminate doubts about them. By having Rashtraman quote Adolf Hitler admiringly in the last panel ("Adolfji"), he furthermore suggests that such efforts to enforce conformity in thinking are bordering on fascism. Another example is a one-panel piece from season three: In *Hanging out with Rashtraman* [fig. 21] we see the protagonist abolish democracy by hanging its personified constituents such as "secularism," "judiciary," or "critisism" [sic] on the gallows. In an affable tone, he candidly warns the onlooker not to criticize him, while the caption "Contempt of course!" cleverly puns on numerous "contempt of court" cases, which (supporters of) the Modi government have been using to target critical voices.

Rasthraman is an excellent example of journalistic commentary dressed up in the garb of a comic strip or cartoon. The series presents us with a host of stand-alone images and brief stories, but unlike the usual cartoons found in newspapers, it draws a significant part of its strength from the complex narrative that unites the individual pieces into a carefully crafted mosaic committed to addressing controversial issues. "Through comics, art, stories and essays, we look beyond the trends, eyewash and agendas in an attempt to unravel today's human being," Appupen states (Appupen, year unknown), and his words may well be read as a motto of graphic journalism, which invites us into alternative spaces that engage us on multiple levels and prompt us to consider new, often critical or rebellious, perspectives.

Figure 20:
The Art of Believing by Appupen. © Appupen

Figure 21:
Hanging out with Rashtraman by Appupen. © Appupen

Conclusion

Graphic or comics journalism is a powerful medium for presenting or commenting upon sociopolitical issues in a way that captures attention and engages readers. It presents us with "unconventional" perspectives, because it disrupts traditional journalistic norms and, as a result, our viewing and reading habits. This makes it especially suited to subvert mainstream representations: Graphic journalism in India has served as a medium of social critique, protest, and activism from its earliest stages beginning with Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994). The format, however, has really only come into its own since around 2010, developing alongside the rise of the graphic novel, which has paved the way for the creation and dissemination of visual narratives aimed at an adult audience. The strength of graphic journalism lies in the power of the image. Practitioners build upon the image's compelling nature as well as its capacity to evoke emotions more directly than text, allowing the journalist/artist to focus on the affective weight of the visual. Moreover, images have the potential to make information accessible, because they can literally be grasped "at first sight" and condense as well as simplify information. At the same time, however, they can maintain depth by expanding meaning—for example, through the use of visual metaphors and intertextualities. Importantly, the latter allows them to tune into broader visual discourses, including those of India's 460 million social media users (Datareportal 2024). Yet, by stepping outside traditional journalistic conventions, graphic journalism has the potential to cut through the noise of today's crowded media landscape in which time and attention are limited, and offer readers a fresh view on dominant stories.

Bio

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