

Anthologies of Untold Stories *First hand* vol. I & II – A Review Essay

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Sen, Orijit & Vidyun Sabhaney (eds.) 2016. *First hand: graphic non-fiction from India*. Volume 1. New Delhi: Yoda Press. 368 pages. Softcover. INR 695, ISBN 93-82579-13-3

Sabhaney, Vidyun (ed.) 2018. *First hand: graphic narratives from India. Exclusion*. Volume 2. New Delhi: Yoda Press. 306 pages. Softcover. INR 695, ISBN 978-93-82579-49-6

Over the last decade journalistic genres have entered the rapidly expanding graphic scene on a large scale. Next to much discussed book-length publications, such as Joe Sacco's pioneering war reportages,¹ a whole range of short pieces has come to the fore. These need to be acknowledged if we want to do the sprawling form justice. As can be expected, we find numerous websites and online magazines acting as a forum for graphic non-fiction²; print newspapers and magazines recurrently publish short graphic journalism pieces³; and collections and anthologies keep coming out, which

¹ Sacco is the pioneer of graphic journalism and his reportages on Palestine (1993-1996) and, later, on Bosnia (2000; 2003) have set the mark for many works to come. Since then the scene has broadened considerably. The new millennium has seen the publication of multiple internationally acclaimed works, like US-American Ted Rall's mixed media reportage *To Afghanistan and back* (2002), Canadian Guy Delisle's journalistic travelogues on Pyongyang (2003 in French; 2005 in English) or Burma (2007 in French; 2008 in English), French Emmanuel Guibert's *Le photographe* (2003-2006 in French; 2009 in English; with Didier Lefèvre and Frédéric Lemerrier), US-American Josh Neufeld's *A.D. New Orleans after the deluge* (2009), or Sarah Glidden's *Rolling blackouts* (2016), to name but a few.

² See for example the international (mostly English language) sites drawingthetimes.com/, symboliamag.tumblr.com/, thenib.com/, www.cartoonmovement.com/comic, narratively.com/medium/comics/, the Italian www.mamma.am/, the French www.larevuedessinee.fr/, or the Indian www.thequint.com/news/graphic-novels and graphicsshelf.com/.

³ Among the newspapers and magazines that have commissioned original pieces or sent out graphic journalists to do the ground work on location and turn the gathered information into graphic formats are the Spanish *El País Semanal* (Abril/Spottorno: *La grieta*, 2013-2016; in German: *Der Riss*, 2017), the US-American *Pacific Standard* (Cagle: *Native America Online*, 2015), the German *Die Zeit* (Heuser/Migliuzzi/Klein: *The astonishing tales of the time traveling woman*, 2013), and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Wagner/Hagelüken: *Freut euch nicht zu früh*,

re-publish earlier works or assemble commissioned pieces that revolve around particular subjects. Some recent examples are the comic magazine *Strapazin's* issues on graphic reportages, Manuele Fior's collection *I giorni della merla*, or the anthology *Illustrated (hi)stories* of the First World War.⁴

Among the latest additions to this list are two state-of-the-art publications from India – the volumes *First hand: graphic non-fiction from India. Volume 1* (2016) and *First hand: graphic narratives from India. Exclusion. Volume 2* (2018). Both have been published under the aegis of Yoda Press, an independent Indian publisher who has made it its mission to cater to non-mainstream cutting-edge subjects.

The two *First hand* volumes are not the first anthologies from the sub-continent to provide a platform for graphic non-fiction – in 2013 Yoda Press brought out the anthology *This side, that side*, edited by Vishwajyoti Ghosh, which brings together fiction and non-fiction contributions on the Indian Partition. *First hand I*, however, is the first to have made non-fiction its explicit agenda, and together the two volumes have raised the awareness of a type of stories that aim at 'depicting the real' (Sabhaney 2016: 6) or being at least 'true to life' (Sabhaney 2018: 9).

Edited by Orijit Sen and Vidyun Sabhaney (vol. I) and Sabhaney alone (vol. II), at first sight the two books do not have much in common, apart from the main title and Sabhaney as a (co-)editor. *First hand I* is a collection of commissioned non-fiction graphic works which draw on diverse genres, themes and visual styles; *First hand II*, on the other hand, revolves around

2014), the French *XXI – Vingt et un* (Guibert/Keler/Lemerrier: *Des nouvelles d'Alain*, 2009-2010; Kugler: *Un thé en Iran*, 2010), the British *The Guardian* (Kugler, *Tahrir Square, Cairo*, 2012) or the Indian *Mint* (*The Small Picture* 2011-2014; various authors/artists, presented/curated by the independent comic book publisher Manta Ray).

⁴ The Swiss German-language magazine *Strapazin* published a first issue on reportages in 2014 (no. 115: *Reportagen*) and a second one in 2018 (no. 131: *Reportagen*); both feature works from around the world, including pieces from India by Harsho Mohan Chatteraj (2014) and Sharad Sharma (2018); besides a special issue on Indian non-fiction came out in 2017 (no. 127) under the guest editorship of Orijit Sen. Fior's collection (2016) has been translated into German in 2018 as *Die Tage der Amsel*; it assembles ten of his own pieces which were published earlier in various Italian and French newspapers. The anthology *Illustrated (hi)stories – Kolonialsoldaten im Ersten Weltkrieg* has been commissioned and published by the German Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Agency for Civic Education); it collects nine pieces which explore experiences of African soldiers who fought in Europe during the First World War and aims at lending a voice to these soldiers who have never been heard previously (Desta 2018: 7).

the central theme of exclusion and relies on a small team of contributors who deal with different aspects of the topic. As a result, the volumes differ significantly with regard to their concept but also regarding their narrative and artistic standards. The experimental character of *First hand I* results in a strikingly heterogeneous panorama of contributions while *First hand II* is firmly held together by the underlying theme and a predetermined conception. Nevertheless, there is a leitmotif, which connects the two volumes: both present us with stories from the margins that are usually left untold in a world that favours narratives from the centre. The volumes are worth reading, especially when taken together, because they invite us to think outside the box.

FIRST HAND I

First hand I assembles twenty-two non-fiction narratives by different authors/artists,⁵ ranging in length from eight to twenty eight pages. The contributions have been selected via a call for entries, and the resulting anthology presents us with stories that seek to represent the contemporary ‘social and political milieu of the country’ (Sabhaney 2016: 7) – the ‘real world’ as both editors repeatedly point out (Sen 2016: 8; Sabhaney 2016: 6). In order to do so Sen and Sabhaney have opted for the graphic medium which demands a more measured reading than, for example, documentary or news photography: ‘facts become visual in ways that allow us to contemplate them at length, and in different ways’ because, as Orijit Sen contends, ‘they are also created at length and over a period of time’ (2016: 8). Graphic journalism is ‘slow journalism’ (Pollmann 2013: no page), and it is necessarily subjective because during the creative process the graphic journalist makes conscious decisions about what to draw and how to draw it. A drawing cannot but be an interpretation of that which the artist has witnessed, and Joe Sacco, the doyen of graphic journalism, reminds us that the artist or cartoonist ‘draws with the essential truth in mind, not the literal truth’ (Sacco 2012: xii). Along these lines, the aim of *First hand I* is not to present us with an objective truth but rather with an alternative view on

⁵ If a piece has been created by a team consisting of an author (responsible for the text) and an artist (responsible for the graphics) both names are given; if only one name is given that person has created both the text and drawings.

the world – a ‘deeper, more personal’ truth (Sen 2016: 9). A connection with reality is established, above all, through the way in which the stories have been conceived of: they are based on actual events that have been accessed via research, interviews or personal experience – knowledge that has been gained *first hand* (Sabhaney 2016: 7). The ‘real’, in this context, becomes ‘a very subjective truth, as told by the hand and the eye of the author’ (Sen 2016: 8-9) or, as Sabhaney has phrased it, ‘the opportunity to enter *another person’s* real world’ (2016: 6; my emphasis).

Importantly, *First hand I* was initially planned as a zine, and it has stayed true to this concept with regard to its themes and motley look. Several contributions have a raw touch to them – their sketchy visuals and frayed narrative structure exude an air of non-professionalism. Zines are, by definition, low budget, alternative forums, created by (and often for) a community that wants to counter a mainstream worldview with a ‘radically democratic and participatory ideal of what culture and society might be [and] *ought* to be’, as Stephen Duncombe has explained in his study on zine culture (1997: 2; italics in the original) – a fitting description of the spirit that still characterises *First hand I*, even though it eventually grew into a ‘full-fledged anthology’ which was put on the market at a relatively high price of 695 INR⁶ (Sabhaney 2016: 6). In it, technically ‘unkempt’ pieces are mixed with high-end graphic narratives, all brought together in a skilfully designed book – discrepancies that are bewildering at first sight but must be seen as the result of the editors’ struggle to circumvent ‘the unavoidable contradiction’ of bringing counter-culture to a larger audience which usually requires walking well-trodden paths (Duncombe 1997: 5). In this context it is important to notice that the DIY aesthetic which characterises parts of the volume has been included deliberately: the editors hold that it is not technically skilled and flawless drawings which make for evocative and success-

⁶ India has a thriving scene of graphic zines; among the better known examples that exist(ed) in print are Bharat Murthy’s *Comix India* (2010-2012), Studio Kokaachi’s *Mixtape* (2013-2017), or the *Gaysi Zine*, which addresses issues of the LGBTQ community and has launched “A queer graphic anthology” (Gangwani) in 2015 (for a preview see https://issuu.com/gaysifamily/docs/the_gaysi_zine_4_preview); a lesser known (unfortunately short-lived) Bengali zine was *Drighangchoo* which ran only three issues between 2009 and 2010 (<http://drighangchoo.blogspot.com/>). For an interview with *Drighangchoo*’s co-founder Deeptanil Ray see Holmberg 2013. For a brief introductory discussion of the scene see Khandelwal 2017.

ful comics but rather the artists' 'eye for detail, [...] sense of rhythm, and style' (Sabhaney 2016: 7). *First hand I* was originally planned as an 'experimental publication', a space for stories that 'find little space in mainstream media' (Sabhaney 2016: 6). The experimental character has survived, but in order for the reader to not misjudge the anthology's heterogeneity it would have been helpful if the information about the volume's prehistory as a zine had been displayed more prominently. As it is, the necessity of switching between the different styles and artistic standards demands from the reader the willingness to be open-minded and somewhat adventurous.

The issue of readership brings us to the two main problems of the anthology: the question of the targeted audience and the apparent lack of an overarching theme. Looking at the two prefaces and the single contributions we can safely assume that the editors and most of the authors are eager to make a difference and engage their readers. Sabhaney openly declares that they wanted to create comics that can not only 'address injustice in contemporary India' but also, thereby, 'challenge the narratives of the powerful' (2016: 7; my emphases). However, a fairly high-priced professionally designed collection of experimental narratives whose title does not offer a thematic focus will most probably attract readers who are primarily interested in avant-garde literature or the capacity of the format. The apparent lack of focus beyond that of formal elements (How has the information been gathered? – *First hand!* – What form do the narratives have? – *Graphic non-fiction!*) is even more unfortunate as there actually is a leitmotif, which, however, has not been prominently displayed: the majority of contributions present us with stories of forgotten heroes, of people whose voices remain unheard, or simply stories that have to stand back behind better-known publicly accepted narratives. If the anthology had been given a motto (such as 'unheard voices' or 'untold stories') it would have been more compelling.⁷ It is generally questionable whether the format of a commissioned anthology is apt to reach out to a general audience. Pieces with strong messages will rather profit from low-threshold platforms like

⁷ Several contributions explicitly mention their aim of telling untold stories: Rangoon to Vadakara; Metromorphosis; Hills & stones; Whispers of a wild cat; Bahurupiya; The edge of the map; The girl not from Madras.

journalistic print media or in digital media as will become clear from the following review of the single contributions.

First hand I – Categories and Contributions

First hand I has been praised repeatedly by reviewers for making a foray into the arena of Indian non-fiction graphic narration (cf. Hasan 2016; Kirpal 2016; Krätli 2017), but as already indicated, graphic non-fiction is, in fact, not a new field in South Asia. The two volumes must be seen in the context of a rich and heterogeneous graphic non-fiction scene – a fact also mirrored by the generic diversity of the pieces in the first volume. The twenty-two contributions deal with a potpourri of topics and have been assigned to the six categories of autobiography, biography, oral history, documentary, commentary, and reportage. The attribution of each piece to one of the categories, however, is not always convincing: the criteria for creating the categories are not consistent – some refer to the content, others to form – and in several cases the genre labels raise expectations that are not met by the respective contributions. This may leave one or the other reader puzzled but at the same time gives food for thought as has been intended by the editors: in the preface, Sabhaney emphasises that the categories – or ‘sub-genres’ as she calls them – should not be ‘taken too seriously’ and she explicitly invites the readers to ‘come forward to disagree with the categorisation’ (2016: 7). Clearly, genres are not natural or fixed categories, but although the genre labels in *First hand I* may be intended to merely offer tentative guidance, they still unnecessarily limit the possibilities of what graphic non-fiction may achieve. Alternative genres that suggest themselves in the case of *First hand I* include, for example, the obituary (*The Nawab*), slice-of-life stories (*Calcutta kid*; *Transistor can be bomb*; *Ellipsis*; *The same, everywhere*), the essay (*Whispers of a wild cat*; *Rangoon to Vadakara*) or the cautionary tale (*Notes from the margins*).

(Auto)Biography

Of the given categories, it is especially autobiography and biography that have already been extensively explored elsewhere, both internationally and within the Indian scene. But while Indian book-length graphic biographies have so far dealt exclusively with prominent persons like Gandhi (2011;

2014), Ambedkar (2011), Jotiba Phule (2011) and Indira Gandhi (2018), *autobiographical* works and shorter biographical pieces tend to focus on people next door, true to Sen and Sabhaney's original idea. The two autobiographical and five biographical pieces in *First hand I* therefore merely add new stories to an already colourful mosaic of narratives. In *Transistor can be bomb* the author Shruti Ravi (illustr. Megha Vishwanath) tells us from a decidedly female perspective about how she adjusted to travelling on the Delhi Metro, and in Rukminee Guha Thakurta's sketch *Calcutta kid* (illustr. Nityan Unnikrishnan) we learn about the importance of food and the unimportance of religion and caste in a Calcutta middle-class household in the 1980s and 90s. In the category 'biography', Gopalakrishnan's *The Nawab* portraits, in the style of a highly subjective but pensive obituary, a 20th-century nonconformist, the 'anarchist-looking' (31) Thekke Arangath Rajendran; and Ikroop Sandhu presents us with a slice-of-life story about her grandmother's temporary death and the story she had to tell about her near-death experiences.

Smita Sen, Madhuja Mukherjee and Gitanjali Rao/Rajesh Devraj, on the other hand, contribute narratives about the lives of three exceptional and fairly well-known women who are fêted for their decidedly unusual careers. In Sen's inspiring rags-to-riches story *Collage of dreams* we learn about the artist Shakila's metamorphosis from rural Bengali housewife to renowned artist; Mukherjee introduces us in her multimodal narrative *Whispers of a wild cat* to the life of the emancipated non-conformist pre-war actress Ruby Myers, critically addressing the 'taming' of this unruly woman without, however, exploring the aspect in any depth; and in Rao/Devraj's *Akhtari* we are presented with an intimate glimpse into the early years of the ghazal singer Begum Akhtar, her hard life, losses and the multiple roles she assumed. An interesting trait of this narrative is that all direct speech is given in Hindi in the Devanagari script.

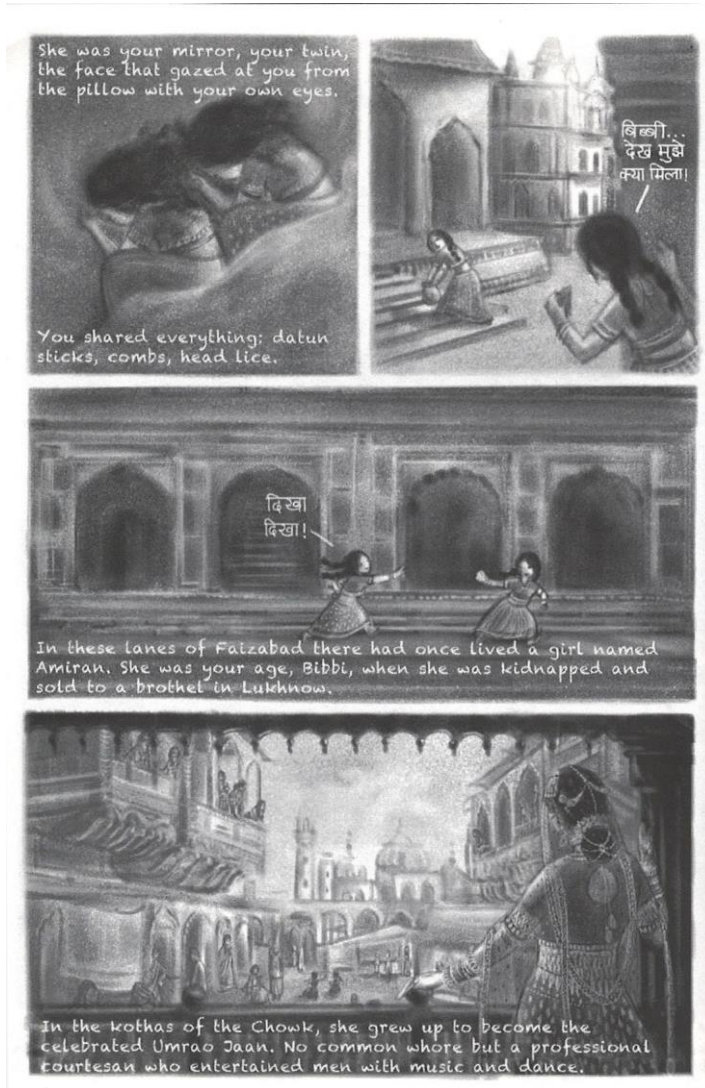


Fig. 1: Rao/Devraj, "Akhtari", *First hand I*, 346.

True to the zine-character of the volume, the former four pieces ‘celebrate the everyperson in a world of celebrity’ (Duncombe 1997: 2), while the latter three try to shed new light on the private rather than the public personas of their well-known protagonists. The editors’ stance that ‘biography’ should apply to people ‘who have led extraordinary lives’, however, does not seem to be equally applicable to all the stories (Sabhaney 2016: 7).

Oral history

Closely connected to the idea of (auto)biography is the genre of oral history to which three texts have been allocated by the editors: in *Rangoon to Vadamakara – A survivor’s tale* A.P. Payal documents her grandparents’ flight from Burma to India in 1942 as a first-person-narrative from the perspective of her grandmother⁸; Ita Mehrotra’s piece *Metromorphosis* presents us with the first-person narrator’s contemplations about the city and, in a framed story, the experiences of Chetan, a woman who migrated to Delhi from Rajasthan for work, as told by herself; and Nikhila Nanduri tells us in *Hills & stones* the story of Gangaramji, a *likhāī*-craftsman, and his vanishing art of wood carving. Of the three pieces, it is especially Payal’s which corresponds to the expectations of oral history as a genre. Payal supplies a personal introduction and also a glossary, scientific footnotes and bibliography, framing the first-person account of her grandmother with the typical scholarly paratexts; unfortunately, however, it remains unclear how much research has gone into the final drawn story. Nanduri’s *Hills & stones*, on the other hand, exhibits a problematic framing: it features a rather prominent first-person narrator who seems to be interested mainly in her own reflexion on the process of gaining information but cannot refrain from heavily commenting on the events or situations she puts forward. Her piece is, at times, more of a report of her own experiences during the process of gathering the data which were collected not by herself but a third person, i.e. her supervisor who conducted the interviews. Similar to *Akhtari*, the quotes from the interviews are given in the original Hindi written in Devanagari.

⁸ Although Payal does not acknowledge the intertextual borrowing, the title would seem to be a quotation from Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: a survivor’s tale*, another graphic narrative that relates events about which the first-person narrator has heard from a third party, his father. *Maus*, however, has never been classified as oral history but optionally as memoir, biography, autobiography, or history. By using the title, Payal seems to claim a certain level of trauma equivalent to that of the holocaust. This looks disproportionate at first sight, but eventually individuals’ experiences of trauma cannot be compared.

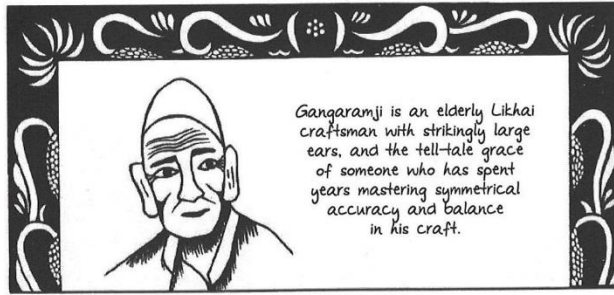


Fig. 2: Nanduri, "Hills & stones", *First hand I*, 144.

Mehrotras's piece is interesting for the narrator's musings about the city and her interview partner Chetan's role within this urban space, but the story appears slightly patronising because Chetan's voice seems to serve mainly to underscore the narrator's own reflections. Nevertheless, the three pieces make for an unusual and intriguing reading.

Documentary

Another quite diverse category within the volume is ‘documentary’ – a notoriously vague term. Sabhaney’s understanding of the word does not provide much clarification either since she defines documentary in the context of *First hand I* as a work in which ‘both primary and secondary research form the basis of the narrative’ (2016: 7) – a definition that can be applied to any kind of scholarly research which, then, could equally result in an essay or a research article. Besides, the self-imposed category does not fit all the texts subsumed under the heading. Thus, the piece *Bahurupiya* by Priyanka Borar, which addresses the vanishing occupation of wandering jesters or *bahurūpiyās*,⁹ does by no means rely on the primary research of its author; rather, as Borar tells us at the end of her story, it is based on a 1985 documentary film.¹⁰ Using literal quotes from the film and replicating filmic images through drawing, *Bahurupiya* must be seen as an adaption of a documentary film but not a documentary in its own right. Borar, however, supplies her own interpretation of the filmic materials: her graphic narrative ends with the idea that identities are not fixed while the film concludes on a more profound note that the *bahurūpiyā’s* ‘exuberant play with identity hints at the transitory nature of social status and provides an immediate example of the mutability of the human soul and liveliness of the human spirit’ (Emigh & Emigh 1985: 38’19 – 38’30). *Bahurupiya* is an interesting (and rare) exercise of adapting film into graphic narrative but it remains unclear how this adds value to the documentary apart from the fact that the subject is brought to a new audience.

The four remaining ‘documentaries’ deal with varied topics: Mohit Kant Mishra’s silent story *Effects of RTI* addresses the possible danger for a person who gets in the way of influential people while seeking the legally guaranteed Right to Information (RTI) which promises timely response to citizen requests for government information; the beautifully executed *Apocalypse*

⁹ *Bahurūpiyās* are street performers who entertain people through the art of impersonation. They assume fake identities by adopting the typical dress and behaviour patterns of particular social groups, or types, but also by dressing up like mythological figures, or gods.

¹⁰ The 40 min. film is titled *Hajari Bhand of Rajasthan: jester without court* and was produced by the theatre scholar John Emigh and his wife Ulrike Emigh. It can be watched at: https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C764746/hajari-bhand-rajasthan-jester-without-court (accessed: 4 April 2019).

by Akash Gaur visually explores the answers of people regarding the question of how they would spend or prepare for Doomsday; Chintan et al. call attention to the problem of e-waste and the global economic structures in *E-waste sutra*; and in *The edge of the map* Ishita Sharma/Priyanka Kumar tackle the question of marginality and displacement due to development projects, a subject addressed in graphic narrative for the first time in 1994 by Orijit Sen in *River of stories*.

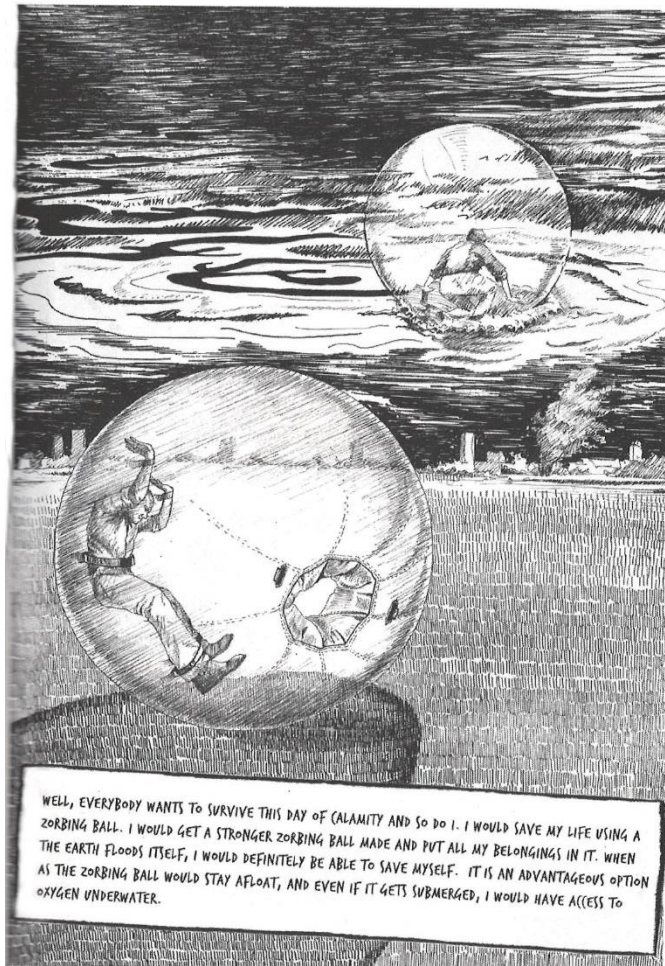


Fig. 3: Gaur, "Apocalypse", *First hand I*, 87.

Sen's seminal graphic novel may also be read as a work of activism – just as the latter two contributions which stand out from the anthology because of their experimental, collage-like, multimodal visuals.¹¹ In spite of the fact that their noisy aesthetics make for a challenging read which counteracts the immediacy that comics activism likes to draw on, they may well be read as activist pieces because they explicitly voice political ideas and clearly aim at stirring the readers up.

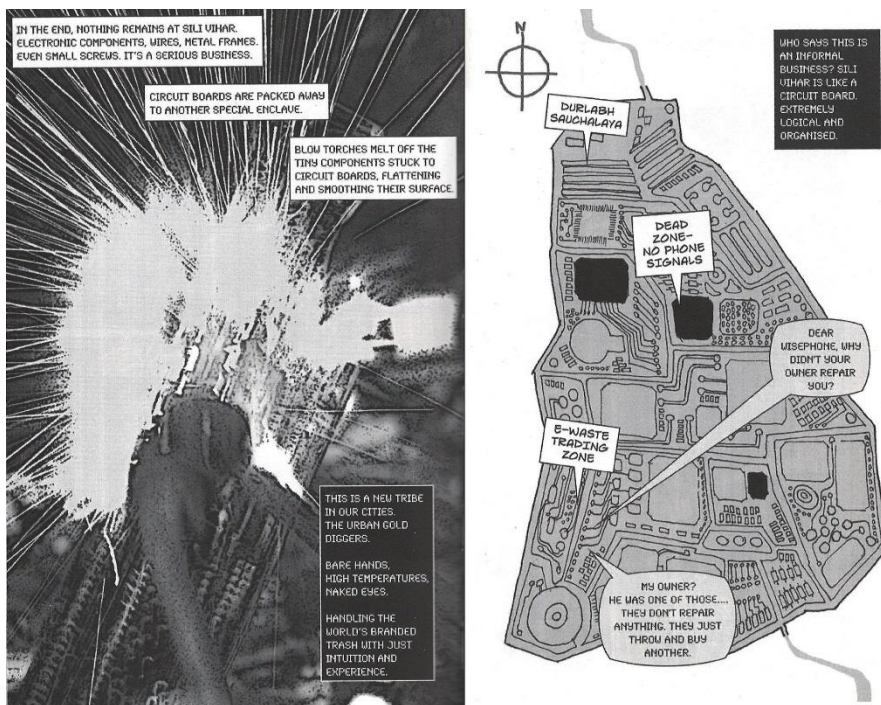


Fig. 4: Chintan et.al., "E-waste sutra", *First hand I*, 148-149.

¹¹ Sen developed *River of stories* for the Delhi-based environmental organisation Kalpavriksha, which had asked for a documentation of the Narmada Dam project. In the run-up to the book Sen stayed at the valley for several weeks to do on-site research and talk both to the residents concerned and the activists protesting against their displacement (cf. Gravett 2017: no page).

Comics activism has been spearheaded in the last years, by Kate Evans, but has also seen practitioners like Susie Cagle, or the Russian Victoria Lomasko. Recent examples from India include anthologies like *First hand II* (Sabhaney 2018) to be discussed later, as well as *Drawing the line* (Kuriyan et al. 2015), *Priya's shakti* (Devineni et al. 2014) and *Priya's mirror* (Vohra et al. 2016). The latter three examples tie in with prominent feminist graphic narratives like Trina Robbins & Barbara 'Willy' Mendes' *It ain't me babe* (1970) or Julie Doucet's *Dirty plotte* (1991-1998).

Commentary

India possesses a sophisticated scene of graphic commentators. Between 2011 and 2014 more than one hundred resourceful and innovative first-rate commentaries appeared on a weekly basis in the journal *Mint*, written and drawn by a host of graphic artists like Prabha Mallya, Gokul Gopalakrishnan, Jai Undurti or Pratheek Thomas, to name but a few well-known representatives; other excellent examples are Aarthi Parthasarathy/Chaitanya Krishnan's web-based *Royal existentials* or Priyesh Trivedi's caustic *Adarsh balak*.¹² The graphic commentaries supplied by *First hand I* add to this heterogeneous body of works but they explore novel possibilities of the genre insofar as they are longer and can therefore present us with more sophisticated arguments. Thus two narratives explore to what extent repression and rejection of the Other are timeless global phenomena: in Aarthi Parthasarathy/Kaveri Gopalakrishnan's *The same, everywhere* we meet Pia, an Indian lesbian woman in Bangalore, and her male friend Kabir in Paris who experience that homophobia is not a specifically Indian problem but 'the same everywhere', which they acknowledge with a grim sense of humour at the end of the story. The story *Why Julieta didn't get her drink* by Isa Hinojosa/Rahul Srivastava introduces us to Julieta from Mexico and Geetha from India who discuss and compare typical mechanisms of oppression that are repeated over and over again, irrespective of time and space.

Dhwani Shah's *One step forward, two steps back*, on the other hand, is a critique of mining activities in bio-diversity regions (here: Goa), supplemented by a smattering of the well-known 19th-century poet Mirza Ghalib's Urdu

¹² Cf. www.royalexistentials.com and www.facebook.com/adarshbalak.

verses (given in Devanagari and translated in footnotes) which act as additional commentaries. We see an unnamed male first-person narrator musing about the problems and his own cluelessness as to possible ways of personal engagement, directly involving the reader by ending the narrative with a question.

Vidyun Sabhaney's own multimodal piece, *Double-speak*, is a narrative about the problematic appearance of the idea of the 'anti-national' which has crept into public discourse under the Hindu nationalist government voted into power in 2014 and the power of language which helps to create a loaded discourse. This story, however, can only be understood in its entirety when reading the author's postscript, and it remains questionable to what extent a commentary succeeds in its aims if it needs additional explanation. Finally, Aditi Chitre/Rahul Bhattacharya's piece *Non-fiction*, a silent story, is a critique of consumerism and the omnipresence of advertisements. The visual narrative is crudely drawn and the story is not novel, to the extent that it looks like a naïve and unsophisticated version of Appupen's *Halahala* universe.¹³ Given the high quality of the already existing landscape of graphic commentary in India, this section falls behind, in spite of its convincing messages.

Reportage

The remaining two narratives have been classified as 'reportage', a fitting label if we understand the generic term as the account of an event related from the personal perspective of the reporter, mixing objective and subjective views. Eminent practitioners of this genre include Joe Sacco, Sara Glidden, or Oliver Kugler; recently the Indian media start-up *The Quint* has begun to publish graphic mini reportages online under the heading 'graphic novel'.¹⁴ As with the definition of documentary, however, this reviewer

¹³ Appupen explores in numerous long and short graphic narratives the fictitious land *Halahala* which mirrors our own world in varied respects. The omnipresence of aggressively advertised products and thoughtless consumers who crave for these products are a staple in his world.

¹⁴ The works include, on the one hand, rather patriotic historical pieces, retelling, for example, the stories of Bhagat Singh (Gopinath/Gour 2018) or Mahatma Gandhi's last day (Upmanyu/Kala 2019); on the other hand, we find brief topical reportages on the Syrian War (Paul/Boben 2018), child rape (Bhattacheryya/Gour 2018), or the suicide of a Dalit student (Gopinath/Paul 2018). While some pieces appear to simply relate known facts in an easy-to-

remains mystified regarding Sabhaney's somewhat idiosyncratic explanation of the term 'reportage'. In the context of *First hand I* she understands it as something that engages 'with the ethics of journalistic practice in [...] primary research' (2016: 7), an explanation that does not add to the meaning or possible interpretation of the two narratives. Pragya Tiwari/Pia Alize Hazarika's *Notes from the margins* and Neha Dixit/Orijit Sen's *The girl not from Madras*¹⁵ are both first-person narrators' reports which heavily comment on the events described in the respective stories. In *Notes from the margins*, a classical reportage, Tiwari presents us with an account of her experiences while interviewing victims of the 2002 Gujarat riots during the run-up to the 2014 general elections, which should see Narendra Modi, former Chief Minister of Gujarat, securing the position of the Prime Minister. *The girl not from Madras* elucidates the work of the NGO 'Bachpan Bachao Andolan' (Save-the-Childhood Movement), telling us about human trafficking in the wake of ethnic violence that leaves people without any means to earn money: a girl, Sakina, who needs to earn for her family, is brought to the city, allegedly for a household job, and then sold off to a family as a bride. Dixit/Sen introduce a second fictive first-person narrator into the story, Laadli, who wears a hijab plus superwoman costume (including the eye-mask) and acts as an extra-diegetic presenter and critical commentator of the events unfolding. Both pieces are thoughtful and convincing with regard to their textual and visual narratives.

digest visual manner, others employ the visuals to good effect, providing an additional level of meaning to the textual narration.

¹⁵ The story has also been published in German translation in the earlier mentioned edition of *Strapazin* on Indian non-fiction (Dixit & Sen 2017).

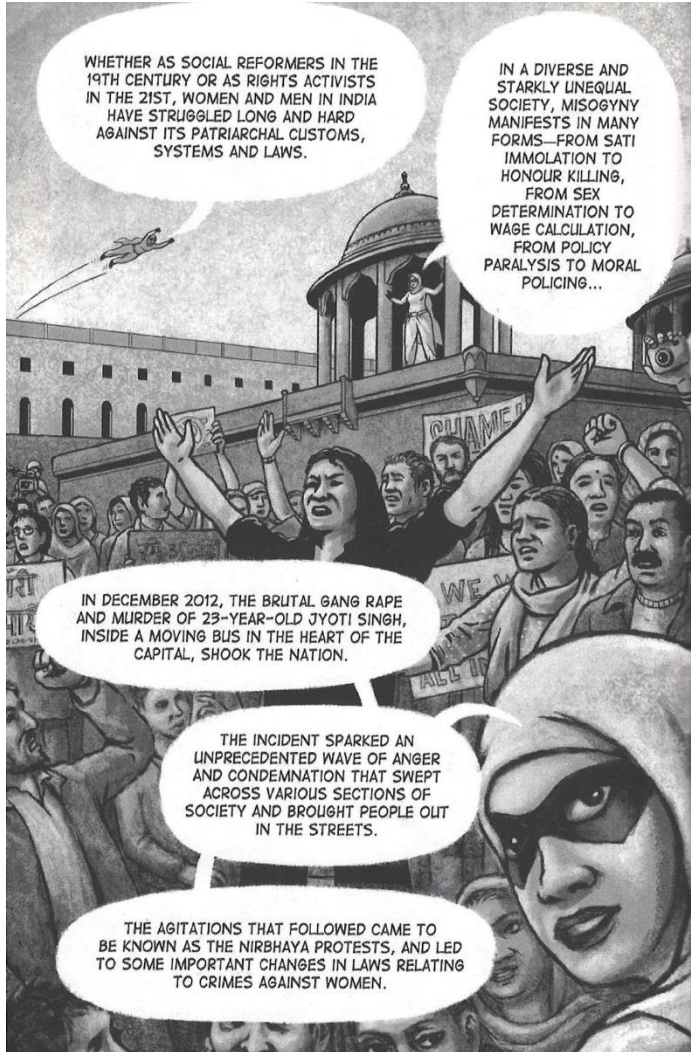


Fig. 5: Dixit/Sen, "The girl not from Madras", *First hand I*, 330.

In *First hand II*, as we will see in the following, the potpourri of themes tackled by *First hand I* and the meandering arrangement of the pieces within the volume make way for a carefully thought-out and well-structured second volume of the series.

FIRST HAND II

First hand II is an intriguing and innovative anthology which follows a completely different concept than the first volume and therefore works much better as a whole. The overarching theme ‘exclusion’ is announced prominently on the cover page and we learn from the subtitle that, this time, we are not to expect ‘non-fiction’ but ‘graphic narratives’. The volume brings together eight inspired narratives varying in length from ten to thirty eight pages which are interpretations of, or comments on, topics investigated in the *India exclusion report 2015 (IXR)*, issued by the *Centre for Equity Studies (CES)*, an independent institution run by a group of social activists and well-known academics who engage in ‘research and advocacy on issues of social justice’.¹⁶ In their *Exclusion reports* they assemble detailed studies on the mechanisms and consequences of exclusion with regard to a variety of public goods, ranging from education, urban health or justice to exclusion in budgetary and planning processes; in addition, each report highlights selected highly excluded groups like transgender people, single women, survivors of ethnic or communal violence, the urban homeless or the urban poor, to name but a few.

The *IXR 2015* lies at the core of *First hand II* which must, thus, be read as a graphic adaptation of the *Report* – an interesting and unconventional exercise within the landscape of graphic narratives. Even though there are plentiful graphic adaptations of literary works, especially the so-called ‘classics’¹⁷, so far globally only two adaptations of specialist reports have come out: *The 9/11 report: A graphic adaptation* (Jacobson & Colón 2006) and

¹⁶ The *CES* was founded in 2000 and explicitly aims at influencing public policy and law; activities include grassroots engagement but also research into the conditions and results of exclusion, leading to the *India exclusion reports (IXR)* which have been issued regularly about once a year since 2013. The reports can be accessed and downloaded from <http://indiaexclusionreport.in/>.

¹⁷ The list of graphically adapted classics is long and includes Amruta Patil’s beautiful interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* in *Adi parva* (2012) and *Sauptik* (2016), the story of the *Ramāyana* as told by Samhita Arni/Moyna Chitrakar in their intriguing *Sita’s Ramayana* (2011), or Saurav Mohapatra/Sayan Mukherjee’s *Moon mountain* (2014), a graphic rendering of Bibhutibhushan’s famous Bengali children’s novel *Cāder pāhār* (1937). Outside India adapted classics range from Austen’s *Pride and prejudice* (Butler & Petrus 2009) or Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (Hamilton 2009) to *Beowulf* (Garcia & Rubin 2017).

The torture report: a graphic adaptation (Jacobson & Colón 2017).¹⁸ Significantly, the adaptations of all reports have been initiated with similar aims in mind: through the graphic presentation the reports' findings are to become more 'accessible' and address 'a new set of readers' – a younger audience in the case of *First hand II*; at the same time the adaptations are expected to stay true to the 'spirit' or 'the data and perspectives' of the original reports (Jacobson & Colón 2006: ix; Mander 2018: 7; Sabhaney 2018: 8). The makers thus take advantage of the classic traits of adaptation, which can typically actualise or concretise ideas, make simplifying selections but may also amplify a story (cf. Hutcheon 2006: 3). The adaptations are deployed to disseminate the messages of the respective reports because the ideas conveyed therein are considered important for the improvement of society.

Interestingly, in contrast to the 'non-fiction' contributions in *First hand I*, the majority of graphic narratives in the second volume openly declare themselves to be fictional. At the same time, however, the authors take care to explain that their narratives are 'true-to-life', because they are 'based on' or 'draw on' various kinds of primary or secondary sources like interviews, conversations with scholars, newspaper reports, or scholarly articles. Notably, this data has been gathered in addition to that given in the report itself; it is therefore not the report that is visualised but the issues it raises. This is important because the volume does not claim objectivity but rather partiality – the aim is to underscore the ideas and ideologies that have gone into the report (Sabhaney 2018: 8). Both renderings of the research data, the report itself and its graphic adaptation, follow the same clear-cut agenda of making society's and the state's failure to combat inequality visible and opposable.

The volume is, thus, much more goal-driven than *First hand I*: in the preface, the editor Vidyun Sabhaney speaks of *First hand II* as 'a visual register of inequality and exclusion' that has been created in the hope that it 'will make such phenomena easier to *identify, critique, and fight*' (2018: 8; my emphasis). Graphic narratives, she argues, can contribute to this by 'disrupting the

¹⁸ *The 9/11 report* is a graphic interpretation of the almost 600-page long final report which investigated how the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 could happen and how such an event can be avoided in the future; it was issued by the 9/11 Commission in 2004. *The torture report* is a text-heavy adaptation of the 2014 report by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence about the abuse of detainees through enhanced interrogation techniques by the CIA but the book also includes chapters on responses to the report after its publication.

familiar’ but also by way of bringing to life characters ‘we may never have the opportunity to meet in our daily lives’ (Ibid.). Hence, almost all the stories provide platforms, which allow for individual destinies to emerge from the amount of data presented in the reports which tend to highlight general issues and suppress detail. As an adaptation, *First hand II* appropriates the materials of the report which means it not only interprets the report’s findings but also creates something new out of it (cf. Hutcheon 2006: 20).

First hand II – The Contributions

Unsurprisingly, the *IXR* is omnipresent within the volume, not only because it provides the theme for each chapter but also because the graphic stories are heavily framed by paratexts that remind us of the setting within which they are to be read: the introductory pages of each story give the title of the original chapter of the report as well as, in most cases, an explanation about how the information of the subsequent graphic narrative has been gathered and to what extent it is fictitious.

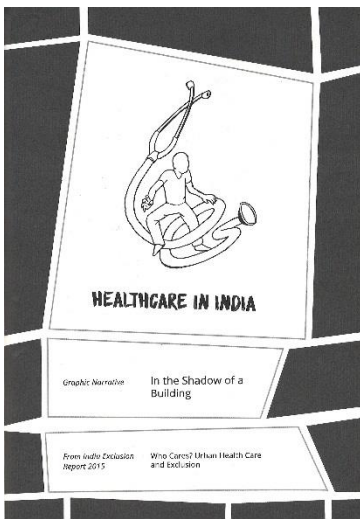


Fig. 6a: Sabhaney/Mishra, “In the shadow of a building”, *First hand II*, 45.

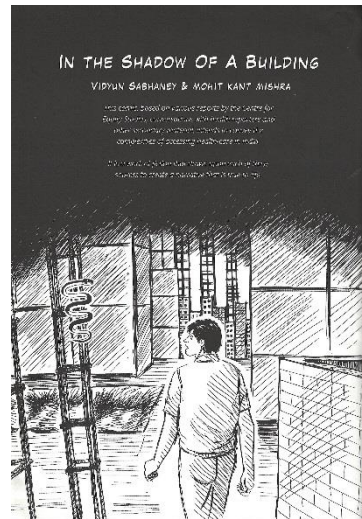


Fig. 6b: Sabhaney/Mishra, “In the shadow of a building”, *First hand II*, 46.

Each story is then followed by an outline of the report’s findings, presented in the style of infographics.

FROM THE REPORT

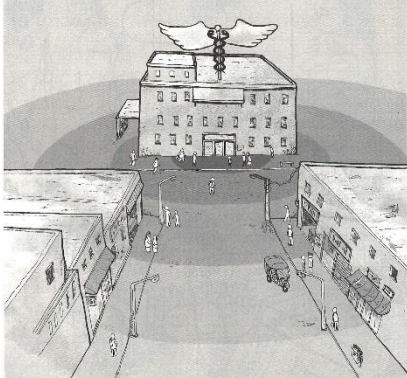
WHO CARES?
URBAN HEALTH CARE AND EXCLUSION

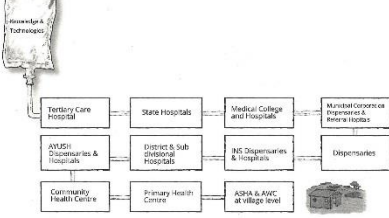
WHY HEALTH CARE IS PUBLIC GOOD?

Health care is considered a public good because it aims at wellness of the entire population. Health care is more accurately considered a merit good. A merit good is one whose consumption benefits us individually and as a whole society.

For this reason, the state has the responsibility to provide such goods.

Health care is a public good whose benefits extend far beyond the patient.





There are certain aspects which emphasize health care's importance as a public good:

- First, knowledge and technologies, particularly for vaccines and pharmaceuticals, which may be considered private commodities but need to be subsidized with public infrastructure to ensure access.
- Second, policy and regulatory regimes in health (e.g., monitoring quality of care in facilities) are also public goods that apply to large populations.

IN CASE OF THREATENED LIFE THREATENING DISEASES, MAKING PEOPLE WHO HAVE NO ACCESS TO THE CARE, LEAD THEM TO IT TO GET THE DISEASES CAN BE PREVENTED AND TREATED WHICH IN TURN REDUCES THE RISK OF THE ENTIRE POPULATION BEING EXPOSED TO IT.

Early diagnosis and treatment can stop the domino effect of disease spreading.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE

Governance of health in urban areas must necessarily be taken care of by the state in the larger interest of the well-being of the population. The Directive Principles of State Policy of the Indian Constitution explicitly state that the government is responsible for the determinants of citizens' health, including health care.

Following the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, Article 243G of the Eleventh Schedule and Article 243W of the Twelfth Schedule provides for municipalities to be endowed by the states with powers to promote public health.

A tall list of legislations concerned largely with regulation also squarely place the state as the sole steward of the health care system (these range from the Drugs and Cosmetics Act of 1940 to the Clinical Establishments Act of 2010).

In India, the emphasis—that too, scant—of public provisioning by the state has been in rural areas, combined with a massive retreat from public provisioning of care in urban areas. There has been dramatic underfunding and improper allocation of funds in health since economic liberalization began in 1991, while incentives for privatization of health services provisioning have increased.

Fig. 7: Sabhaney/Mishra, “In the shadow of a building”, *First hand II*, 70-71.

The graphic narratives thus framed differ significantly from each other with regard to the way the visuals are employed. Some use the images only to illustrate single aspects, while others use them to tell the (or an additional) story; two pieces are rather text-heavy, and one contribution is a silent story that completely dispenses with text. Remarkably, the anthology features two contributions in Hindi by Bhagwati Prasad, a courageous move in a publishing environment that relies almost exclusively on English for bringing out graphic novels. The two pieces prove that Hindi (or any other vernacular for that matter) can well be a suitable medium for modern avant-garde graphic narratives.¹⁹

¹⁹ Bhagwati Prasad’s earlier graphic novels *Tinker. Solder. Tap* (2009, illustr. Amitabh Kumar) and *The water cookbook* (2011) were written in Hindi too, but translated into English for publication. The two works were published in the context of projects at the Delhi-based research centre SARAI and explore the impact of media like VCR or cassettes on life in a neighbourhood, and water conflicts in urban India, respectively. Apart from these only a few

In the first Hindi piece, *Caśmadīd* (*Eye witness*), which serves as an ‘introduction’ to the anthology, we encounter a number of objects commenting matter-of-factly on the deplorable conditions for the economically and politically disadvantaged in contemporary (Indian) society. The piece is rather text-heavy but its striking visuals impressively complement the text, each telling its own minute story.

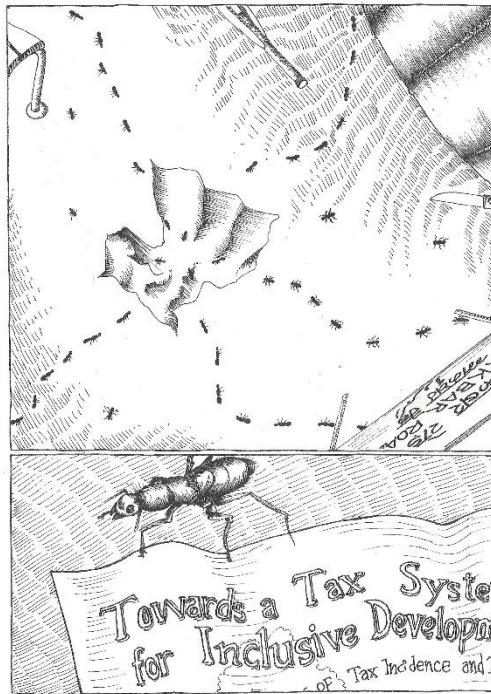


Fig. 8: Prasad, “Caśmadīd”, *First hand II*, 35.

Caśmadīd is a compelling graphic narrative, which interprets the report’s corresponding (and admittedly somewhat unwieldy) chapter ‘Towards a tax system of inclusive development’ only loosely. It still adequately introduces us to the volume because it establishes the undercurrent for all coming narratives: the state’s failure to fight injustice effectively.

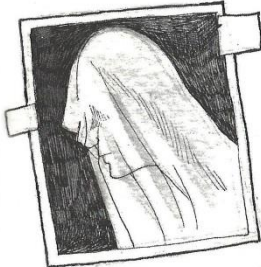
shorter pieces in Hindi can be found scattered in some anthologies, but no full-length graphic novel has so far been published.

The second contribution, *In the shadow of a building*, by Vidyun Sabhaney/Mohit Kant Mishra addresses urban healthcare. The (fictional) narrative presents us with a young man who seeks work in the city on a construction site where he hears, over the months, several stories about people who died or became seriously ill because it was difficult for them to get access to a hospital or pay for treatment; in the end he, too, has to go back to his village because he falls ill but gets no help. The narrative is not very strong in itself but illustrates the malfunctioning health system by introducing us to the desperate situations of those who fall ill, true to the motto of the report's corresponding chapter: 'Who cares?'

The similarly urgent problem of the notoriously unequal provision of water and sanitation services is addressed in the piece *Water*. Images by Bhagwati Prasad and Shohei Emura accompany a beautiful poem by the renowned Telugu writer Challapalli Swaroopa Rani (in English translation). The well-known poem, which has a place on the reading lists of various South Indian colleges, revolves around the issue of how restricted access to water is a major stumbling block in a Dalit (woman)'s life. Challapalli's poem is one of the most powerful contributions of the volume since it presents us with the intimate take of a person who is herself afflicted.

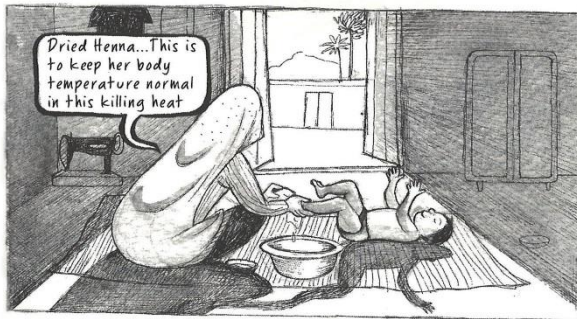
The piece *Hard times* by Vidyun Sabhaney/Shohei Emura covers two chapters of the report, one on the role of the state in securing just working conditions for women and another on 'living single'. The fictional narrative centres on the massive violent 2016 protests of garment industry workers against governmental changes to the rules regulating workers' access to their savings in the Employee Provident Fund. From the first-person perspective of Meena, a young widow from a small town who was sent to work in the city by her parents, we learn about the vulnerability of single women, the abominable working conditions in the factory, the ensuing protests and, eventually, the worker's triumph over the companies and the government. Sabhaney's narrative is straightforward as are Emura's visuals. An enriching add-on are some extradiegetic text-passages, which remind us of the factual setting: on a double page showing the protesters, we are presented with first-hand quotes from four women who participated in the strike, as an authorial comment tells us.

A Matter of Honour

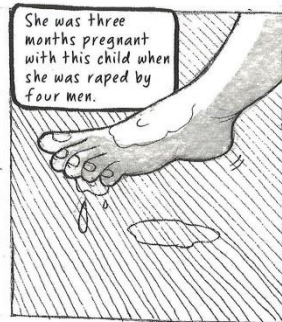


F, mid-20s,
Fugana village,
Muzaffarnagar district
Four accused, chargesheet yet to be filed

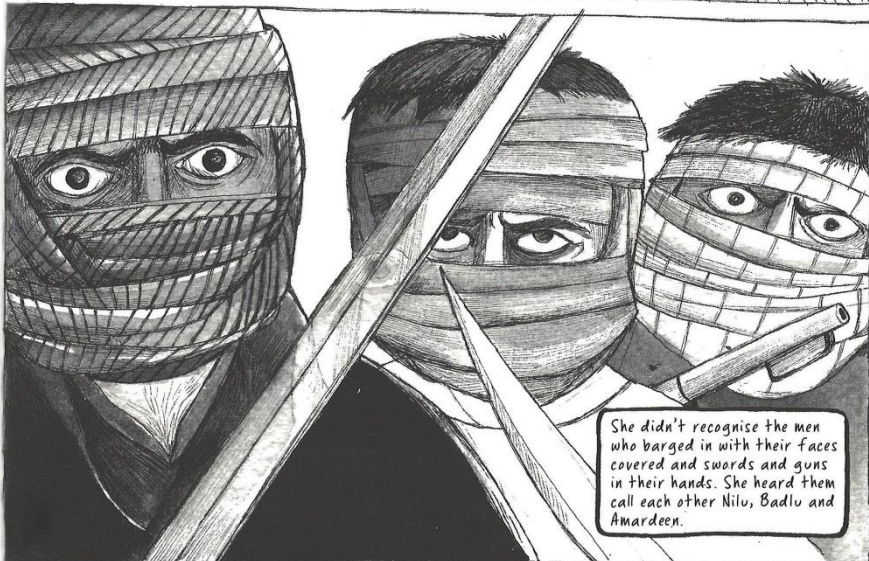
'My lower abdomen hurts, still does, continuously. I would bleed often. Only my husband knew.'



Dried Henna...This is to keep her body temperature normal in this killing heat



She was three months pregnant with this child when she was raped by four men.



She didn't recognise the men who barged in with their faces covered and swords and guns in their hands. She heard them call each other Nilu, Badlu and Amardeen.

Fig. 10: Dixit/Kuriyan, "Shadow lines", *First hand II*, 167.

Given the fact that Dixit refrains from explicitly stating that the events are ‘fictional but true-to-life’ we must assume that we are presented with the original statements of the afflicted women. *Shadow lines* therefore not only presents us with an easily accessible version of the report but literally allows those women’s voices to reach a larger public.

In *There’s no place like home* Amrapali Basumatary/Vipin Yadav present us with the ‘survivors’ of ethnic conflicts in Assam. In a combination of three single stories we learn about the displacement and dispossession of different communities and the absence of appropriate state action. The narratives are fictionalised accounts based on Basumatary’s own field research, oral history interviews and (for the third story) reports from various sources. As the stories tell us about the terrible conditions in the relief camps and the still hopeless situation in the present with nobody willing to help or offer long-term support, we are made witnesses to the failure of the government to effectively deal with the issues at hand. All three parts are very text-heavy with the images merely illustrating the text. The visuals do not give additional information, but they do remind us that there are individual fates with individual faces and names behind the data, graphs and charts of the report.

Bhagwati Prasad’s *Devadāsī: ek pahcān (Devadasi: an identity)*, the second Hindi piece of the anthology, introduces us to the theme of the corresponding report by presenting Lakṣmī, a former *devadāsī*, who tells her own story. The author thus follows the anthology’s general (if unspoken) strategy of illustrating the meaning of the data by means of an individual destiny, but it remains unclear to what extent the narrative is completely fictitious or based on factual materials. In the story Prasad raises several aspects addressed in the report like the *devadāsī*’s vulnerability, and her ostracisation, by focussing on Lakṣmī’s complete loss of social ties, including those to her family. The narrative itself, however, is not entirely convincing as the protagonist remains bland. Regrettably, both Hindi contributions suffer from sloppy editing with lots of (printing) mistakes in the Devanagari.

The last piece of the anthology is also one of the most impressive ones: Vidyun Sabhaney, Christopher Burchell (illust.) and Anupam Arunachalam (illust.) have teamed up to present us with a beautifully drawn silent story

about the Jarawa, a tribe from the Andaman Islands, in *Without permit, entry prohibited*.

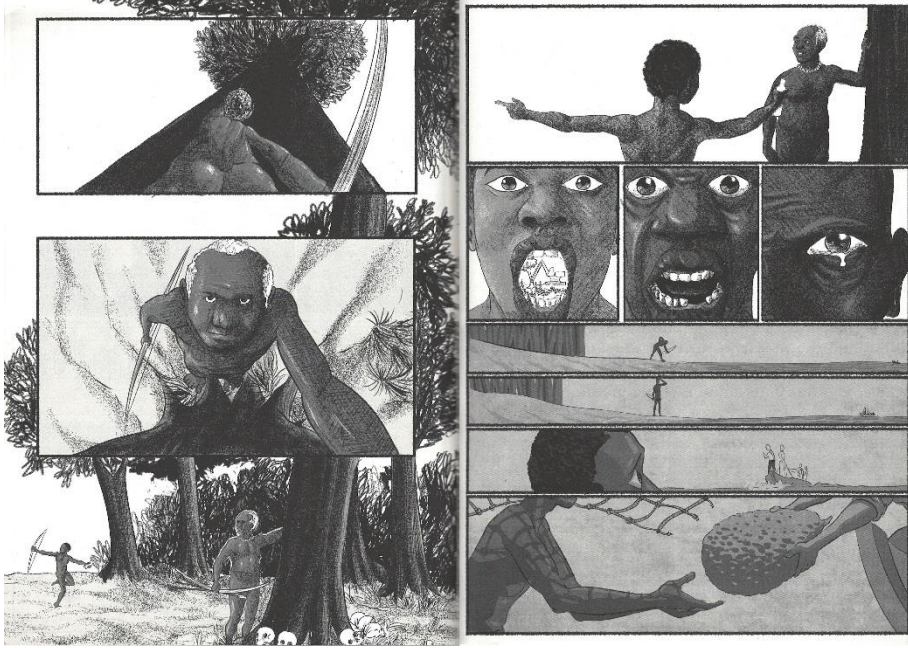


Fig. 11: Sabhaney/Burchell/Arunachalam, "Without permit, entry prohibited", *First hand II*, 264-265.

The narrative draws upon 'documentation, reportage and other secondary material' but is still fictional so as to better 'capture' the Jarawas' 'experiences' (260). These are rather lofty aspirations because we do *not* see the Jarawa themselves raising their voices, like, for example, Challapalli has done in her poem *Water*, but rather find Sabhaney, Burchell and Arunachalam attempting to defend their interests. Nevertheless, the story shows us impressively how the Jarawa lose both their habitat and also their culture to intruding government officials, researchers and tourists who are primarily interested in turning them into objects of their studies. *Without permit, entry prohibited* is a dense and atmospheric graphic narrative, which fully exploits the potential of the adaption as a means of creating an autonomous piece of art, which engages the audience in a novel way.

CONCLUSION

First hand I and II are strongest when taken together. They are connected by their choice of themes that have been identified by the contributors to matter in life, be it on a small and personal scale like many pieces of the fledgling first volume, or on a scale that concerns society as a whole, such as the socio-politically engaged contributions of the second volume, which has clearly ‘come of age’ with regard to concept and continuity in artistic standards. A second underlying theme is the activist stance, which joins not all but a considerable number of the contributions. The graphic medium as such cannot be impartial, a fact, which might be considered a drawback, but must be seen as the actual forte of the medium: it is the openly subjective and highly engaged take on contemporary Indian society, which makes the two volumes a rewarding read.

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