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Konzept

Die *Interdisziplinäre Zeitschrift für Südasienforschung* (IZSAF) ist eine elektronische, peer-reviewed Zeitschrift, die vor allem Nachwuchswissenschaftlerinnen und Nachwuchswissenschaftlern, deren Forschungsarbeit einen Bezug zu Südasien aufweist, eine Plattform zur Veröffentlichung ihrer Forschungsergebnisse bzw. zur Vorstellung geplanter Forschungsvorhaben in deutscher und englischer Sprache bietet. IZSAF ist offen für neue Formate und publiziert auch Fotoessays, um Themen der Südasienforschung auf visuelle Weise zu präsentieren.

The *Interdisziplinäre Zeitschrift für Südasienforschung* (IZSAF) is an electronic peer-reviewed journal that seeks to provide a platform for young researchers with a research focus on South Asia to publish their findings. The intention of IZSAF is to bring together young scholars from a variety of disciplines and to enter into interdisciplinary discussion regarding issues surrounding the study of South Asia. IZSAF is open to new formats and also publishes photo essays to present topics in South Asia studies visually.

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Comics and Science Fiction in West Bengal

Daniela Cappello

Abstract: In this paper I look at four examples of Bengali SF (science fiction) comics by two great authors and illustrators of sequential art: Mayukh Chaudhuri (*Yātrī*, *Smārak*) and Narayan Debnath (*Ḍrāgoner thābā*, *Ajānā deśe*). Departing from a conventional understanding of SF as a fixed genre, I aim at showing that the SF comic is a 'mode' rather than a 'genre', building on a very fluid notion of boundaries between narrative styles, themes, and tropes formally associated with fixed genres. In these Bengali comics, it is especially the visual space of the comic that allows for blending and 'contamination' with other typical features drawn from adventure and detective fiction. Moreover, a dominant thematic thread that cross-cuts the narratives here examined are the tropes of the 'other' and the 'unknown', which are in fact central images of both adventure and SF: the exploration and encounter with 'unknown' (*ajānā*) worlds and 'strange' species (*adbhut jāti*) is mirrored in the usage of a language that expresses 'otherness' and strangeness. These examples show that the medium of the comic framing the SF story adds further possibilities of reading 'genre hybridity' as constitutive of the genre of SF as such.

WHAT'S IN A COMIC?

Before addressing SF comics in West Bengal, I will first look at some international definitions of comic to outline the main problematics that have been raised in the literature on this subject. In one of the first books introducing the world of comics to artists and academics, Will Eisner looks at the mechanics of 'sequential art' (a term coined by Eisner himself) describing it as a dual 'form of reading' (Eisner 1985: 8):

> The format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (e.g., perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (e.g., grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit.

With this tentative definition, Eisner encouraged a critical understanding of comics where image and text overlap and work together in the creation of meaning. Both the aesthetic and the intellectual, the 'visual' and 'verbal' skills of the interpreter, are summoned to encourage a holistic approach to the enjoyment and critical analysis of the comics. What has kept the 'sequential art' at the margins of literature and literary criticism was in fact the predominantly visual aspect of the comics, where the text only assists the primary function often designated by the image. While literacy was predominantly associated to the ability of reading texts, the comics sponsored 'multimodal literacy' (cf. Jacobs 2013) through the interaction of the verbal and the visual. The dominant role that image plays within the texture of the comics had for long confined sequential art to the margins of literary criticism, making the task of defining what a comic is much harder than that of recognizing it. Besides this, the idea persists that comics are rooted in children's literature and grounded in the child's psychology, while on the other hand the links between comics and childhood remain under-investigated. Charles Hatfield (2007) has argued that while children's literature studies seem newly receptive to comics, this field of study is perhaps still constrained by a sense of the otherness of comics vis-à-vis literature. Conversely, the putative 'coming of age' of the comics from the late 1990s, especially in the form of the 'graphic novel' of social and political import, including Art Spiegelman's *Maus: a survivor's tale* (1989), spurred a wave of academic theory and research that provided a new literary vocabulary to the 'resurgent' art of the comics (cf. Baetens & Frey 2014; Stein 2015).[1]

The intersection of text and graphic in the comic book, so controversial to traditional literary criticism across the world, functions in a way that enhances the visual and imaginative power of genres like fantasy, horror, porn and science fiction, encouraging a synesthetic 'enjoyment' of the oeuvre through multiple senses, thus comparing to cinema the experience of looking

[1] This paper has emerged from the meeting and discussions raised during the panel 'Gauging Comics and Graphic Narrative in South Asia' that took place in Paris at the European Conference for South Asian Studies (ECSAS 2018). My nostalgia for reading Italian comics (mainly auteur comics like Tiziano Sclavi's Dylan Dog and Hugo Pratt's Corto Maltese) and my curiosity about the various relations existing between the reader and the narrative mode of the sequential art are motives that have significantly driven and animated the writing of this paper.

at and reading the comic book. It is with this view in mind that I use the category of 'mode' in this paper to refer to the intersection of image, text and narrative in Bengali science fiction comics in alternative to 'genre', traditionally more limited to the taxonomic classification of literary types. Moreover, with 'mode' I want to outline a broad and more fluid understanding of science fiction, itself constituting a mode of discourse, that often transgresses the boundaries of its enclosed genre especially when framed by and within the medium of a comic book. That is why the idea of 'mode' seemed to me more appropriate to explain the exchange of tropes and languages that takes place among 'fantastic' graphic narratives, of which these Bengali comics under discussion are an elucidating example. Illustrations of fantastic narratives of Bengali literature, including books like Majumdar's iconic *Ṭhākurˈmār jhuli* or Sukumar Sen's *Ābol tābol*, have since long offered a widely diversified hotchpotch of stories, characters, themes and tropes that blended the fairy tale with the ghost story, the fable with the adventure story, humorous tale with rhymes and lullabies, often transgressing the boundaries of genres. An interesting case of this 'contamination' between genres occurs in the adventure and science fiction comics by Mayukh Chaudhuri and Narayan Debnath, two great authors and illustrators of Bengali sequential art. What emerges from these sources is that the strategic interaction of text and image within the medium of comics offers room for experimenting with Bengali science fiction, blending it with tropes, languages and narrative modes that inform also other 'established' genres, such as adventure and detective stories. One such feature that cuts across SF, fantasy, adventure, thriller and horror fiction is the trope of 'otherness', illustrating the continuity of language and narrative among these different genres. My analysis shows that genre hybridity is constitutive of science fiction narratives, especially when these are accommodated in and enriched by the medium of the comic book.

FANTASTIC AND SCIENCE FICTION IN BENGAL

Post-millennial Indian fiction in English has shown a predilection for 'fantastic' or 'weird' narratives. These have proliferated and enjoyed discrete success in the global and domestic Indian literary market in a diverse range of narrative forms, including novels, graphic narrative, movies and TV series (cf.

Varughese 2017). Especially the Indian commercial or popular literature, falling under the umbrella tag of 'genre fiction', has been oriented toward fantasy,[2] with a predilection for horror and gothic elements, while to a lesser extent it has also informed science fiction.[3] Although there have been signs of a growing interest for science fiction comics written in South Asian languages, especially in the form of conferences and initiatives of digital archiving,[4] the adaptation of this genre into sequential art in South Asia still lacks serious critical reception. Sandip Roy (2019) has noticed a revival of science fiction but recognized its marginality in the Indian literary canon and the reluctance of literary criticism to offer new readings and a serious critical reception of the genre. He further noted that, as compared to the growing popularity of 'fantasy', SF has been consumed more as an elite and 'niche' genre by nostalgic readers of this type of narrative. Possibly following this wave of nostalgia and the resurging interest for the low-brow, the marginal and entertaining character of pulp literature, scholars have turned their attention to the multiple theoretical, historical and material horizons of the genre of science fiction (cf. Chattopadhyay, Mandhwani & Maity 2018) and of adventure comics in India (cf. Kaur & Eqbal 2018). In the case of science fiction, some writers and fervent readers of the genre, like Dip Ghosh and Sandipan Ganguly, have started the 'science-fiction/fantasy' webzine *Kalpabiswa* to draw attention to new and old vernacular writings in the genre, creating a visible platform also for the young acolytes of the genre.

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[2] For instance, Varughese has introduced the term 'Bharati Fantasy' with reference to post-millennial 'mythology-inspired' fiction in India. Regarding the proliferation of 'fantastic' narratives in South Asia, it is worth mentioning *An anthology of Indian fantasy writing*, published by Sahitya Academy (Lal & Agarwal 2017), which can be seen as symptomatic of the growing critical reception and official recognition of the genre.

[3] Sami Ahmad Khan's English novel *Aliens in Delhi* (Niyogi Books, 2017) is one such example drawing upon 'classic' motifs of the genre accommodated in the Indian contemporary space of the city of Delhi.

[4] That is the case for the conference 'Workshops of Horrible Creations' (November 2018) and the project 'The Comic Book in India' both hosted by Jadavpur University in Kolkata (School of Cultural Texts and Records). This project included, among other tasks, the digital archiving of old comics to collect and preserve scattered materials of popular literature, making it accessible to international readers and scholars alike. Unfortunately, the website is only partially completed, and one gets the feeling that the British Council, East India, that originally provided funding to the project, has not extended its support to go on with this very important project of digitization and preservation.

Notwithstanding this late reassertion of science fiction in West Bengal, Bengali literature has had a well-established tradition of science fiction writing since colonial times. One can identify some variations in the approach and treatment of SF in Bengali colonial and postcolonial writings: a strand that extolls progress, technology and the rationalism of science, making it the legitimizing logic of narration; and another that subverts the 'universal' scientific logic to create alternative scientific facts out of the peripheries of the Empire. Early Bengali SF, based on the premises of science and technological progress, accommodated Western science into an Indian world-view, while at the same time it also developed a critique of the 'universality' of Western and colonial science, progress and rationalism (Sengupta 2010: 115). Often Bengali SF literature has tried to mock the scientific language of natural sciences (i.e. Sukumar Ray) and to subvert the classic stereotype of 'the East' as the land of spirituality (i.e. Premendra Mitra). For example, Sukumar Roy's *Heśorām Hũśiẏārer ḍāẏeri* (The diary of Heshoram Hushiyar, 1922) offered an ironic critique of the accuracy of scientific knowledge by making fun of the pretention of science to 'label' things with Sukumar's typical 'upside-down' language (Sengupta 2010: 117-18). However, the first examples of the genre were concerned with 'real' science and its future possibilities, such as interplanetary and interstellar travels. The literary genre evolves out of realistic scientific concerns and 'true' experimentations with the realms of science. The first Bengali writers of the genre were in fact scientists: Jagadishchandra Bose and Jagadananda Roy are considered as the initiators of the genre in Bengal.

Jagadishchandra Bose, more popularly known for his research on electromagnetic waves, wrote one of the first SF short-stories, 'Palātak tuphān' (The runaway cyclone, 1886), a story narrating the mysterious disappearance of a terrible cyclone in the Bay of Bengal caused by the 'hailing' Kuntalin hair oil. The short story follows the memories of a man who embarks on a sea-journey to cure his illness. When the sick man's daughter reveals him the powers of the oil, which helps hair to regrow, he keeps one bottle in his bag before embarking on the sea-journey. The cyclone that had uncannily disappeared from the Bay of Bengal came back to haunt the ship passengers with gigantic waves and storms. When all hopes seem to be lost, the man remembers the recent discoveries about the calming effects of oil on water waves. When he throws his daughter's bottle of the 'hailing' hair oil into the stormy waters,

'like magic the sea became calm, and the wonderful cooling oil even calmed the entire atmosphere'.[5]

Another prolific scientific writer of the time was Jagadananda Roy, whose contributions included books on several scientific subjects, including astrophysics and botany, especially written for young readers to educate them in modern science and to impart a rational temperament and an awareness of the natural environment. Jagadananda published 'Śukra bhramaṇ' (Travels to Venus) around the 1890s where he describes an interstellar journey and visit to another planet. Here the alien creatures are described in terms mirroring evolutionary theories about the origin of man.[6] The language of sciences, of botany, chemistry, geography, history and physics became constitutive of SF stories written throughout the twentieth century, in continuity with the origins of the genre in Bengal and its creators. SF was in fact often used as a didactic means of mediating modern science and disseminating knowledge (cf. Sengupta 2010: 120-1).

With Premendra Mitra's much-loved character of Ghanādā and Satyajit Ray's Prof. Śaṅku, Bengali SF addressed a critique and subversion of the universality of Western science. Through the 1950s and 1960s, Ghanādā, a quintessential Bengali bachelor, scrupulous and down to earth man, travels to space and under the sea to rescue humanity from the failures of science, weaving a moral humanistic narrative of man's triumph over the forces of evil. In 'Maśā' (The mosquito, 1945), the first story featuring this character, Ghanādā tells his eager listeners that he had killed only one mosquito in his life: a mosquito whose DNA was transformed in a laboratory, through the experiments of a mad scientist, so that its bite would kill (cf. Sengupta 2010: 119).

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[5] This story shows how early Bengali SF relevantly centered on the power of science to control and to legitimate the narrative. The story participated to the Kuntalin Story Competition instituted by the inventor of the oil on one condition: the stories had to promote and refer to his Kuntalin oil in some essential way. Bose, who was also active in the Swadeshi movement, through his story turned the Kuntal Keshari hair oil into a powerful nationalist symbol that combined scientific endeavors with nationalist concerns (cf. Chattopadhyay 2013).

[6] 'They resembled our apes to a large extent. Their bodies were covered with dense black fur. Their heads were larger in comparison with their bodies, limbs sported long nails and they were completely naked' (cf. Sengupta 2010: 117).

Unlike Premendra Mitra's Ghanādā, the typical image of the smart masculine Calcutta-based *bhadralok*,[7] Satyajit Ray's Prof. Śaṅku re-inscribes the history of science from the 'peripheries' of Europe by locating the greatest scientific discoveries in Egypt, Japan, and Iraq (Chattopadhyay 2016: 446). In these characters the power of the human mind cannot be overcome by technology and the machine. In their own ways, both Mitra's Ghanādā and Ray's Śaṅku put forward a consistent critique of Western – and therefore colonial – science: they incorporate it while introducing subverting ideas regarding the universality of Western scientific knowledge.

WHAT IS KALPABIJÑĀN?

The genre of the *kalpabaijñānik*, a term composed of *kalpa* (imaginary) and *bijñān* (science), refers to a type of literary narrative that draws from the empirical world of natural sciences, technology, and more generally on the 'cognitive norms' of the author, although it departs from that empirical logic to project an 'estranged' possible reality. Notwithstanding the multiple points of contact that Bengali SF shares with 'international' SF, scholars have pointed out the need of redefining the genre outside the Anglo-American space. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, for example, has shown that a redefinition of SF in 'marginal' spaces outside the peripheries of the Empire must center on the transformations in history of the concept of what he calls 'scientificity' (2011), as I will show later.

Before turning to theoretical and linguistic aspects of Bengali SF, it is worth addressing the plethora of definitions of SF that are current in the Anglo-American literary criticism to make sense of the formalist discussions about 'genre' that have surrounded science fiction, as well as to highlight the traits that have more commonly distinguished this narrative mode. In the widely reprinted book *Metamorphoses of science-fiction*, Darko Suvin argued for an understanding of this genre as the 'literature of cognitive estrangement', emphasizing the ways it differentiates from other 'fantastic genres': 'SF is a developed oxymoron, a realistic irreality, with humanized nonhu-

[7] The Bengali word *bhadralok* denotes the gentry, a class of Bengali 'gentlemen' that arose in Bengal during British colonial rule.

mans, this-worldly Other Worlds, and so forth. Which means that it is – potentially – the space of a potent *estrangement*, validated by the pathos and prestige of the basic cognitive norms of our times' (1979: viii). In Suvin's view, the 'novum', denoting an innovation which is scientifically plausible (like time travel), is the dominant aspect that distinguishes the genre from others that only aspire at reproducing the rules and conventions of the genre (i.e. *Star Wars*).[8] For instance, *The encyclopedia of SF* differentiates among multiple entries describing 'mainstream' and 'genre' SF, let alone the numerous subgenres and hybrids that merged science fiction with other genres (i.e. 'science fantasy').[9] However, recent scholarship has encouraged to view SF as belonging to the broader horizon of fantastic writing, prompting and mirroring the proliferation of sub-genres of science fiction in writing and other media. John Clute, for example, suggested to view science fiction as part of the wider cauldron of 'fantastika' genres, while Broderick described the 'megatext' as a 'shared cultural thesaurus' of science fiction encompassing tropes, images and rules that SF and fantasy narratives share ('Fantastika', *The encyclopedia of SF*). Attebery further broadened the horizon of the genre with the etiquette of 'speculative fiction', all non-mimetic genres, while 'genre-fiction' designated the commercial orientation of these 'fantastic' narratives (Oziewicz 2017: 2).

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[8] The distinction between genre and non-genre SF has represented the major area of literary criticism since the 1980s. However, attempts at expanding the horizons of SF have shattered the distinction between conventional and non-conventional SF mirroring a more 'relaxed' reading and understanding of the fluid and flexible boundaries of SF, often mixing with cyberpunk, horror, gothic, fantasy and other subgenres (cf. 'Definitions of SF', The encyclopedia of SF).

[9] For example, the term 'genre SF' denotes 'sf that is either labelled science fiction or is instantly recognized by its readership as belonging to the category – or (usually) both', the identification with the genre usually depending on certain conventions and rules of that storytelling (cf. 'Genre SF', The encyclopedia of SF). Mainstream SF lacks precision but more usefully uses SF in its opposition to 'genre SF' writers. Slipstream SF designates 'stories which make use of SF devices but are not genre SF' (cf. 'Slipstream', The encyclopedia of SF). The coexistence of a plethora of definitions gives an idea of the challenges of 'fixing' the category in one critical box.

Fig. 1: Phyānṭās'ṭik (1977), *Āścarya!* (1969), and *Bismaẏ sāẏens phik'śan* (1971) SF magazines edited by Adrish Bardhan (Roy 2018)

Coming to the Bengali compound word *kalpabaijñānik*, this vernacular adaptation of the 'fanta-scientific' is a quite recent formulation, tracing back to the 1960s when the Bengali writer Adrish Bardhan published his first SF magazine *Āścarya*! in which for the first time he used the Bengali 'portmanteau word stapling together imagination and science' (Deb 2007: 7). In perfect SF style, the magazine covers introduced the reader to the new worlds of weird monsters, giant ants, and floating astronauts (fig. 1). Bardhan became an icon of Bengali SF, creating his own mad scientist Professor Natbaltu Chakra, arranging SF radio plays and setting up India's first science fiction cine club (Roy 2018). His formulation of *kalpabaijñānik* seems to reproduce certain problematics that are also entailed in the English word-constructions for science fiction, such as Hugo Gernsback's scientifiction (1926) or 'scientific romance', until the modern and widely shared sci-fi, in a way that literally reduplicates the 'original' English phrase. Chattopadhyay rightly points out the term's association with a cluster of 'fantastic' literature that is more generally identified with the *āścarya*, the sense of wonder, including horror, fantasy and 'science', as well as other fictions of the inexplicable and visionary (2016: 435). The two Bengali words that make up the composition *kalpabaijñānik* (lit. imaginative science) are linked to different connotations and meanings of 'science' and 'imagination' in Bengali. *Bijñān* is a construction that merges the Sanskrit suffix *vi-* [10] and the noun *jñān* denoting the vast field of knowledge

[10] The v in Sanskrit is b in Bengali.

according to classic Indian philosophical thought, both mundane and transcendental. Yet the addition of the suffix *vi-* brings this holistic, gnostic approach to knowledge down to earth, reducing the field only to technical and material knowledge. However, it seems that Adrish Bardhan derived the usage of kalpa not from its first connotation as Dharmic unit of time but from the definition of *kalpanā*, which in many Indian languages denotes 'imagination', as an 'act of conceptualizing transformation' (Chattopadhyay 2016: 436). It is not the scope of this paper to solve the tensions and conflicts implicated in the translation and adaptation of the genre to the postcolonial humus of Bengal. However, it is worth mentioning that *kalpabijñān* through the years has tried to challenge universal understandings of science and to enrich them by searching local 'particulars' of the socio-cultural imaginary, and especially through the reproduction of local 'myths' of science, which Chattopadhyay has called 'mythologerms' (2016).[11]

Anthologies of SF Bengali fiction take account of the long discussion about the definition of the genre and are rather reluctant when it comes to subsuming the 'many different worlds of science fiction' under one label (Deb 2007: 7). In spite of that, Anish Deb identifies the key features of SF stories, and especially the role of science as that which controls the visible (*pratyakṣa*) and invisible world (*parokṣa*), the search for unknown (*ajānā*) worlds and living beings (*prāṇī*), and the future. Often Bengali 'classic' SF stories do not reflect the common tropes expected by the reader who is familiar with Western science fiction. As someone commented after reading Anish Deb's *Serā sāẏens phikˡśān* (Best SF stories), the book was not what 'Hollywood would have us believe[d] science fiction is – you know, space, and aliens, and rocketships, and monsters, and mindboggling CGI and all that'. On the contrary, the stories collected are meant for the 'soul of simple middle

[11] He shows this by arguing that Satyajit Ray's character Prof. Śaṅku challenges the universality of science by re-inscribing the history of science from the 'peripheries' of the Empire, of the West, as well as of urban India; that Marathi science fiction writing, especially that of Jayant Narlikar, reproduces the tensions between science and religion and solves them by showing the dual nature of science as a source of benefit and harm; that Amitav Ghosh's postcolonial science fiction novel *The Calcutta chromosome* negotiates with the colonial past exploring and proposing a counter-science voiced by the 'subalterns' (cf. Chattopadhyay 2016).

(and sometimes lower) class Bengali-life, but with an "extraordinary element" thrown in'.[12]

If these examples show that Bengali SF writing sometimes lacks the features traditionally identified with the genre, Bengali SF comics, by contrast, do incorporate in their visual component the tropes that are part of the SF 'megatext' or the shared imaginary of this genre, i.e. alien encounters, spaceships, interplanetary journeys, time travels. Unlike contemporary trends in Bengali comic narratives that show more complex characters, the SF narratives developed in the comics under discussion incarnate Darko Suvin's vision, who stated that much of 'SF production is strictly perishable stuff, produced in view of instant obsolescence for the publisher's profit and the writer's acquisition of other perishable commodities' (1979: vii). The Bengali comics that are the object of this study are in fact more representative of SF narratives showing the typical features of this fantastic genre (i.e. interstellar journeys, spaceships, etc.) without being necessarily ideologically constructed, but rather market and readership oriented, produced for the enjoyment of a specific public with genre-specific demands.[13] Often these comics have shown the attempt at metabolizing the Bengali features developed by SF (i.e. the tall tale, the detective and adventure story), blending them with an international version of SF tropes (i.e. introduction of a *novum*, the scientific discovery, alien encounter, interplanetary travels) and thus taking part in a globally shared imaginary about science fiction.

INTERSECTION OF MODE AND MEDIUM: SCIENCE FICTION AND COMICS

In the history of the literary genre, SF has often been interacting with 'visuality', as shown in the early American magazine *Amazing stories* (1926) as well as in the Japanese manga and anime adaptations, such as the popular *Akira* (1988) and *Ghost in the shell* (1995). In West Bengal, too, science fiction became significantly associated to the medium of comics in works that were

[12] The anonymous reader used inverted commas perhaps to point out that the extraordinary was created out of its juxtaposition to the 'ordinariness' of Bengali middle-class life, which is a central theme developed in Bengali SF stories (<https://readbengalibooks.com/index.php/sera-science-fiction-samagro.html>, accessed: 12. March 2019).

[13] For example, the tension between science and religion is a dominant theme in Marathi and Bengali science fiction narratives (cf. Harder 2001; Chattopadhyay 2016) but it remains untouched in the science fiction comics under discussion.

mostly published in the children's magazines *Kiśor bhāratī*, *Kiśor jñān bijñān*, and *Śukˈtārā*. What is remarkable about the intersection and interaction of mode and medium in these science fiction comics is the blurriness of the boundaries, where one bleeds into the other 'loosening' the strict definition and category of genre. It is in fact by force of the visuality of the comic that the strict label of science fiction welcomes tropes that are characteristic of other genres, such as the historic (Mayukh's *Yātrī* and *Smārak*), the detective and adventure story (Debnath's *Kauśiker abhiyān*), or *vice versa*: the adventure narrative often blends and incorporates traditional SF elements, to enhance the 'extraordinariness' of the story.

These Bengali children's magazines published various kinds of graphic narrative for children that included comedy, adventure, the science-based, hardcore and 'hybrid' science fiction stories. An example of a 'hardcore' science fiction comic is Narayan Debnath's *Ajānā deśe* (In an unknown land) that contains all the characteristic features of the literary genre of SF; yet it features under the section 'adventure comics' with other more typical stories of this genre (i.e. *Rahasyamaẏ abhiyātrī*, *Bhaẏaṅkarer mukhomukhi*, etc.), all grounded on the premises of a journey to exotic lands in order to solve a mystery (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: xii). Narayan Debnath, more popular for creating funny duos like Hāṁdā Bhõdā and Naṇṭe Phaṇṭe, has also invented science fiction inspired characters for his detective stories, like Kaushik Roy, the Indian government's spy with a bionic hand. Other creations by the Bengali illustrator are the characters from a light-hearted science-based series called 'Dānˈpiṭe Khāṁdu ār tār kyāmikyāl dādu' (The reckless Khadu and his chemical grandad). The stories always feature Khadu's grandfather creating a technologically advanced object and devices that function as the main reason behind the unfolding of the narrative: these devices can either repair damages, or hunt mice, but they put people in danger if used uncritically, as the curious Khadu usually does.

Another significant aspect in Bengali comics of this genre is the adaptation of hybrid SF narratives in the medium of the comic or of the graphic novel. One strand of these adaptations is well represented by the graphic novels on Prof. Śaṅku, like *Āścarjantu* (The extraordinary animal), *Śaṅku o UFO* (Śaṅku and UFOs), and *Śaṅku o ejipˈsīẏa ataṅka* (Śaṅku and the Egyptian terror), and on Premendra Mitra's Ghanādā, like 'Maśā' (The mosquito), 'Nuṛi' (Pebble)

and 'Pokā' (The insect).[14] The assimilation of the international features of SF is evident also in the series *Biśbasāhitya citrakathā* (World literature in pictures) that offered adaptations of Western classics of 'fantastic' literature into Bengali comics, including H.G. Wells' *The time machine*, Stoker's *Dracula* and *Ben-Hur* drawn by the illustrator Gautam Karmakar.[15] Among other SF comics, Karmakar also illustrated 'Commander Bose' (2003), 'Paiśācik' (Demoniac, 1978), and 'Jībanta jādughar' (The living museum, 1981).[16]

These adaptations of classic (Western) SF narratives and tropes of genre-SF accommodated in the medium of Bengali comics find space for entangling and interacting with themes and tropes from other popular genres, such as adventure and detective fiction. In these cases, the comic functions as a 'medium' that adapts and transfers the SF narrative into pictures accommodating the story in a more accessible and 'fancier' vehicle.[17] If one excludes so-called *auteur* comics, like Mayukh Chaudhuri's comic stories, genre-SF seems uninterested in producing innovations and introducing significant variations in the stories, characters and tropes of SF narratives. The following case study of 'hybrid' SF comics by Mayukh Chaudhuri and Narayan Debnath shows how the visual mode of the comic expands and enhances the capacity of genre-contamination by integrating some typical features of SF narrative into the adventure and detective/thriller story, all genres that are centered on different articulations of the notion of 'otherness'.

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[14] I am thankful to Dip Ghosh (Kalpabiswa webzine) for drawing my attention to other illustrators of science fiction comics, including Gautam Karmakar and Ujjwal Dhar, who have adapted English science fiction into Bengali comics. He also pointed out a comic story by Tushar Chakraborty where two Bengali sleuths are kidnapped by the people of Atlantis to help them against a powerful alien. Recently there is the trend of producing graphic novels on Prof. Śaṅku, Ghanādā, Sunil Ganguly's Nīl mānuṣ and Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay's adventure series (mail communication, 07.07.2018).

[15] The website comicbookindia.wordpress.com, part of the project based at Jadavpur University, provides examples of comics illustrated by Gautam Karmakar. Other titles and extracts from the comics are available on this website. *Ubhacar mānab* (The amphibian man) was Karmakar's comic adaptation of the Soviet writer Alexander Beliaev's eponymous novel (1928).

[16] I thank Prof. Abhijit Gupta (English Department, Jadavpur University) for having kindly 'disclosed' the huge cupboard in his office, full of dusty original editions of Bengali comics and children magazines allowing me to consult this immense material.

[17] These Bengali genre-SF comics, featuring aliens, robots, and interplanetary journeys, being primarily oriented to commercial market, are often published under the name of the illustrator, more well-known among the readership, while that of the storywriter — if different from the person of the illustrator — remains unspoken.

INCORPORATING SF IN ADVENTURE FICTION: MAYUKH CHAUDHURI

Falling under the category of juvenile literature, adventure stories enjoyed rising popularity in early twentieth century Bengal: they offered to the young reader the pleasure of transgressing the restricted boundaries of a disciplined and obedient childhood exploring the exciting possibilities of 'losing oneself' in the story and recuperating the sense of 'responsibility' and decision-making of the adult's world (Chatterjee 2012: 90).[18]

A master of action-adventure comics was Prasad Ray, who drew under the pen-name of Mayukh Chaudhuri. His favorite subjects were adventures in the wild, exotic lands, encounters with wild animals in the jungle, and episodes from ancient Indian history. Mayukh was known for his 'realistic drawings', overtly influenced by Western comics style and narrative, including graphic narratives realized on literary characters like Tarzan, Robin Hood and Mandrake. His oeuvre was inspired by the Italian explorer Attilio Gatti and his travels to Belgian Congo in pre-World War I Africa, a character that appeared also in *Chāṁder pāhārh* (The mountain of the moon, 1937), one of the most-loved adventure novels in Bengali literature (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: xvi).

Fig. 2: Suresh Biswas in *Baṅgadeśer raṅg* (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 36).

[18] Bani Basu too, in her *Bāṃlār śiśusāhitya*, makes this point regarding the theme of the *ajānā* (cf. Chatterjee 2012).

Fig. 3: The fight between Chandragupta and a Greek soldier
in *Chadmabeśī* (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 15).

Some of his most popular comic stories made use of famous Bengali characters from colonial history that had had a certain impact on popular culture, like Colonel Suresh Biswas, the legendary adventurer who left his hometown at 15 to become a circus tiger-tamer in Kent and a lieutenant in the Brazilian army (fig. 2). Often his stories are set in foreign lands, such as Africa, the American desert, or Brazil, and are often developed out of a juxtaposition between the cowardice of the *bideśī* (foreigner) and the courage, pride and strength of the Bengali, in a move to build a national Bengali character emancipated from colonial stereotypes of weakness and effeminacy. For example, in his comic story *Chadmabeśī* (Incognito, 1968) the anonymous inhabitant of Aryavarta, after showing courage during a fight with a Greek soldier (fig. 3), is taken to Alexander in order to reveal the path to Magadha, a still unconquered region in Aryavarta. Instead of joining the army, the anonymous protagonist, who will later reveal himself as Chandragupta, future Emperor of the Mauryan Empire, intimidates them into leaving Magadha with all the looted treasures. More common in Mayukh Chaudhuri's style are the stories based on wild animals from the African savanna and jungle; they are almost educational in nature and evoke documentaries of wild life. Unlike these, the comics here examined represent a narrative stream that is less typical of the author but more interesting for our understanding of genre-hybridity, for they display a different treatment of the classical genre of the adventure

story, here enriched by SF elements, as well as of the subject of strangeness and ‘otherness’, a common thread of these fantastic narratives.

The episodes *Smārak* (Memento, 1983) and *Yātrī* (The passenger, 1984) feature the ex-criminal Paresh Datta and the scientist Mr. Sen (whose real name cannot be revealed), inventor of a secret time machine (*samaẏ'yān yantra*). Paresh used to live on illegal businesses until he started working for Mr. Sen. Although he was jailed because of taking part in ‘antisocial’ activities, at the time the story unfolds he has become a police collaborator. As one would expect from the protagonist of an action-adventure series, Paresh is also very well versed in guns and always carries a revolver with him. He is known for smuggling rare objects to Europe, including wild animals’ skin, claws, and tusks.

Fig. 4: Paresh landing in the future through Mr. Sen’s travel machine (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 157)

These two narratives are entangled through the idea of time travel: while the first (Memento) takes place in the future, the second (The passenger) brings the protagonist back to ancient India. In the first episode *Smārak*, Paresh is offered money for accomplishing his ‘time expeditions’ on behalf of the mysterious scientist Mr. Sen who is collecting evidence of life in the future. The story begins with Paresh fighting to convince his friend Abhay, collector of ancient artefacts, that the precious animal’s claw was in fact stolen from a creature that lives in a far-away future, and not snatched from an animal in the Indian jungle as he believes. Through flashback mode, the reader follows Paresh in his journey to the future, when he ends up in a wild, vast and lonely

prehistoric-looking land (fig. 4). His goal is to bring back to the present evidence of life in the future in the form of the claw of an antique creature. The author plays with time through the visual disposition of the panels and the unfolding of the narrative, arranging the balloons in the typical cloud-like shape that suggests flashbacks. Only at the end of the story, the reader has 'proof' that the time travel has really happened and that the claw truly belongs to a creature from the future.

The reader is invited to take an active part in the unfolding of the story by looking at Paresh's deeds from the point of view of the surrounding characters. After returning the claw to Mr. Sen, he decides to travel again to the future to collect the head of the same creature that Abhay is willing to buy in exchange of a huge amount of money. However, once he has returned to the future land and encountered the dead creature, he discovers that the logics of science and biology have changed over time: the creature's dead body has in fact undergone an 'extraordinary' process of growth (fig. 5). He then realizes that he will not be able to carry such a heavy head in the time machine and prove to his friends that the claw really belongs to a creature from the future.

Fig. 5: Paresh seeing the giant body of the dead creature (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 159)

In this episode, the questions of the unknown, the other, and the terrific associated with mysterious lands and species are addressed through the repetition of words like *adbhut*, *āścarya* and *bhaẏaṅkar* (strange, wondrous and terrific) that characterize the foreign land of the future. Here Paresh does not

meet 'anything like what exists in our present': the encounter with the 'creature' (*jānoẏār*) from the future seems to echo the classic alien-encounter trope of classic SF, but the juxtaposition here denotes more the discovery of a sense of 'loss' at the vast loneliness experienced on the future earth. As opposed to the representation of the future as a land of scientific and technological progress, Paresh's future is painted as a prehistoric one, inhabited by ancient creatures and dominated by natural rules that are unknown to both present and futuristic science. The encounter with the 'other' is projected onto a future that is non-scientific, as opposed to the more familiar hyper-technological future of classic Western SF. In Mayukh's drawings, the representation of the future provides an alternative to stereotypical images of futuristic landscapes and encounters by figuring a 'an earth after one thousand years' (*hājār bachar parer pṛthibī*) that looks lost, primitive, and deserted to the eye of an urban Bengali *bhadralok*. One possibility of reading this prehistoric future shall therefore include a repositioning of the dialectics of colonizer-colonized that situates the Indian city *vis-à-vis* the village, the forest, and all that remained outside the boundaries of progress, modernity, and civilization in postcolonial India.

In the years following Partition and preceding the independence of Bangladesh, a different image of 'otherness' gradually came into being in juxtaposition to the ideal of the Bengali *bhadralok*, urban and educated. This is the opposition between *bhadralok* and *choṭalok*, *ghaṭī* and *bāṅgāl* [19] (cf. Ghosh 2013), the latter used for refugees coming from East Bengal. In addition, people from Pakistan, Muslims, immigrants, and terrorists came to embody the 'other' and the enemy that threatened the very existence of *bhadralok* society. We will see how this opposition between self and other – urban vs. rural, foreign vs. native – is articulated in all the comics under discussion.

[19] As opposed to the *bhadralok*, the Bengali gentry, the word *choṭalok* generally defines low-class people in Bengal, those who lack a 'proper' education. By extension, it can also denote a dishonest person. While *ghaṭi* refers to a Bengali person from West Bengal, *bāṅgāl* is a more derogatory term that defines a Bengali person coming from East Bengal, today's state of Bangladesh.

Fig. 6: Paresh and friends meeting the Greek soldier Pardicus (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 166).

In the time adventure narrated in *Yātrī*, Paresh is accompanied by two partners: Biman, a famous ex-boxer endowed with a tremendous physical strength, and Bhombal, a robot with human features, who protects Mr. Sen from unwanted visitors. This time, Paresh's task in exchange for money is to travel back to the year 327 BC in the heart of Aryavarta, at the time of Alexander the Great's expedition to India. Here they meet Pardicus (fig. 6), a Greek soldier escaping from Odeyus,[20] King of Ithaca, whose army is led by the legendary strong Hercules. At the sight of Pardicus, dressed in ancient Greek fashion, the passengers have the feeling that the travel machine has landed in ancient Greece instead of Aryavarta. The intertextual reference here shall be traced to the story told in *Chadmabeśī*, where the Greek soldier Pardicus had already made his appearance. Bhombal offers to protect Pardicus with his superhuman strength, facing Hercules' mythological power, who is tragically knocked down by a punch of the Bengali robot (fig. 7).[21] As already noted above, the Bengali protagonists are generally endowed with positive qualities, clever and smart like Paresh, or physically strong and protective like Bhombal. In the way it is portrayed here, the robot is reminiscent of the traditional characteristics associated with a wrestler, embodying that

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[20] The author could have here mis-spelled, or consciously played with, the name of Odysseus, the king of Ithaca from the epic poem the Odyssey.

[21] Here the friends ironically describe Bhombal's punch as one that 'not even Mohammad Ali was able to blow!' (167), creating a funny case of anachronism in the intertextual reference to the 1960s American boxer.

'national masculinity', amply discussed by scholars (cf. Alter 2011), that projected the fears and anxieties of war[22] onto a 'superhuman' defender of the homeland, rescuer of 'good' people and punisher of 'criminals'.

Fig. 7: The Bengali robot Bhombal knocks Hercules down (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 167).

This time, Paresh and his friends make use of the translating machine (*bhāṣāntarer yantra*) (fig. 8), another incredible invention made by Mr. Sen, which allows mutual communication with the ancient Greek soldiers. The translating machine, functioning as the *novum* of the story, facilitates the encounter with the 'other' (the soldier from ancient Greece): Paresh addresses him as 'friend' (*bandhu*) while the Bengali trio is characterized as the 'foreigners' (*bideśī*). The historical, linguistic and cultural distance that divides the Bengali modern trio from the ancient Greek soldier allows the inversion of the common dichotomy *deśī/bideśī* (local/foreign), erasing the configuration of the 'foreign' as the 'other', source of fear and trouble. Unlike the previous episode, where Paresh meets the 'horrific creature' (*bhaẏaṅkar jānoẏār*), in *Yātrī* the encounter with the 'other' is more friendly. Rather than evoking a sense of loss and incommunicability, the intervention of the 'translating machine' subverts this possibility in order to overcome the boundaries

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[22] During the 1960s and the early 1970s, India was involved in several armed conflicts with its neighboring countries: with China in 1962 and Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, during the liberation of East Pakistan/Bangladesh.

of cultural difference. The story ends with the trio coming back to the time machine hoping that Bhombal will drive them safely back to contemporary Calcutta.

Fig. 8: The visitors applying the 'translating machine' to their ears and throat to enable mutual understanding with the strangers (Gaṅgopādhyāẏ & Pāl 2015: 165).

LANGUAGE OF 'OTHERNESS' AND GENRE HYBRIDITY: NARAYAN DEBNATH'S ADVENTURE COMICS.

Mostly known for illustrating the funny stories of *Hāṁdā Bhōdā* and *Nanṭe Phanṭe*, Debnath became also a popular author and illustrator of adventure comics, including numerous types of narratives such as 'the thriller, the journey-adventure, the detective mystery, and science fiction'.[23] The two comics analyzed below represent two examples of Narayan Debnath's adventure comics: if the first one (*Ḍrāgoner thābā*) exemplifies the genre hybridity that

[23] For example, *Svapna nā satya* (Dream or truth, 1379 Beng. era); *Mṛta nagarir dānab debatā* (The demon-god of the dead town, 1380 Beng. era); *Duhsvapner deśe* (In the land of nightmares, 1382 Beng. era); *Andhakārer hātʼchāni* (The gesture of darkness, 1384 Beng. era); *Pretātmār pratiśodh* (The revenge of the ghost, 1385 Beng. era); *Āścarya mukhoś* (The extraordinary mask, 1386 Beng. era), and others (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: 340).

is typical of adventure fiction, blending elements from the SF, the adventure and the detective story, the second (*Ajānā deśe*) is more representative of genre-SF, displaying in text and image all traditional tropes of the genre, including alien encounter and the hunt for new planets. Besides illustrating the strategies of genre hybridity through the interaction of text and image, these two comics are especially representative of a language of 'otherness' and strangeness that reproduces the ambivalent feelings of fear and desire entailed in encountering the 'other'.

Race, hybridity and otherness are questions that have significantly informed the genre of SF. Narratives based on alien-encounters have inevitably introduced the question of self and other, exploring the selfhood from the vantage point of alterity. The alien, who can be a monster (*Frankenstein*'s creature), a doppelgänger (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), or an extraterrestrial on a far-away planet, embodies the enemy, that which stands against the self and mirrors different moments of fear – of Nazis, of flying saucers, of communists, of the 'different' in general (Castelli 2006). Jessica Langer explains that:

> […] the figure of the alien comes to signify all kinds of otherness, and the image of the far-away land, whether the undiscovered country or the imperial seat, comes to signify all kinds of diaspora and movement, in all directions. Their very power, their situation at the center of the colonial imagination as simultaneous desire and nightmare, is turned back on itself (2011: 4).

The bug-eyed alien and the far-away planet ripe for the taking are twin signifiers in science fiction. These signifiers are in fact the very same twin myths of colonialism. However, the 'others' of these Bengali comics — i.e. the horrific creature, the Greek soldiers, the alien species, the native — represent an extension of the traditional signifiers associated with the alien of science fiction narratives. In these Bengali comics, published more than two decades after the Partition, the different encounters with the 'other' show some variation from mainstream SF in the characterization of this face-to-face encounter, portraying a more optimistic view of the self-other relationship in a move to sublimate the fear and anxieties caused by a decade of war on the Indian borders.

Fig. 9: Star-Trek-looking Indian space team (Deb & Ghoṣ 2011: 316).

Fig. 10: Robot-looking aliens pointing at the Indian shuttle (Deb & Ghoṣ 2011: 314).

In Debnath's comic story *Ajānā deśe* (In an unknown land, 1969), for example, the narrative focuses on the exploration of the universe and peaceful alien encounters. The Indian space team, undeniably drawn in reference to the American TV series *Star Trek* (fig. 9), leaves earth with the aim of establishing good relationships (*bandhutva sthāpan*) with other planets in the universe. When the Indian astronauts spot a planet inhabited by a 'strange species' (*adbhut jāti*), they agree on greeting the new peoples (fig. 10). Through the help of a translating machine, not too different from the one imagined by Mayukh Chaudhuri in his time travel stories, the Indian team is sure of a friendly communication with the inhabitants of the unknown planet. However, due to a temporary breakdown of the translating machine (fig. 11), the Indian astronauts are unable to decipher the message of warning sent by the aliens about the 'terrifying' mist that protects their planet, capable of blowing up the space shuttle. As a last warning to keep the Indian space shuttle away from the danger of disintegration, the aliens are forced to attack it with missiles. In reaction to that, the impulsive Samir, captain of the space expedition, orders to fabricate a bomb and punish the obstinacy of the alien people. The only one who opposes Samir's plan of 'revenge' (*pratiśodh*) is the man referred to as 'the professor' by the other members of the expedition. Samir has already

left with his space shuttle to the new planet when the Indian team finally receives the message from the aliens correctly translated into Bengali. They understand it is too late for Captain Samir, for his shuttle has already reached the *kuẏāśā*, the mist that protects the planet, thus provoking the explosion of his shuttle. As soon as the translating machine starts working again, the team finally discovers that the missiles launched by the aliens were only meant to warn the Indian astronauts about the explosive mist.

Fig. 11: The translating machine (Deb & Ghoṣ 2011: 315).

Again, translation functions as a means to overcome linguistic and cultural boundaries and to promote friendship instead of enmity among peoples. Moreover, the didactic intention of this comic story is evident in the professor's concluding words affirming that they 'would be finished without patience and forbearance' (*dhairya ār sahiṣṇutā*), offering the young reader a morale that privileges tolerance and self-control instead of impulsiveness and obstinacy. In the context of the encounter with the alien species, establishing a friendly relationship (*bandhutva sthāpan*) is therefore seen as more desirable and advantageous than attacking (*ākramaṇ karā*) the unknown 'others'.

Let us now turn to an episode of Narayan Debnath's *Kaushik adventures* to have a closer look at how SF elements are weaved into the detective-adventure story and how the trope of 'otherness' is addressed in this comic. Kaushik Ray, protagonist of Narayan Debnath's series *Kauśiker abhiyān* (Kaushik's adventures),[24] embodies the 'hero' of Bengali detective fiction: he is a secret spy of the Indian government who is good at martial arts and boxing. Kaushik's right bionic-arm shoots bullets, intoxicating gas and laser. The nails of his bionic hand can be used as a knife and, attached to it (fig. 12), there is a hidden transmitter (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: 242). A reader familiar with Bengali cinema and popular culture can easily identify the direct influence of characters like Satyajit Ray's Pheludā and Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's Byomˈkeś Baksī, although there is an element of action in Kaushik that is missing in more traditional detective figures, making Kaushik a perfect Bengali counterpart of the British spy James Bond.

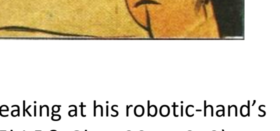

Fig. 12 Kaushik speaking at his robotic-hand's transmitter (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: 243)

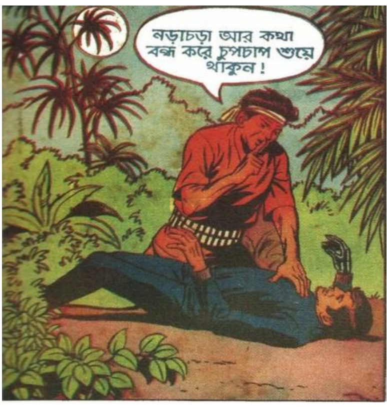

Fig. 13: Kaushik meets the local inhabitant (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: 247).

[24] From 1975 the magazine *Śukˈtārā* started to publish episodes of Kaushik's adventures: *Sarparājer dbīp* (The island of the snake king, 1975); *Ḍrāgoner thābā* (The dragon's claw, 1385 Beng. era); *Bhaẏaṅkarer mukhomukhi* (Face to face with terror, 1387 Beng. era); *Ajānā dbīper bibhīṣikā* (The horror of the unknown island, 1390 Beng. era); *Mṛtyudūter kālochāẏā* (Death's black shadow, 1392 Beng. era); *Bhayaṅkar abhiyān* (Dreadful adventure, 1398 Beng. era); *Sbarnakhānir antarāle* (In the heart of the golden mine, 1399 Beng. era) and more (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: 354). One can note the recurrence of tropes associated with feelings of terror, thrill, excitement, and with the search for the unknown in all fiction labelled as 'adventure'.

In 1979's *Ḍrāgoner thābā* (The dragon's claw), Kaushik travels in the middle of the ocean to reach an archipelago of 'undiscovered' islands (*ajānā dbīp*) that are periodically submerged by water during high tide and then reappear on the surface when the waves withdraw again. One of these islands, known as the 'Island of the dragon', is the site where a group of strangers, led by a man in a hood, have recently built an outpost and fabricated prehistoric reptiles to keep any unwanted visitor away from the island. When Kaushik reaches the place, he first meets a local inhabitant of the island (*adhibāsī*) (fig. 13) who warns him against a bunch of 'foreign villains' (*bhinˈdeśī durbṛtterā*) having illegally occupied the island and built an outpost on the top of the hill, regardless of the will of the local people. The configuration of the 'foreign' as evil and the 'locals' as the ones to be rescued seem to reproduce the 'otherness' involved in the colonial encounter between colonized and colonizer. However, the entertaining logic of the graphic narrative sublimates this encounter through the intervention and assistance of Kaushik, himself a 'stranger' to the native people of the island. Kaushik is, in fact, represented as the smart urban Bengali hero coming to rescue the helpless locals under threat, whose main representative is drawn in the stereotypical imagination of a *bāṅgāl* (East Bengali), or a peasant from a rural area of Bengal outside the civilized fringes of the city of Calcutta.

Fig. 14: Kaushik entering the scene with a high kick to rescue his friend (Lāhirī & Ghoṣ 2011: 259)

After having rescued his *adhibāsī* friend from Mr. Dragon's fellows (fig. 14) and fought with the gigantic reptiles, Kaushik eventually faces Mr. Dragon in

a face-to-face fight, managing to knock him down and to blow up the illegal outpost surrounded by the prehistoric monsters.

If one considers the historical context when these comic stories were published (1969; 1979), few years after the Indian armed conflicts with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965 and 1971),[25] one has the feeling that these graphic narratives project the crisis triggered by those events on a metahistorical level. Even the language used in both comics mirrors a state of conflict and the rhetoric of war. Attack, revenge, bombing, explosion, punishment, and obstinacy are all signifiers of the state of war that India was experiencing in those years. Moreover, words like native, foreign, villain, and stranger represent the various facets constituting the 'other' in post-independence West Bengal. The quasi-mythical reality depicted in the comic story then offers a playful ground that allows to give cultural coherence to the loss of peace, unity and coexistence that were disrupted during Nehru and Indira Gandhi's rule, reactivating the trauma of Partition. Instead of picturing the 'other' as the enemy, as some comics have already shown, here Debnath imagines the aliens as a peaceful species that seeks to warn and protect the foreign visitors. This narrative could be seen as countering global narratives about the Cold War years — i.e. American superhero comics, *The twilight zone* movie series — that pictured aliens as evil invaders, representing the threat of totalitarianism, other than nurturing the paranoia of nuclear bombings.

Ajānā deśe is representative in terms of style and themes of genre SF, retaining all the traditional tropes of global market-oriented SF, while it signals an interesting shift from Narayan Debnath's mainstream comics that generally represent the 'other' as a threat to be vanquished. On the other hand, the message of peaceful warning sent by the alien people on the new planet, as well as the *adhibāsī*'s friendship with the Calcutta *bhadralok*, constitute metonymic ways to de-potentiate the threat of 'otherness' experienced in the historical reality of 1970s South Asia.

[25] As already explained in footnote 22.

CONCLUSIONS

Reading Bengali SF comics as 'modes' rather than 'genres' has disclosed multiple possibilities of interpretation. As opposed to seeing these comics as belonging to closed generic categories, such as 'adventure', 'detective' or 'science fiction', the notion of 'mode', on the contrary, permits to enrich the narrative with other elements, including the 'scientific', enhancing the 'extraordinariness' of the narrative and the entertainment of the readership. Strategies of blending, contamination, and hybridization are especially represented by the recurrence of the trope and language of 'otherness' as this is mirrored in the linguistic choices of these Bengali graphic narratives, addressing questions about the exploration of the unknown, the feeling of wonder and terror at the unfamiliar, and the encounter with the 'other'. Meanings and significations of words denoting strangeness and 'otherness' (i.e. *ajānā*, *adbhut*, *bideśī*, *āgantuk*, etc.) encompass feelings related to the sphere of the wondrous, the uncanny, and the dreadful. The places and the inhabitants encountered during Paresh's time travels are described as *bhaẏaṅkar* or *baẏābaha* (terrifying); exploring a new planet is *romāñcakar* (a mixture of thrilling and terrific); crossing a boundary is *bipajjanak* (dangerous) while what is familiar is denoted as *nirāpad* (safe, without dangers). Fear, thrill and terror about the unknown are dominant tropes of the 'fantastic', always entailing the physical and metaphorical exploration of the unknown.
In this sense, Bengali SF does not need to be conceptualized only within the boundaries of the 'scientific', nor to be explained in terms of being a subversive response to the universality of Western science: these questions are mostly eschewed in the comics under discussion. What emerges, by contrast, from these Bengali comics, is that the blending of the SF element — i.e. Paresh's time travels, translating machines, Kaushik's bionic hand, and the Indian space expedition and alien encounter — with other typical features of the adventure, the thriller, and the detective narrative functions as a way to enhance the extraordinariness of the story aiming at the entertainment of the readership. Moreover, such blending and contamination among 'fantastic' narratives highlight the multiple semantic potentials of some tropes that are explored in these Bengali comics. For instance, one can read them — i.e. the future imagined as a prehistoric land, the sense of loss and unfamiliarity,

the dichotomy between self and other, foreign and native — as part of a shared imaginary of speculative fiction or for their historical and sociopolitical meaning in the context of West Bengal, as I have attempted to show in this paper. Finally, the notion of 'mode' can become a helpful heuristic tool as an alternative to 'genre' in that it helps drawing attention to the multiple interpretative layers that are embedded in the format of the comic, opening new possibilities of reading genre hybridity, trope and narrative contamination as constitutive of the 'mode' of these science fiction comics.

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The Itineraries of a Medium: Bengali Comics, and New Ways of Reading.

Sourav Chatterjee

Abstract: When the nineteenth-century social reformers with their prescribed practices and trenchant pulpiteering failed to revive the virility of bootlick and sycophant Bengali *bābu*s (the genteel class), political cartoonists pompously rose to intercede in the dispute. Political cartoonists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, like Prannath Datta (1840-1886), Gaganendranath Tagore (1867-1938), and Binoy Basu (1895-1959) realized that *ākhˈṛā*s or gymnasiums, wrestling, body-building, and martial arts were inadequate to trigger a seismic rearrangement in the disposition of the English-educated debauched and profligate *bābu*s because the prevalent decadence, corruption, and colonial complicity had already hindered the outcome of such social reforms in the first place. Political cartoonists in late colonial Bengal, therefore, assumed the public role of stripping the *bābu*s of their accoutrements of Western modernity with the artistic deployment of satire and caricature. This lecherous, imitative, pretentious, anglophile *bābu* became a cultural stereotype in late colonial Bengal that allowed it to metastasize into a fecund trope of caricature, parody, and literary imagination.

It was around this time that with the publication of one of the first Bengali cartoon magazines like *Harˈbolā bhā̃ṛ* (1873, Fig. 1) and *Basantak* (1874, Fig. 2)[1], the meaning of the word "cartoon" was redefined. The word "cartoon"

[1] Although *Harˈbolā bhā̃ṛ* and *Basantak* are claimed as the first cartoon magazines in Bengal, they are not the first illustrated Bengali books. A Brahmin man called Baburam was the first Indian to install a printing press in Calcutta in 1807 in Kidderpore, but most importantly it was in 1816 that the first illustrated Bengali book – Bharatchandra Ray's *Annadāmaṃgal* with eight woodcut and metal engraving illustrations – was published by Gangakishore Bhattacharya, and printed by Ferris and Company. Kashinath Mistri's illustrations in Joyce's *Dialogues on mechanics and anatomy* are well documented in The School Book Society's Annual Report for 1818-1819. John Lawson was also well known for his illustrations of animals in the first illustrated monthly periodical *Paśbabali (The animals)* published in 1822. Ramchandra Vidyalankar's *Gourī bilās* published in 1824 also had six illustrations. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Calcutta became a fecund site for the display and sale of British pictures, with the first art exhibition organized by the British Club taking place in the city in 1831. Sukumar Sen mentions with awe the seventy-two full page illustrations by Ramdhan Swarnakar in Paranchand Kapur's *Hariharˈmaṃgal* published in 1830. Sen also suggests that illustrations in the Battala books appeared after 1831, while William Archer dates them from 1850 onwards. The Battala book trade stormed the colonial market with a varied range of literature that

attained a new economy of its own as it was no longer considered to be a preparatory drawing (Horn 1980: 15-34 *passim*) but rather a finished product – a satirical one – that now employed innuendo, wit, pretension, bathos, and irony to parody contemporary manners and social groups.

Fig. 1: Cover picture of Harˈbolā bhā̃ṛ (Vol. 1, 1873)

ranged from farces, erotica, mysteries, history, etc. printed onto cheap flimsy papers from woodcuts, and sold at a low price. These Battala prints competed in the market against the already existing Kalighat paintings. Purnendu Pattrea points out that with the mass scale circulation of almanacs (*pañjīkā*) especially after the publication of Kr̥ṣṇacandra Karmakarī's *Natun pañjīkā* (*New almanac*) published by Sanders and Jones Printing Press in 1847 that woodcut prints found its new target audience – the middleclass of Calcutta. The Calcutta School of Industrial Art established in 1854, which became Calcutta School of Art in 1864, and later became Government College of Art & Craft in 1951 promoted engraving and woodcuts as special branches of training. See: Paul 1983; Śrīpāntha 1996; Gupta and Chakravorty (eds.) 2004; Basu and Māmun (eds.) 2005; Ghosh 2006; Bhadra 2011; Pāl 2013; Śrīpāntha 2015; Sen 2015; Pāl 2018.

Fig. 2: Cover picture of *Basantak* (Vol.1, 1874)

The overtly satirical drawings published in these magazines in the form of social and political cartoons ridiculed individuals, exposed human follies, parodied foibles of the society, and criticized colonial politics. Political cartoons emptied its arsenal of *byājastuti* (mock-praise), *bakrokti* (oblique expression), *upahās* (ridicule), and *śleṣ* (irony) – all the essential instruments of early Bengali satire of Sanskrit origins (Basu 2013: 126) – to deploy an attack against the landed gentry, middle class *bābu*s, British officials, and social magnates. The excoriation of the empire's 'civilizing mission' through caricatures and a self-critical stance established the cartoonists as the 'alter-ego' of the Westernized *babu*. The cartoonists of *Har'bolā bhā̃ṛ* and *Basantak* sought to envision a social change through their caricature and satire, but

nonetheless faded out of the public discourse as people failed to grasp the seriousness of the medium and its humor.

The clown or jester-like (*bidūsak*) narratorial figure in *Harˈbolā bhā̃ṛ* and *Basantak* was modeled after the cultivated iconoclast – Mr. Punch – of the nineteenth-century English satirical periodical called *Punch, or the London Charivari*.[2] The all-seeing omniscient narrators of *Harˈbolā bhā̃ṛ* and *Basantak* employ burlesque to interlace their juxtaposed visual-verbal invectives directed against the colonial administration. The structural importance of the visual-verbal caricatures in these periodicals is based on the effective use of burlesque, i.e., the severe treatment of a frivolous subject matter and vice-versa, and a witty, informal, amusing and tolerant revelation of foibles through Horatian satire, which is opposed to the formal, vitriolic and caustic Juvenal satire that attacks vices through contempt and indignation. The vein of the Horatian satire runs throughout nineteenth century Bengali self-ironical tradition in the celebrated works of Pyrichand Mitra's *Ālāler gharer dulāl* (*The spoilt brat of a wealthy man*, 1857), and Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutom pyā̃cār nakˈṣā* (*The observant owl*, 1862). Although the periodicals have abstained from all sorts of ribaldry and bawdy indecency, the zaniness produced in the aftermath of the tumescence and de-tumescence of their subject matter through literary wit and inflated and deflated bathos remained a stable trope unrivalled by any other visual medium in nineteenth-century Bengal.

Seventy years after *Harˈbolā bhā̃ṛ* and *Basantak*, West Bengal has braved tumultuous times that in retrospect can now be rightly called chaotic. The Bengal Famine (1943), the Great Calcutta Killings (1946), the Sino-Indian War (1962), the death of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister (1964), the

[2] *Le Charivari* founded by Chales Philipon (illustrated by Honore Daumier) was an illustrated magazine that was published in Paris from 1832 to 1937. It published political cartoons, caricatures and reviews. In 1841, Ebenezer Landells and Henry Mayhew employed *Le Charivari* as a model to establish their Punch magazine that was subtitled, *The London Charivari*. *Punch*'s reception in India occurred with the publication of *The Indian Charivari* or *The Indian Punch* in 1872 that featured the Indian version of Richard Doyle's *Punch* cover. *Delhi Sketchbook* was the first Punch-inspired magazine, which the newspaper *The Englishman* launched in 1850. After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 the magazine was re-launched as *The Indian Punch* which ended in 1862. It was against the racial caricatures of the Indians in *The Indian Charivari* that illustrated Bengali periodicals like *Harˈbolā bhā̃ṛ* (1873) and *Basantak* (1874) endeavored to claim cultural superiority and subvert colonial policies through their caricatures.

Indo-Pak War (1965), the Naxalbari Uprising or Naxalite Movement (1967), the Bangladesh War of Liberation (1971), and the Emergency or the notorious suppression of and abuse of civil rights and democratic processes by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1975-77) were some of the vital events that marked the transition from the decadent British-ruled colonial Bengal to the rebellious and fractured post-Independence West Bengal. The socio-political history of Bengal and its reception in contemporary literature till the present day is a long and chaotic one. The visual or graphic literature in the form of Bengali political cartoons and comic strips that was produced in the wake of this chaos remained unacknowledged amid the hegemony of other literary genres and its subsequent forms like novel, poetry, drama, and essay.

Political cartoons and comics of these stormy decades abound with mythical recreations and endless insurrections. In the 1960s, cartoons fully evolved into comics. The medium of a single-page political/social/educational cartoon spatially expanded and stylistically modified itself to accommodate speech-bubbles, panels, and gutters. One of the first practitioners of comic art was Narayan Debnath (born 1926). Debnath published India's first comic-strip superhero, *Bā̃ṭul di Greṭ,* in the May-June, 1965 edition of the *Śukˡtārā* magazine. The *Bā̃ṭul* strips redefined the medium of Bengali comics in the 1960s. *Bā̃ṭul* strips are treated as a metonymy for analysis here, i.e., it is a part which represents the whole of Bengali comics corpus from the 1960s onward. It created an artistic precedent for everything that followed after its publication. The *Bā̃ṭul* comic strips pose enormous complications for a comics scholar, firstly, because Narayan Debnath illustrated some roughly three hundred *Bā̃ṭul* strips over the course of fifty-two years. Secondly, there are uncanny similarities with Dudley W. Watkins' *Desperate Dan* (1937) that might hold answers to the question of whether a distinct Bengali comics theory is at all required or not to fully fathom the itineraries of this medium (Fig. 3). And thirdly, although the strips are interconnected thematically they do not follow a continuous narrative. A reader can approach the *Bā̃ṭul* strips regardless of its chronology and can freely gallop back and forth on its publication timeline without the risk of losing the essence of the texts.

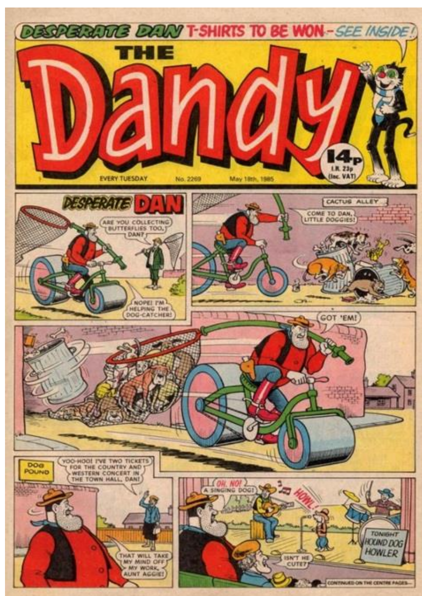

Fig. 3: Similarity between Desperate Dan and Bā̃ṭul di Greṭ

No matter in what sequence one chooses to read these comics, one's understanding of the figure of the superhero within the matrix of culture and language of West Bengal will always remain stable and holistic. This discontinuous and fragmentary nature of the *Bā̃ṭul* corpus makes it more approachable for analysis, unlike in the case of the DC or Marvel Comics, where one is compelled to locate the origin story of the superheroes to find clues about some secret messages, hidden features, and the ruptures in the storyline or narrative process. The origin story is an initial background story or a "bedrock account" (Hatfield, Heer and Worcester 2013: 3) of the events from which the figure of the superhero emanates who is then eventually set apart from the rest of humanity. Origin stories are recurring tropes within the narrative that constantly act as organizing principles to drive and shape the singular nature of the superhero. It is the event from which the entire narrative springs. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester explicate that (Hatfield, Heer and Worcester 2013: 3): to read origin stories about destroyed worlds, murdered parents, genetic mutations, and mysterious power-giving wizards is to realize the degree to which the superhero genre is about transformation, about identity, about difference, and about the tension between psychological rigidity and a flexible and fluid sense of human nature.

Bā̃ṭul being West Bengal's first superhero has regrettably no origin story to narrate, which makes him somewhat dissimilar from his Western counterparts, and too aberrant for the Western theoretical frameworks to accommodate.

In North America and Europe, the hegemony of the dominant academic attitudes toward the already existing literary genres and other mediums of mass entertainment fomented a plague of stigmas that rendered mass-produced products like comics aberrant and harmful (Lopes 2006: 387-414). Comic book theorist Will Eisner recollected that comic book artists were once regarded, socially and professionally, as what the German called *Untermensch*, an inferior person or a subhuman (Groth and Fiore 1988: 16). This stigmatization of popular cultural forms was created by the labeling process that vehemently intervened as a social construction (Lopes 2006: 393). But unlike the problematic comics culture in North America or Europe, its medium, practitioners, and fans were never completely stigmatized or vilified by critics or educators in West Bengal. In the 1960s, when comic book illustrators like Narayan Debnath, Kafi Khan (Pratul Chandra Lahiri / P.C.L. / Piciel), Mayukh Chowdhury, Shailesh Pal, Pratul Bandhopadhyay, Tushar Chatterjee, Balaibandhu Roy and others were perfecting the art form amid the political tumult of the times, they were branded as "bina poishar artists" [*binā paẏˈsār ārṭisṭ*s] (Chakravorty 2012) – penniless artists – due to the lack of financial prospect that engulfed the area. It was only the status accorded to them as artists that saved them from this kind of stigmatization seen in Europe and the United States, as most of them were readily hired for their skills in Bengali magazines like *Nabakallol*, *Śukˈtārā* and others. It was only in the late 1960s[3] that the birth of the comic book fan culture (as a subculture) is witnessed in West Bengal. These artists found a community of target audiences that validated their work as worthy of attention. This community of "sympathetic others" (Lopes 2006: 391) had a significant impact that spawned an unprecedented amount of comic strips on public demand in the successive decades.

[3] In 1969, *Bā̃ṭul di Greṭ* was nominated as the topic/theme for '*Kākali Basu smr̥iti sāhitya pratiyogitā'* [Kakoli Basu memorial writing contest] that was advertised in *Śukˈtārā* magazine. Bengali comics enthusiast and researcher, Kaushik Majumdar was confounded to see how quickly *Bā̃ṭul*'s fame escalated within the fourth year of its publication. See: Majumˈdār 2013: xi.

Ian Gordon records in his book *Comic strips and consumer culture: 1890-1945* (1998) that comic strips were published in the newspaper because their appeal to the target audience led to higher sales, and not because "literary-minded people with community based salons requested their publication" (1998: 43). Gordon also writes that the "purchasers did not directly consume comic strips, the strips established their characters as commodities. The popularity of comic strip characters, and the art form as a whole suggested broader commercial opportunities to a number of entrepreneurs involved in their production" (43).

Nonetheless, it was Mayukh Chowdhury's contention that in Calcutta – "readers understand comics, but not the publishers"[4] (Caudhurī 2016: vii). Chowdhury asserts that comics demand adventurous stories and "action-packed drama" throbbing with suspense (Caudhurī 2016: vii).

Based on his scrupulous nature of composing graphic narratives and an ardent fondness for American comics like *Tarzan*, *Hercules*, *Flash Gordon*, *Rip Kirby* and others, he gave a brief outline of three key features which every Bengali comics illustrator must possess to become commercially successful. Firstly, the ability to create a meticulous narrative; secondly, the artistic skill to proceed from one action to another through astounding shot divisions; and thirdly, a masterful execution of drawings with an impeccable knowledge of spellings (Caudhurī 2016: vii). Debnath is exempted from Mayukh Chowdhury's adopt-adapt-adept guidelines because he had already mastered these tenets even before they were formulated.

Moreover, Mayukh Chowdhury and Narayan Debnath had familiar sources of reference like *Rip Kirby*, *Tarzan*, and *Batman*, *Hercules,* etc. In the 1960s, when the Bengali author Dr. Samarendranath Panda (a.k.a. Sri Swapan Kumar) started writing serialized crime stories, they were accompanied by Debnath's mesmerizing black and white sketches on the back cover, which eventually achieved public fame in the decades to come. The protagonists of Sri Swapan Kumar's crime series – Detective Dipak Chatterjee [Dīpak Cyāṭārjī] and his assistant Ratanˈlāl, as well as the antagonists – Bājˈpākhi (Hawk), Kālō Nekˈṛe (Black Wolf) and Dragon were equally celebrated among the readers. Bājˈpākhi was illustrated in the image of Batman, Kālō Nekˈṛe in the likeness of Phantom, and Dragon in the likeness of Mandrake. For detailed and meticulous

[4] Bengali original: *pāṭhakˈrā kamik·s bojhen, kintu bojhen nā prakāśakˈrā.*

illustrations of the pistols, Narayan Debnath referred to his much loved John Prentice’s *Rip Kirby* comic strips (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) (Gaṛāi and Ghoṣ 2013: 431).

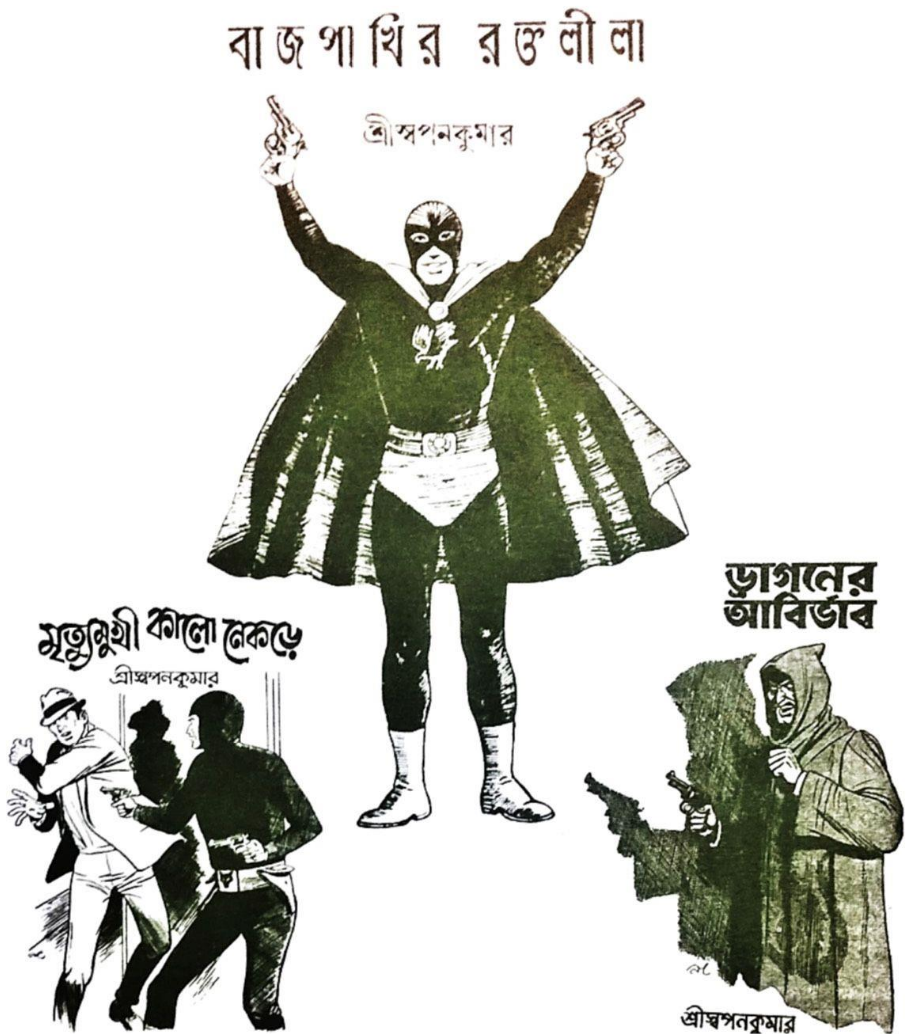

Fig. 4: Bājˈpākhi, Kālō Nēkˈṛē and Dragon

PRACTICING THE ART IN WEST BENGAL

The realistic nature of Debnath's comics is derived from its simplified illustrations. Scott McCloud said that cartooning is a form of "amplification through simplification" (McCloud 1994: 30). When an image is stripped to its essential meaning that meaning is amplified better than any realistic art. Here, before we proceed any further, it is necessary to outline the basic differences between cartoons and comics. Observations on the form of comics are varied, eclectic and contestable[5] and for a better understanding, I have resorted to the most widely circulated and readily comprehensible ideas regarding the medium. Scott McCloud's analysis of the form of comics[6] in *Understanding comics: The invisible art*, is considered to be essentially broad, yet provisional for critics and practitioners. He defined comics as: "[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 1994: 9).

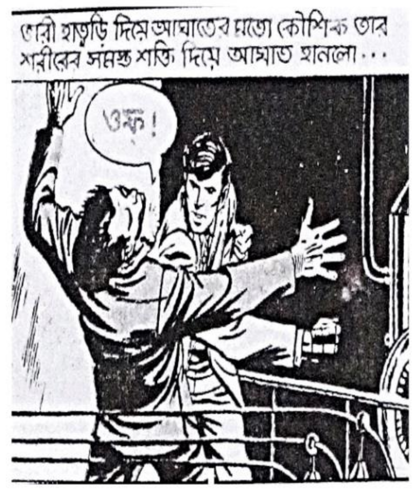

Fig. 5: John Prentice's Rip Kirby, and Narayan Debnath's Kauśik Rāẏ in Sarparājyer dbipe (The island of the Serpent King)

[5] For the various definitions of the comics form, see: Eisner1985: 8; Groensteen 2007: 21-22; Gordon 1998: 7-11; Hayman and Pratt's *pictorial narrative* in 2005: 423; Meskin 2007: 369-379; Chute 2008: 452; Pratt 2009: 107-117; Cook's *mereological pictoral thesis* in 2011: 285-296.

[6] McCloud writes that comics is "plural in form, used with a singular verb", 1994: 9.

The cartoon form here differs from the comics form in a way that cartoons have single-panel images, while comics unfolds over multiple frames and deviates from the regular interval of space (Chute 2008: 454).[7] Moreover, the gutter – the blank space between the panels of illustration – that "plays host to much of the magic and mystery" (McCloud 1994: 66) at the heart of the comics is "the only element of comics that is not duplicated in any other medium" (McCloud 1993: 3-16). The 'closure' or our mental process that bridges the spatio-temporal incompleteness of the diegesis in the 'gutter' allows readers to participate in the completion of the narrative. Scott McCloud describes 'closure' as the everyday process of "observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (McCloud 1994: 63). He argues, "[i]f visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar. And since our definition of comics hinges on the arrangement of elements, then, in a very real sense, comics is closure" (McCloud 1994: 67).[8] Moreover, this "hybrid word-and-image" comics form does not coalesce the visual and the verbal, neither does it use one to illustrate the other, it rather presents the two "nonsynchronously" (Chute 2008: 453).

Illustrators and editors of comic books in Bengal have defined comics and graphic narratives as stories in picture and picture stories respectively (Gaṃgopādhyāẏ 2015: 3). In the light of the extremely fecund comics scholarship in the Western academia, this minimalist definition of Bengali comics is inadequate for a critical venture. The delineations of Bengali comics are embedded in a completely different cultural matrix. South Asian comic book theorists are insouciant to consider Indian comics as anything but "variations on the master narrative" from the West, which as a result, further relegates this genre to a position of marginality in West Bengal (Chakrabarty 2000: 27). To analyze the form of comics for a postcolonial critic in total ignorance of the Western theoretical frameworks and their conceptual paradigms is to

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[7] Kafi Khan (1900-75) was the master of drawing gag cartoons that were heavily influenced by the political cartoons and caricatures of the cartoonist David Low. Gag cartoons are single-panel drawing with verbal captions beneath. Gaṃgopādhyāẏ 2012: 7.

[8] Henry John Pratt says Scott McCloud's choice of the word 'closure' is "unfortunate", as the term has been used to refer to the resolution of narrative tension for a long time beside its usage in epistemology. Pratt is not involving in a semasiological study of the term, but is rather delineating that other words like 'suture' from film theory (to sew a film together from various elements) can also be used to understand this concept. Pratt coins the terms "soldering" and "bridging", but decides not to use in the light of the prominence of McCloud's 'closure'. See: Pratt 2009: 111.

provide an incomplete and an "outdated" project, which would further smear the credibility of the work (Chakrabarty 2000: 28).The time has not yet come to "return the gaze" (Chakrabarty 2000: 29), so this article must endure the rites of passage and be content with the borrowed theories from the Western comics historiography. The form of the Bengali comics cannot define themselves; they must be defined. And in the quest for a definition, one is compelled to go back to its Western precedents.

Fredric Wertham, a New York psychiatrist in his book, *Seduction of the innocent,* published in 1954, had already anticipated the negative influences of comic books on children. Wertham in his book unabashedly castigated the entire enterprise of comic strips and comic books for their publication for mass consumption where *Superman* and *Donald Duck* were no less than "adult-oriented horror and crime comic books" (Gordon 1998: 2). Wertham's virulence toward the medium of comics was apprehended as a threatened reaction to a new form of mass culture that was beyond the jurisdiction of the cultural elites (Gordon 1998: 2). In the United States, the academic reciprocation towards the comics culture was a hostile one, while in West Bengal it was that of indifference. Bengali comics of the second half of the twentieth century, according to the masses, politicians or intellectuals, did not even possess a destabilizing potential toward the socio-political framework. Bengali comics posed no threats and had no status except light-hearted entertainment. It is one of the primary reasons why comics scholarship in West Bengal even after almost eighty years of production and circulation of Bengali comics is still suffering from a dearth of serious academic research.

With the publication of the first critical book on the great comic book heroes in the 1960s (Jules Feiffer's *The great comic book heroes*, 1965), along with other secondary materials, there emerged a widespread minimalist notion of the superhero comics as necessarily "formulaic, masculinist, melodramatic, and morally reductive" (Hatfield, Heer and Worcester 2013: xiii). The celebration of the imagery of the American superhero, rather than its analysis, became a major drawback for the magical yet marginal position of the superhero comics in contemporary popular culture.

Fig. 6: John Buscema's Hercules #1006, July 1959 (left) and Mayukh Chowdhury's Yātrī (The traveller) (right)

It is beyond doubt that Narayan Debnath and Mayukh Chowdhury were equally influenced by the Golden (1930-1950), Silver (1956-70) and Bronze Age of American Comic Books (1970-85). They strongly inculcated, appropriated and modified these formulae to forge their narratives and characters. Mayukh Chowdhury's list of influential comics is mentioned in his 1996 article, "When comics tell stories!"[9], which includes Alex Raymond and John Prentice's *Rip Kirby,* Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon*, Neal Adams' *Green Lantern*, John Buscema's *Conan the Barbarian* and *Hercules*, Lee Falk's *The Phantom,* and *Tarzan* by Burne Hogarth (the person whom he hailed as the "Michelangelo of the comic world") (Caudhurī 2016: x) (Fig. 6).

Narayan Debnath and Mayukh Chowdhury were aware of the dismissive tags that were attached to the medium, but they threw down their gauntlets to define the purpose, idiosyncrasy and objectives of action and adventure comics in West Bengal. Narayan Debnath through his *Bā̃ṭul, Indrajit Rāẏ,* and *Kauśik Rāẏ*, and Mayukh Chowdhury through his *Rabinˡhuḍ (Robin Hood)* series, *Agantuk (The stranger)*, *Andha Mākōṛsā (The blind spider)* and

[9] Bengali original: *Kamikˡs yakhan galpa bale.*

Rāmˡdhanur sandhāne (In search of the bow of Ram) (Fig. 7.1 – Fig. 7.4) retaliated against the monolithic ideas of the superhero comics genre as "an adolescent male power fantasy" (Hatfield, Heer and Worcester 2013: xiii) that were considered incapable of expressing thought-provoking visions and accused of being conformist and juvenile. [10]

[10] It is also interesting to note that this Bengali comics tradition also invokes the underlying historical arc of physical culture that was prevalent from the mid-nineteenth century onward. John Rosselli, in his essay "The self-image of effeteness: physical education and nationalism in nineteenth-century Bengal", deftly traces the rise of physical culture in Bengal from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1930s when Bengalis strove to ameliorate the detrimental fabrication of their imposed degeneracy, i.e. effeteness, through the pursuit of physical culture. In order to overcome the undesirable state of their humiliation they sought remedy in physical culture and martial art. The members of the Tagore family and their allies in the Ādi (Original) Brāhma Samāj launched the first response against the colonial stereotype of Bengali effeteness. In 1866, Rajnarayan Basu's prospectus of a *Nationality Promotion Society* mandated the revival of "the national gymnastic exercises" first among the society's tasks, followed by the publication of tracts in Bengali that illustriously offered instances of "the military prowess of the ancient Bengalis", and the reform of the Bengali diet. In the following year (1867), members of the Tagore connection launched the Hindu Mela (Fair), an annual festival in Calcutta which exhibited the display of handicrafts as well as cultural and sporting events. It was termed as the "National Gathering" by its promoters. The Hindu Mela under its chief organizer Nabagopal Mitra made much of gymnastics, wrestling and other traditional sports. In 1868, Nabagopal Mitra established a gymnastic school from which a well-known though short-lived National School was later developed. Within a few years, he had trained and dispatched several physical education teachers, and founded a number of *ākhˡṛā*s. In 1876, Bipin Chandra Pal also founded a secret society to promote physical culture and train all adults in handling weapons. Projit Bihari Mukharji also explicates in his book *Nationalizing the body: the medical market, print and daktari medicine* that in the early twentieth-century Bengal, *ḍāktārī* authors wrote zealously about the role of *byām* (exercise) in the cultivation of the body as well as in the prevention of diseases. Narayan Debnath's characters seem to react to a caveat issued by Dr. Kulachandra Guha in 1910: "We need to attend to the cultivation of the body [*byām*] with as much urgency as we do these days to our diet [*āhār*]—possibly even more urgently—this has become our solemn duty now, or else, our nation [*jāti*] shall soon fall prey to a variety of Contagious Diseases and disappear from the face of this earth" (2009: 119). The definition of *byām* expanded much beyond the realm of physical exercise to incorporate *mānasik byām* (mental exercises) that aimed at the rejuvenation of *bibek* (conscience), *buddhi* (intellect), *smr̥iti* (memory) and *kalpanā* (imagination). See: Chowdhury-Sengupta 1995; Sinha 1995; Dasgupta and Baker (eds.) 2013; Chatterjee (ed.) 2013; Armstrong 2018.

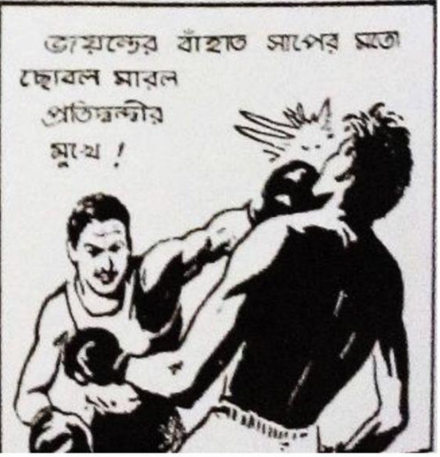

Fig. 7.1: Āgantuk

Fig. 7.2: Rāmˈdhanur sandhāne

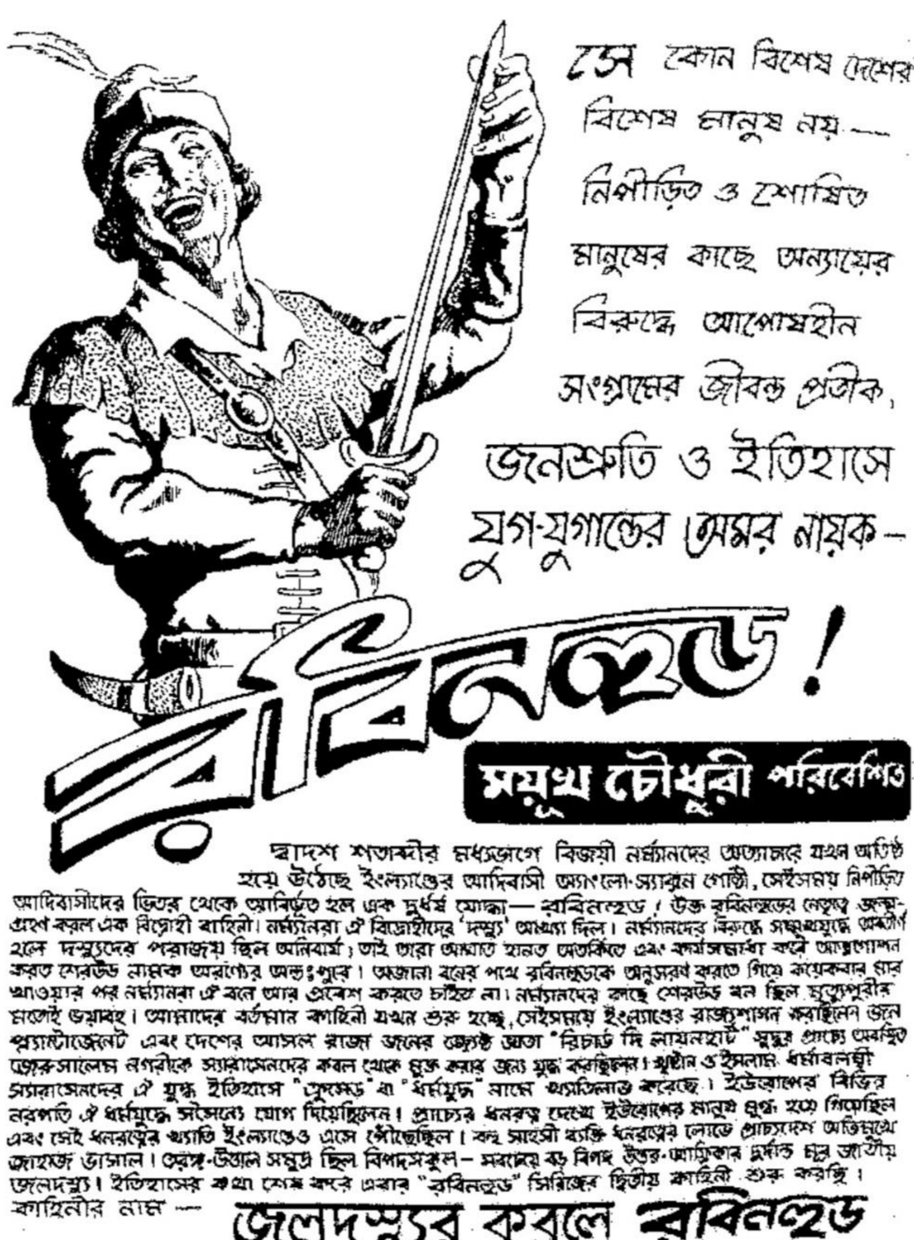

Fig. 7.3: Jaladasyur kabale Rabinˈhuḍ (Robin Hood, the Prisoner of the Pirates)

ডিসেম্বর মাস। কনকনে ঠান্ডা।

কলকাতার শহরতলি গোলাপনগরের পথে পথে রাত্রির অন্ধকারে যে নিশাচর শেয়ালগুলো টহল দিয়ে বেড়ায় আর থেকে থেকে তীব্রকণ্ঠে নিজেদের অস্তিত্ব ঘোষণা করে আজ রাতে তাদেরও কোন সাড়াশব্দ পাওয়া যাচ্ছে না। রাত মাত্র বারোটা–
কিন্তু গোলাপনগর কলোনির পথে দাঁড়িয়ে কেউ যদি মনে করে সমস্ত পৃথিবীতে বুঝি একটাও মানুষ জেগে নেই তাহলে বোধহয় বিশেষ ভুল হবে না। তবু দিনের পৃথিবী যখন ঘুমিয়ে পড়ে রাতের পৃথিবী তখন জেগে ওঠে···
তাই গোলাপনগরের ফাঁকা মাঠটার উপর যে লম্বা তিনতলা বাড়ীটা দাঁড়িয়ে আছে···

Fig. 7.4: Andha mākōṛˈsā

'Bengali comics' under the broader topic of 'Indian comics' was not established as a separate genre until Anant Pai introduced the Amar Chitra Katha (Immortal Pictorial Tales) series (henceforth ACKs) in 1967 (Mathur 2010: 176). Suchitra Mathur observed that ACKs were a deliberate nationalistic enterprise, which involved a retelling of Indian myths, legends, and history in the form of graphic narratives to "create a visually coherent 'Indian' cultural tradition" (Mathur 2010: 176). These comics intentionally set themselves apart from the Anglo-American comic tradition in both style and form. The larger-than-life heroes were quickly recognized, as they belonged to specific socio-cultural contexts. In the 1960s along with ACKs the establishment of the two comic book publishers in India – Diamond Comics (1960) and Indrajal Comics (1964) – resurrected the figure of the superhero in the Indian comics tradition with the initial publications of American superhero comics like *Mandrake*, *Spiderman*, *Superman* and *Phantom* in Hindi translations (Mathur 2010: 176). It was only with the publication of *Bā̃ṭul* that India received its first strange and distinct superhero.

THE ROBUST BĀ̃ṬUL OF TALEB

Bā̃ṭul, as Narayan Debnath reiterated with firm conviction, was written solely for children (Chatterjee 2015). I believe, that had Bā̃ṭul lost his apolitical stance and behaved like the DC or Marvel Comics superheroes who cogitate during their past time about the democratic policies of the nation and the outcomes of their involvement in different conflict zones including Vietnam War, Cold War and space wars, then eventually, the target audience would have been comprised. It is naïve to assume that the *Bā̃ṭul* texts are not laden with political messages because after all – all art is propaganda.

Ritu Khanduri writes in her book, *Caricaturing culture in India* regarding the impact of this artistic and political propaganda. She writes that cartooning in India, in contemporary times, marks out a cultural space for itself in which its style evades from being pinned to a national or other vernacular identities (Khanduri 2014: 211). Khanduri also delineates that it also exposes a form of artistic agency that "arises from the bodies of knowledge" (Khanduri 2014: 211). The ambiguous relation between communism and cartooning is also explored by sociologist Dipankar Gupta's extensive study into the

far-right political party of Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. Gupta notes that Shiv Sena's tussle with communism was implicitly associated with the Left's ideological opposition to freedom of speech and art. The founder of Shiv Sena, Bal Thackeray, was a renowned cartoonist in Maharashtra who considered himself primarily as an artist. Ironically enough in the 1970s West Bengal, during the stronghold of the Left, there was a rich tradition of wall cartoons and graffiti that spewed forth revolutionary sentiments (Khanduri 2014: 211). In fact, Mayukh Chowdhury also illustrated movie posters during his heydays on the walls of the Purna cinema in Bhowanipur (Ghoṣ 2015: 149).

Bā̃ṭul is embedded within the social history of West Bengal. Therefore there is a need to unravel, re-exhume and deconstruct its semiotic and referential codes to create a holistic understanding of its ideology. The word *bā̃ṭul* has two meanings in Bengali. Firstly, it means a playing marble which is either forged out of glass or iron, Sanskritized as *bartul*, and secondly, it signifies a short or a stout person or *bā̃t'kul* (Bhattacharya 2010: 591). The first meaning of the word cannot be easily dismissed, as the figure of Bā̃ṭul can be symbolically read through the playing marble motif. The playing marble[11] or the catapult motif recurs throughout the corpus where Bā̃ṭul is seen to catapult others intentionally or accidentally, and also occasionally catapults himself (according to the rule of this game) amid the thick of conflicts (Fig. 8). It is a peripheral theme which needs further elaboration, but for the time being, the article is more concerned with the second meaning of the word – 'robustness' (*balabān*) – the dominant one, which represents the personality of Bā̃ṭul in the mind of the readers.

[11] While playing marbles, the action that is performed with the fingers to fling a marble also imitates the mechanism of a catapult.

Fig. 8: Bā̃ṭul and the catapults in 4 distinct illustrations

Nassim Nicholas Taleb's compelling study of the nature of things and events in his book *Antifragile: how to live in a world we don't understand* can be used to analyze the figure of Bā̃ṭul as a literary event and as an object of speculation.[12] The central thesis of Taleb's work is how organic or complex systems react under 'The extended disorder family'. Taleb introduces the concept of 'the Triad', which is composed of the following three degrees: the 'fragile', the 'robust' and the 'antifragile'. His definition of the three degrees on the spectrum of the Triad is such that the 'fragile' wants to be left alone in tranquillity, it hates volatility (e.g., the Sword of Damocles), the 'robust' remains the same and attains equilibrium quickly (e.g., Phoenix), while the 'antifragile' grows, self-heals and self-repairs from random disorder or volatility (e.g., Hydra) (Taleb 2012: 23). He lists sixteen volatile elements that form the 'Extended Disorder Family' or 'Cluster' against which the 'robust' demonstrates resilience (Taleb 2012: 13): i. Uncertainty, ii. Variability, iii. Imperfect, incomplete knowledge, iv. Chance, v. Chaos, vi. Volatility, vii. Disorder, viii. Entropy, ix. Time, x. The unknown, xi. Randomness, xii. Turmoil, xiii. Stressor, xiv. Error, xv. Dispersion of outcomes, and xvi. Unknowledge.

According to Taleb, a robust entity is neither harmed nor helped by volatility. It "resists shocks and stays the same" (Taleb 2012: 3). The figure of Bā̃ṭul analyzed through Taleb's theoretical framework brings forth the distinct quality of the Bengali superhero, which deviates from its Western counterparts (DC and Marvel comics superheroes) that dominantly possess the status of antifragile. Consider this historical fact for instance, when the X-Men of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby was published in the fall of 1963, it developed the mythemes of 'radiation' and 'mutation' influenced by the dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945 during the WWII, and by the discovery of the double-helix structure of DNA by Francis Crick and James Watson in 1953 (Kripal 2015: 173).

The radiation-to-mutation theme is so universal in the world of DC and Marvel Comics that it instantly reminds us of Reed Richards, Susan "Sue" Storm, Johnny Storm and Ben Grimm's exposure to cosmic rays in outer

[12] Taleb is a statistician and a risk analyst, but not a literary scholar. To deploy his ideas to buttress my arguments might initially seem out of equation, but Taleb's theory of the 'fragile', 'robust' and 'antifragile' is so dynamic that it can be used to analyze any phenomenon, starting from historical epochs to biological evolution to mythologies to human emotions and personalities to *ad infinitum*. See: Chatterjee 2015: 636-639.

space that gave them superpowers to become Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four* (November, 1961); Peter Parker being bitten by a radioactive spider in Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's *Spider-Man* (August, 1962); Bruce Banner's accidental exposure to the gamma radiation that transformed him into Jack Kirby and Stan Lee *The Incredible Hulk* (May, 1962); Professor Xavier's father who worked on the Manhattan Project, on the first atomic bomb, and the Beast whose father was an ordinary labourer at an atomic site in *X-Men* (Kripal 2015: 175). In pop culture and comic book studies, these characters undoubtedly qualify as examples of the Talebian 'antifragile'. These entities regenerated themselves from shocks through adaptation, and as they regenerated, they became stronger. For an antifragile element, the sufferings are minor, while the gains are tremendous when they are exposed to the Extended Disorder Family. Taleb's concept of the antifragile, which engulfs other "organic" and "complex" social systems has its root in the exemplary quality of the human bones that regenerate and become stronger every time they undergo wear and tear. Therefore, by all means, if the Western superheroes are marked by the characteristics of antifragile, growth, evolution and change, then Bã̄ṭul, through his construction, is marked by robustness, resilience, and stasis in the face of volatility. This is evident, in some illustrations, we observe how Bã̄ṭul remains utterly calm and unflinching as he encounters dynamite explosions and ferocious animals (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9: Bã̄ṭul the oblivious

Moreover, whenever he is bashed with a sledgehammer or stabbed with a knife, he feels as if he has been tickled or bitten by a mosquito (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10: A sledgehammer is a mosquito

He is not only oblivious to his surrounding threats, but as he encounters them, they are instantly trivialized. Robustness, trivialization, bathos and exaggerated representation of the reality are the main tropes and sources of humour in the corpus. The evolution of Bã̄ṭul's disproportionate body that is traced through the decades from 1965 to 2015 is hardly distinguishable with the minor improvisation, and is also a theoretical validation for his robustness (Fig. 11).

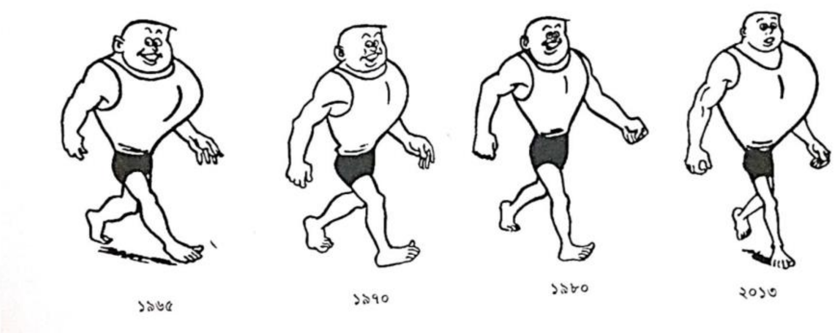

Fig.11: The evolution of Bā̃ṭul. L-R: 1965, 1970, 1980, 2013

RESPONSES TO CAWELTI'S FORMULAS

Western superhero theories start to collapse at the threshold of Bengali comics and become almost redundant without any scope for negotiations. The Western comics theories that are formulated by Walter Ong, Charles Hatfield, Richard Reynolds, Fredric Wertham and others mostly have Western superhero comic books and *not* comic strips (like *Bā̃ṭul*) as their object of analysis.

John G. Cawelti authoritatively lists some literary formulas that were used to create superhero/ adventure comics in North America and Europe. Cawelti explicates systematically how, firstly, the superhero overcomes obstacles to achieve some impossible mission against all odds, which symbolizes his a constant triumph over death. Secondly, the superhero always receives an additional favour from attractive young ladies; and thirdly the superhero is "one of us," a figure marked by flawed abilities and attitudes presumably shared by the audience (Cawelti 2013: 78). The principle of identification between the readers and the character is shaped essentially by the third point.

Although Cawelti's formulas are apposite in the realm of superhero studies, they aren't universal, and the first two points do not hold valid while studying *Bā̃ṭul*. In the light of Cawelti's formulas, the article offers two more formulas that would define the laws of Bā̃ṭul's world. Firstly, the need to triumph over death is hardly a feature in *Bā̃ṭul*. Bā̃ṭul is invincible and inde-

structible. Debnath has endowed him with zero vulnerabilities or weaknesses, except that he occasionally suffers from a chronic drowsiness. Therefore, the theme of death or overcoming it is peripheral to the corpus. Secondly, the world of Bā̃ṭul is dominated by male characters – Bā̃ṭul, Bhojā-Gajā (his nephews), Lambakarṇa (his friend), Sāṭā Ostād (local goon and Bhojā-Gajā's mentor), dacoits, policemen, terrorists, and other supernatural entities. Attractive ladies and damsels in distress have been deliberately excluded from the *Bā̃ṭul* corpus. There is *pisimā* (aunt) of Bā̃ṭul – possibly an old widowed woman – who is always seen confined to her kitchen cooking tasty dishes for him. Regarding this second issue, Narayan Debnath retorted that he preferred not to include female characters in *Bā̃ṭul* because he thought it was unnecessary, and that *Bā̃ṭul* was illustrated dominantly for children (Chatterjee 2015). The decision to exclude female characters from an illustration that is solely meant for children seems absurd. Debnath was either making a sexist claim to the genre by saying that women shouldn't have any role in violence, absurdity or delinquency, where only the male body is suited for these purposes, or he was unconsciously forging male asexual characters; those who are neither sexually attracted to the opposite sex nor to their own.

It is, therefore, not hard to notice that in *Bā̃ṭul,* sexual energy of the characters are channelized or diverted into other activities like hatching plots, robbing banks, going on outdoor trips and ceaselessly gormandizing during free time (Bukatman 2013: 171). Bā̃ṭul's asexuality does remind us of Jughead Jones from the *Archie Comics* (1941), who was confirmed to be an asexual in the canon (Reisman 2016).[13] Bā̃ṭul and Jughead share a similar trait in their ability to consume large quantities of food in a single sitting without gaining weight or becoming sick (Fig. 12).

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[13] Reisman 2016. Also see the recent controversy surrounding the figure of Jughead in the American television drama *Riverdale* (2017). A writer has commented that the screenwriter Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa's decision to make "Jughead straight and not acknowledge the effort that went into making the character asexual was just another example of 'asexual erasure'." See: Alexander 2017.

Fig. 12: Jughead and Bā̃ṭul the gormandizers. Family Tree Glee from Pep (Archie, 1960 series) #360, April 1980

It is not as if all comic characters of Narayan Debnath are asexual. There are characters like detective Kauśik Rāẏ, and detective Indrajit Rāẏ who are equally attractive and are attracted to the opposite sex. In *Rahasyamaẏ sei bāṛiṭā* (*The mysterious mansion,* 1970, the first installment of the nine graphic narratives that constitute *Indrajit rāẏ o blyak ḍāẏmanḍ ayāḍbheñcār sirij*), Indrajit Rāẏ rescues a lady called Ms. Subira Mitra from the evil machinations of Black Diamond.

It was in the following issue of the *Indrajit Rāẏ* series, *Tuphān meler yātrī* (*The passenger of Tufan Mail*, 1971-72) (Fig. 13) where the readers are told that it has been fifteen years since the murder and massacre at "*Rahasyamaẏ sei bāṛiṭā*" (*The Mysterious mansion*) and that Subira is now no longer a '*Mitra*' but a '*Raẏ*' – a "*Rāẏ'bāghinī*" ("tigress Ray") (Ghosh 2016: 334). *Indrajit Rāẏ* is, in fact, Debnath's only action hero who is married in the corpus where a female character like Subira Mitra/Ray plays an equally important role in both *Rahasyamaẏ sei bāṛiṭā* and *Tuphān meler yātrī*. [14]

[14] The editors of *The superhero readers* grapple with these same questions as they write: "The superhero is a polarizing genre that has generated fierce battles for a host of reasons: political,

Fig. 13: Tuphān meler yātrī from Indrajit Rāẏ o blyak ḍāẏmaṇḍ ayāḍbheñcār sirij

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gender-oriented, psychological, formalist, and aesthetic. Is the genre inherently authoritarian, or does it contain multiple ideological valences? What should we make of the hypermasculinity of superhero comics? Is their highly stylized imagery evidence of sexism, a foregrounding of sexual anxiety, or a vivid display of a queer sensibility that is otherwise culturally suppressed?" Introduction Hatfield, Heer and Worcester 2013: xviii.

The dearth of female characterization had its roots even before the publication of the first issue of *Bā̃ṭul* in May-June (Bengali *Jaiṣṭhya*) 1965. In April-May 1964 (Bengali *Baiśākh*), Deb Sahitya Kutir (DSK) published Narayan Debnath's *Śũṭˈki ār Muṭˈki (Skinny and Fatty).* It was based on the outrageous antics of two sisters called *śũṭˈki* and *muṭˈki* ("skinny" and "fatty"). Debnath illustrated a total of six *Śũṭˈki ār Muṭˈki* comic strips – #1 (April-May 1964, Bengali *Baiśākh*), #2 (April-May 1965, Bengali *Baiśākh*), #3 (Oct-Nov 1965, Bengali *Kārttik*), #4 (Aug-Sept 1966, Bengali *Bhādra*)), #5 (Dec-Jan 1967, Bengali *Pauṣ*), and #6 (Jun-Jul 1968, Bengali *Āṣāṛh*) (Fig. 14).

Fig. 14: Śũṭˈki ār Muṭˈki #1 (April-May 1964, Bengali Baiśākh)

It is evident from the publication dates that *Śũṭ'ki ār Muṭ'ki* were published randomly once a year, which shows that they failed to lure the readers with an equal magnetism of *Bẫṭul*. It was around 1968 that an uproar was sparked at the DSK office following the publication of *Śũṭ'ki ār Muṭ'ki #6*. Feminists and other activists heavily criticized Debnath for stereotyping and body shaming female characters in his illustrations (Deb and Ghoṣ 2013: 148). Not much is recorded about the form of the protest at DSK, but this issue determined that the community of comic strip readers in the 1960s were cognizant of the negative influences of this medium on the masses (just like Dr. Wertham). Another probable reason for this kind of outrage was that the readers who were previously overwhelmed by the fantastic thirty-three page graphic narrative by Debnath called *Citre Durgeś'nandinī* (*Durgeś'nandinī in painting* was inspired by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's historical romance novel, *Durgeś'nandinī*, 1865) published by DSK in 1962, found Śũṭ'ki ār Muṭ'ki politically unpalatable and disruptive (Fig. 15).

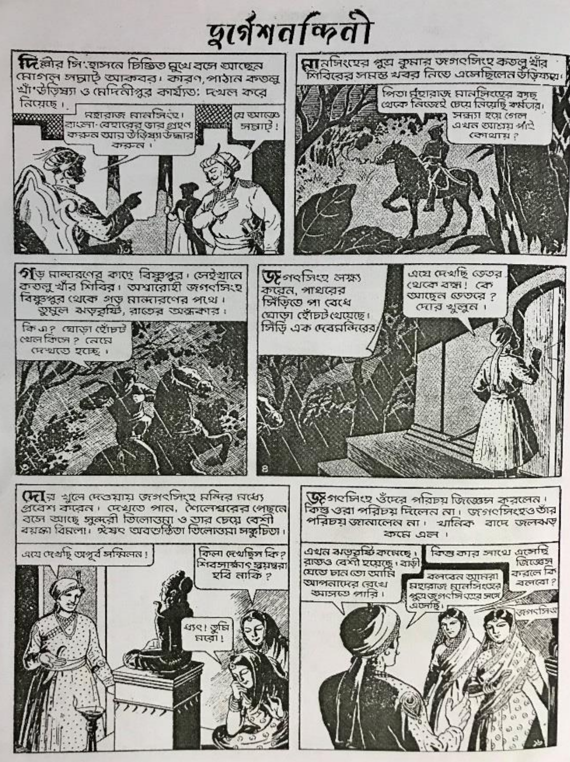

Fig. 15: Citre Durgeś'nandinī

The antithetical shift from the aesthetically enriching and dignified *Durgeś'nandinī* to the apparently humiliating *Śũṭ'ki ār Muṭ'ki* dealt a massive blow to the readers' worldly preference of the ideal female character. In the aftermath of this public protest, Debnath abandoned the *Śũṭ'ki ār Muṭ'ki* project altogether to propitiate his audience. Debnath eventually relinquished illustrating female teenagers in a lead role for his comic strips.

After much digression, reflecting back on Cawelti's premise is the only way to move forward with the analysis of Bā̃ṭul. Cawelti's third point about superheroes sharing similar attitudes with the audience, for which they are identified as "one of us" holds valid for Bā̃ṭul.

Fig. 16: Kauśik Rāẏ, in Bhaẏaṅkarer mukhomukhi (Face to face with danger)

No other comic strip superheroes illustrated by Debnath (only if we consider the Rip Kirby and James Bond-like Kauśik Rāẏ [Fig. 16] and Indrajit Rāẏ to be superheroes) except Bā̃ṭul share this unusual trait of sympathetic identification with the readers of the text. It is worth observing that Bā̃ṭul is invincible in the face of death but is easily trounced in the paroxysm of drowsiness and ennui. We occasionally see him lounging on a chair or sofa and taking a nap whenever he is free, and we also witness him flexing his muscles and mumbling to himself – "my whole body is aching"[15] (Fig.17) (Debˡnāth 2014: 159).

Fig. 17: "My whole body is aching"

This perpetual malaise in the Bengali character, as Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, was previously observed by Nirad C. Chaudhuri in *The autobiography of the unknown Indian* (1951) (Chakrabarty 2000: 184). Chakrabarty writes that Chaudhuri compared Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay's riveting anecdotes of Bengali social life in colonial Calcutta in the text *Kalikāta kamalālaẏ* (*Calcutta colony*, 1823). Chaudhuri's observations provided him with the compelling evidence that the common Bengali practices of "the morning gossip, the midday spell of business or siesta, the afternoon relaxation, and the evening court (here: *āḍḍā*), had all come down unmodified" from the 1820s to the 1930s'

[15] Bengali original: *śarīrˡṭā baṛa myāj myāj karˡche.*

Fig. 18: Our lazy superhero

CONCLUSION

It is in these gaps of time and the interstices of actions when Bā̃ṭul yawns and becomes heavy-eyed that we truly discern the cultural signatures that are etched on his body (Fig. 18). Debnath and Bā̃ṭul are both aware that no amount of action can transform the state of things within and without the fictional realm of comics. This absolute lack of faith in action that can alter the order of things has established superhumanity as "a nostalgic myth (without a precise historical setting)" (Eco 1994: 19). The transnational artistic influences on Bā̃ṭul are unequivocal. The point of critique is not to dismiss the singularity of the Bā̃ṭul corpus or Bengali comics as a whole by tracking down the foreign routes of transcultural influences. The point is to

[16] Narayan Debnath writes in his essay "*Koutuhaler bipad*" that during the days of the WWII, he used to sit with his friends on the *roẏāk* and gossip (in *Nārāẏaṇ Debʹnāth Kamikʹs samagra*, Vol. 3, eds. Pradīp Gaṛāi and Śāntanu Ghoṣ, Lālmāṭī, 2013, 504). Dipesh Chakrabarty mentions that the *roẏāk* was "the elevated verandas attached to the older Calcutta houses (here Shibpur), where young men of the neighbourhood assembled to have their noisy *addas* [*āḍḍā*]" (188). This vociferous *āḍḍā* on the *roẏāk* was often seen as a threat to the respectability of the middle-class Bengali householders. This observation regarding Debnath's social life is tied to Nirad C. Chaudhuri's comment on the unmodified inheritance of the colonial social practices, which further exemplifies the origins of the cultural signs that Bā̃tul embodies.

acknowledge that Bā̃ṭul is a cultural viaticum – a hybrid of foreign and indigenous artistic traditions – that occurred within a linguistic framework and during a particular historical epoch. I, therefore, propose that a distinct mode of reading be formulated based on the formal aspects and the content of the Bengali comics. This new mode of reading will incorporate Euro-American centric comics theory to analyze not only the medium of Bengali comics but also the indigenous cultural and social codes that this medium (which is also a culmination of its indigenous artistic evolution) seeks to critique.

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

Ira Sarma

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-fiction[2]; print newspapers and magazines recurrently publish short graphic journalism pieces[3]; 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 Lemercier), 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, narrative-ly.com/medium/comics/, the Italian www.mamma.am/, the French www.larevuedessinee.fr/, or the Indian www.thequint.com/news/graphic-novels and graphicshelf.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/Migliazzi/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 subcontinent 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/Lemercier: *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 Chattoraj (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 INR[6] (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-

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[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 LGTBQ 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 Akthar, 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.

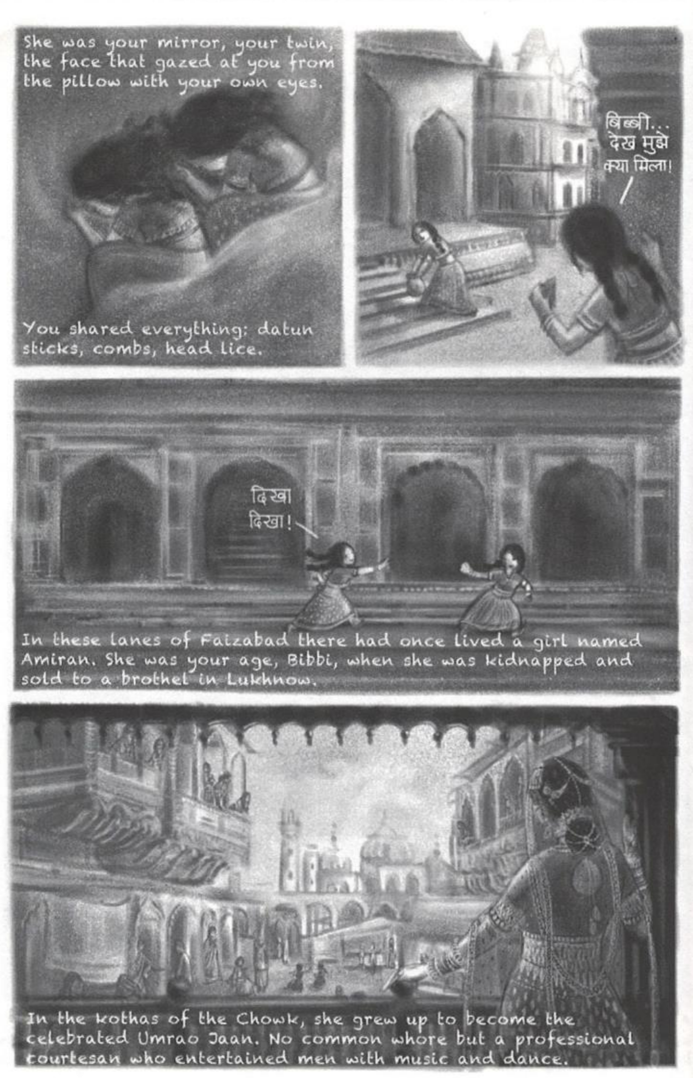

Fig. 1: Rao/Devraj*, "Akhtari", First hand I,* 346*.*

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 Vadakara – 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 grandmother[8]; 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 *bahurūpiyā*s,[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] *Bahurūpiyā*s 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*.

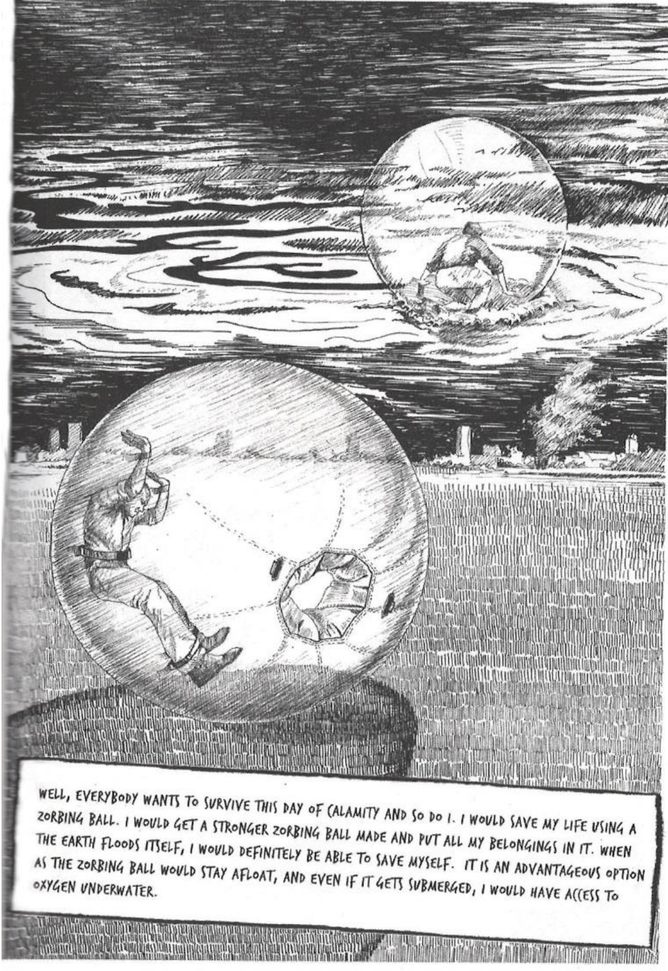

Fig. 3: Gaur, “Apocalypse”, *First hand I*, 87.

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.

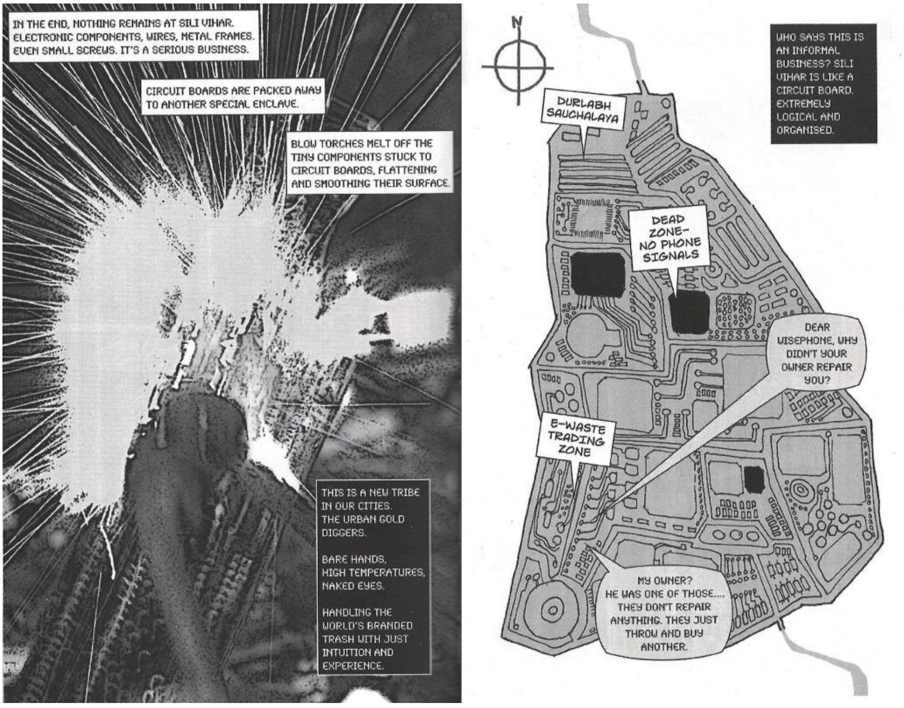

Fig. 4: Chintan et.al., "E-waste sutra", *First hand I,* 148-149.

[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 Bhattachrya'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.

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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).

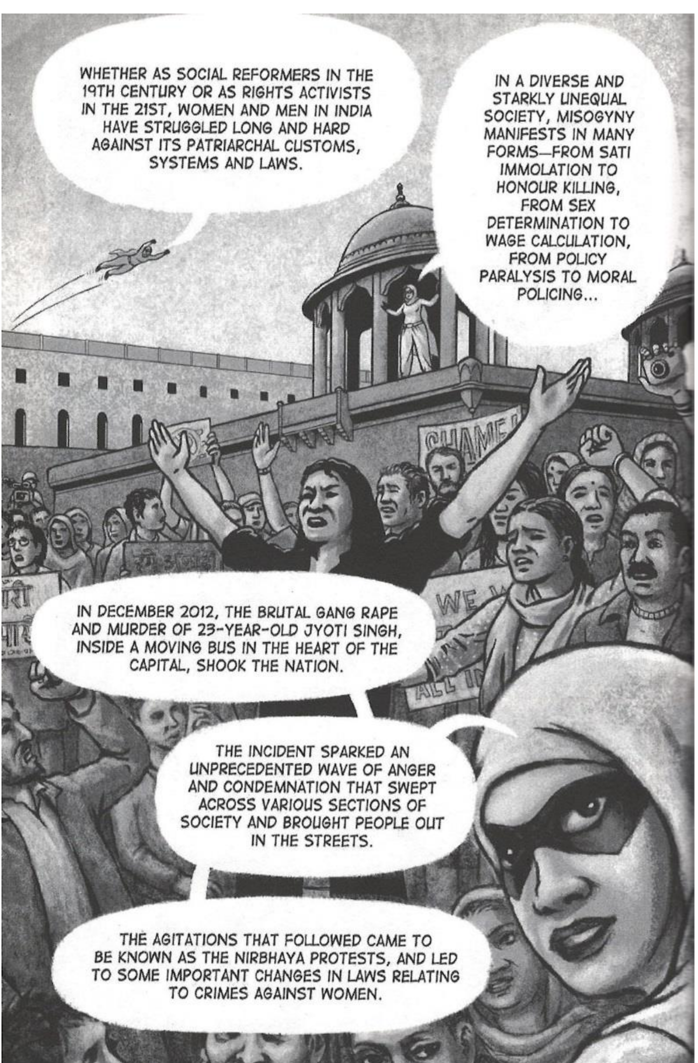

Fig. 5: Dixit/Sen, "The girl not from Madras", *First hand I*, 330.

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 *Rāmāyaṇa* 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 *Cā̃der pāhāṛ* (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

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[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.

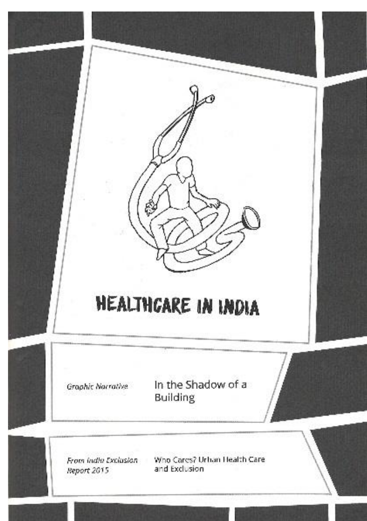

Fig. 6a: Sabhaney/Mishra, "In the shadow of a building", *First hand II*, 45.

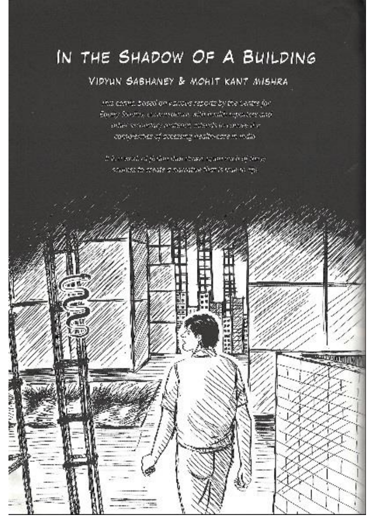

Fig. 6b: Sabhaney/Mishra, "In the shadow of a building", *First hand II*, 46.

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

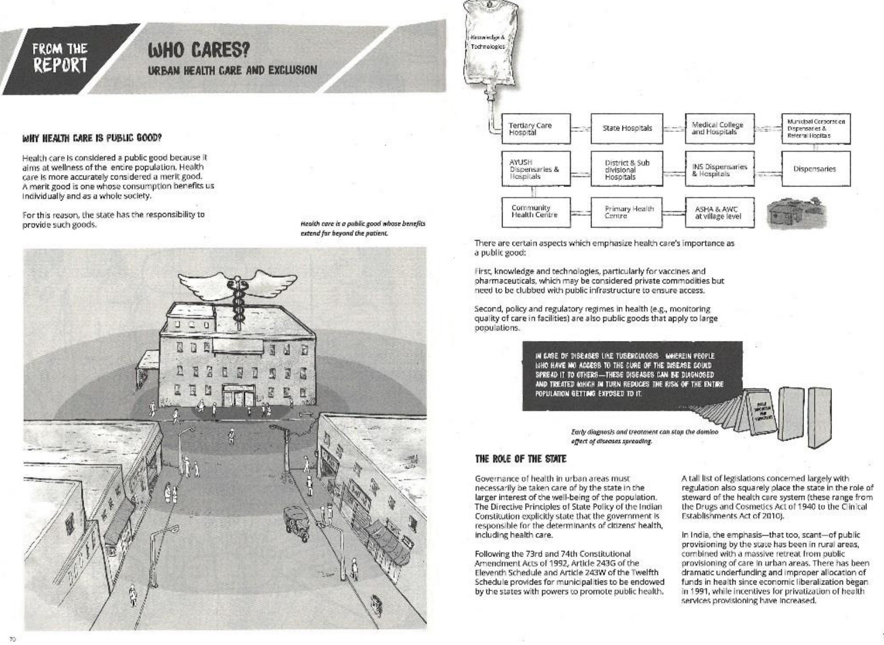

Fig. 7: Sabhaney/Mishra, "In the shadow of a building", *First hand II*, 70-71.

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.

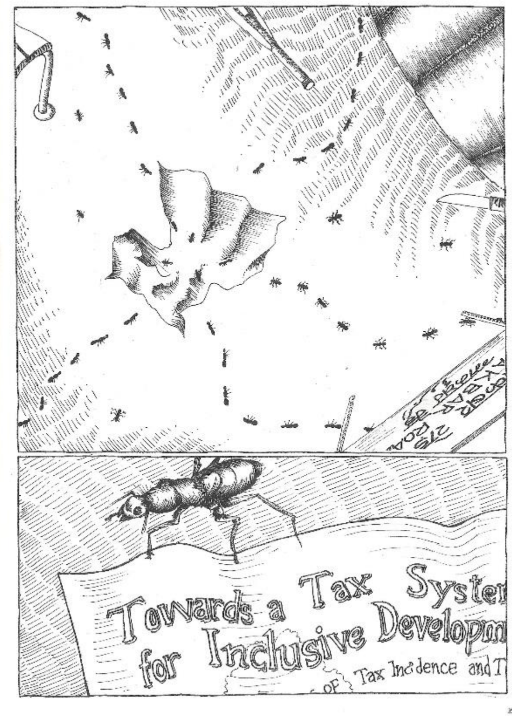

Fig. 8: Prasad, "Caśmadīd", *First hand II*, 35.

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.

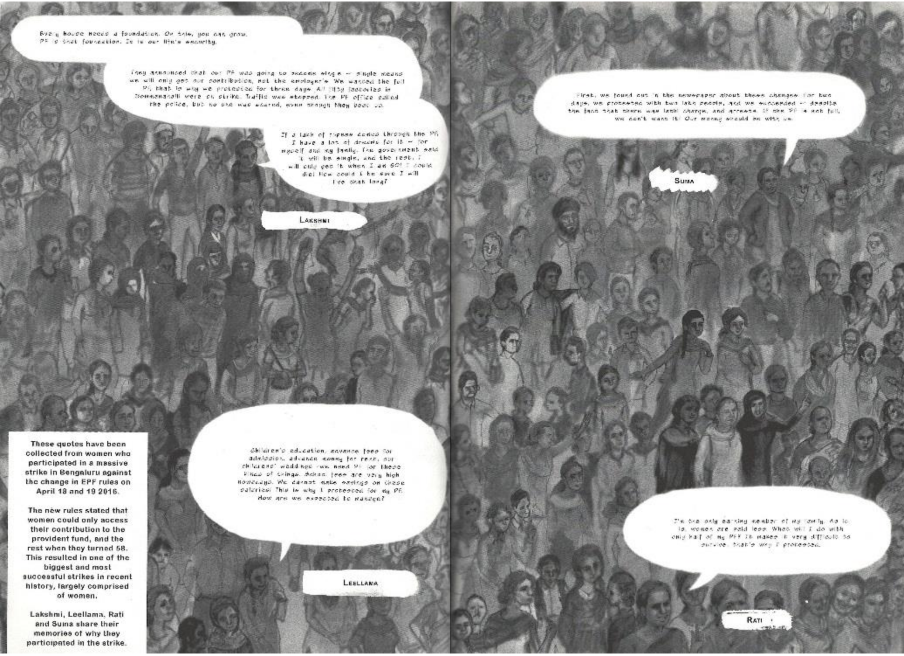

Fig. 9: Sabhaney/Emura, “Hard times”, *First hand II*, 124-125.

In the same vein, the story closes with an epilogue by Sabhaney in which she gives further background explanations about the events, complemented by undisguised personal comments – very much in line with the activist stance of the volume.

The last four contributions of *First hand II* focus on ‘highly excluded groups’, two of which centre on ‘survivors’ of violent conflict. Of these a particularly strong narrative is Neha Dixit/Priya Kuriyan’s *Shadow lines* about the violent communal riots and mass rapes which occurred in the Muzzafarnagar region in 2013 after the reported event of a Muslim boy having allegedly eve-teased a Hindu girl. The story is told from a deliberately subjective and openly condemnatory perspective as the narrators set out to amend official reports about the events and accuse BJP politicians of having been involved in the violence. Particularly unsettling are seven first-person narrations by anonymised Muslim rape victims who decided to seek legal justice and whose distressing reports conclude the piece.

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*.

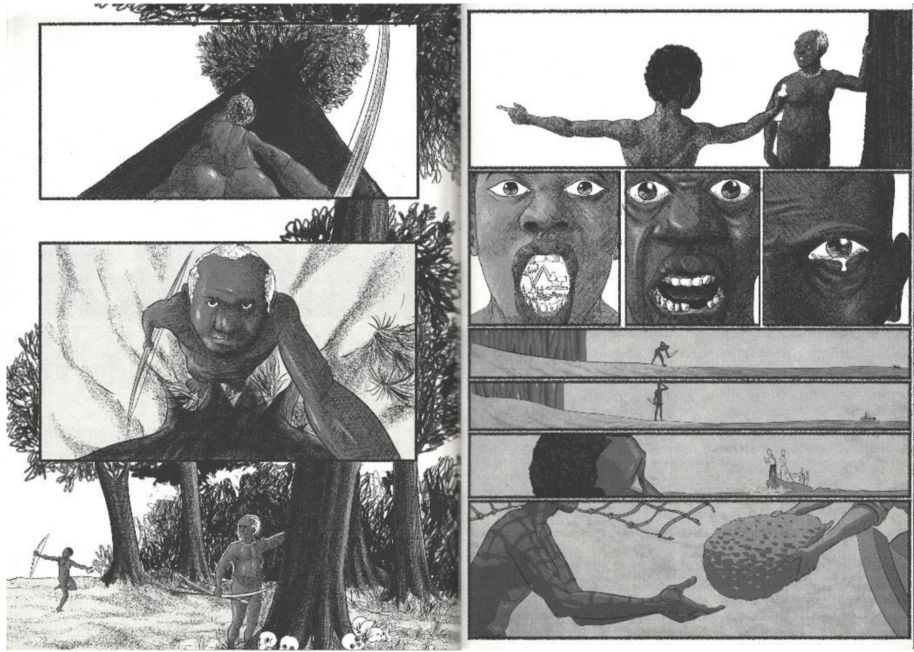

Fig. 11: Sabhaney/Burchell/Arunachalam, "Without permit, entry prohibited", *First hand II*, 264-265.

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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"They have occupied our *rattekoal*[1] (summer) and made surgical strikes into our *soanth* (spring) and *harud* (autumn), but when *wande* (winter) arrives…"[2] – Memories of everyday encounters in Kashmir[3]

Sarah Ewald

Abstract: The following essay is a personal account of two several months long stays in the Himalayan Kashmir Valley during autumn-winter of 2016 and 2017. Staying in Kashmir had a couple of reasons, one was a research interest in different kinds of work networks and how through them the political situation of the larger region could be understood more thoroughly. This essay though is rather about what happened in between the more official interviews. Text and images developed by and by, based on several diary entries and the visuals I took during these months. The different paragraphs do not claim and don't want to be a coherent narrative or analytical piece, they are more like fragments of conversations and time spent with people in different parts of Kashmir, people who are friends, became friends or whom I met and accompanied during their work. The essay struggles with one open question, however. There are almost no names mentioned in the text and no faces visible in the pictures. One could say this follows an academic convention to anonymize people, also for their own safety in parts. From a perspective of 'representation', on the other hand, it would be a right thing to give full references. These particular, small insights into people's lives are unique, while at the same time, coming to Kashmir since a few years now, I could have added several names to most of the paragraphs. Without having a final answer to the open

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[1] The diacritics in this text follow as good as possible a book by George Grierson (1916), one of the few works on Kashmiri language, or Koshur, how the language is called by the ones who speak it. But even when it is the everyday language of over 7 million people in the Kashmir valley, approximately 95 percent of Kashmiris can't read and write it. Kashmiri is a language recognized by the Constitution of India as the language of the Jammu and Kashmir State. Though, after a very short period in the early 1950s when Kashmiri was introduced in the schools of the Valley, the language was taken out from the school curriculums till November 2008, when it has been made a compulsory subject in all government schools in the Valley up to secondary level. https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/the-kashmiri-novel-tales-in-a-lost-tongue/story-2PqYE6Y4iSJviPJsCVGlyL.html. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

[2] http://www.wandemag.com/about/. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

[3] The essay has already been published in a slightly different outline as a two parts essay in a Kashmiri journal, the Wande Magazine – *wande* means winter in Kashmiri – in September 2018.

question, for me, the essay therefore is an attempt to share my subjective understanding of what I see as some of this society's strengths showing in individual and collective engagements, as well as what people have to struggle with due to the impossibility of not being involved, in the one or other way, in the larger regional politics. While writing this introduction, Kashmir, a region which's population is equal with countries like Switzerland, Hungary, Austria, Bulgaria, Senegal, Bolivia or Sweden, and the people living there, remain under a complete communication lockdown, imposed by the Indian army for more than seven weeks now, with a more and more precarious health and food supply situation. Considered as the most extensive shutdown in the history of Kashmir, cut off from the rest of the world, it was the Indian government's strategy to silence people's protest against India's unilateral decision to remove the autonomous status of the region from its constitution on 5 August 2019. Neither was the government of Jammu & Kashmir involved in this decision (rather it was put under detention, together with several thousand other Kashmiris), nor anyone living in Kashmir.

"If you haven't stayed here in winters also, you don't know what it means, Kashmir," more than one person had told me during the last two summers. How do you come to an understanding of the places and people you grow up with? And how do you come to an understanding of places and people you meet later in life? Sometimes by coincidence you reach somewhere, and what you find there makes you keep coming back.

The air is like vibrant, cicada chirring the first welcome of the Kashmir valley after crossing the Himalayan Peer Panjaal range through the Banihal tunnel, a pass which connects the valley with the neighbouring region of Jammu. Traffic, as expected, has thinned out. Right at the bifurcation to Verinag spring, the major source of the river Jhelum, a friend of a friend is waiting for me. A serpentine byway leads us downhill towards Duru, Islambad. It is the year 2016. Late September, beginning of harvest season. From the fields the rice ears seem to wave and call with dry whispers. Roads are as good as empty.

This is not a piece about July 2016's Kokernag encounter or the valley wide funeral processions which followed[4]. Not about roads filled with people, men, women, all ages, out for protest marches, queues of army busses

[4] http://www.raiot.in/the-restored-humanity-of-the-kashmiri-rebel/. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

filled with soldiers getting relocated, their shotguns' pellet rain, which blinded hundreds, deaths on the roads and inside homes, months-long shutdown, cut off from food, medicine and energy supplies, mass demonstrations, mass detentions, calls for strike, night raids or what happened afterwards in the prisons.[5] It is also not a piece about a 2017 Indian army operation "All Out" and related "standard operating procedures"[6]. It isn't, somehow. It is about several everyday moments I can't but remember, and about how people keep up commitment for their occupations, in a place the different Indian governments keep in a state of emergency since nearly 30 years, in a place where its people, since long decades, live and work for their (political) self-determination (Faheem 2018, Bhan 2018).

Dusk and uncertainty about the roads on the first evening back in Kashmir make me follow an invitation of people I just got to know. The family of a friend. His brother-in-law takes me further the next morning. We stop at the local hospital. His daughter who last night entertained me with ball games and imitations of an elderly relative's snoring has a small injury close to her right eye. I had heard about the situation in the hospitals during these last two months, overcrowded in many parts of the valley, doctors and nurses working extra shifts. When we walk out with the prescription, the corridors are filled with people waiting; most of them for family members admitted with pellet injuries from ongoing street protests. Young volunteers hurry back and forth to support the staff and the families. A good number of the injured apparently decide not to consult doctors but rather go to a blacksmith's workshop for makeshift treatment, afraid of the army raiding hospitals to find and arrest stone throwers, as I read in a Kashmiri newspaper later. Next to the article is the image of a body x-ray. Hundreds of tiny metal pieces under the skin of the person make his torso and head look like a sieve. Other articles report about retina specialists from Indian AIMS hospital rushing in to support Kashmiri doctors. They struggle to extract pellet fragments from numerous eyes, while outside, the Indian army continues shooting on protesters.[7] I also read about a 5-year-old boy who

[5] http://www.4a.com.au/4a_papers_article/alana-hunt/. (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[6] https://www.newsclick.in/operation-all-out-kashmir-bludgeoning-military-panopticon (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[7] https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/world/asia/pellet-guns-used-in-kashmir-protests-cause-dead-eyes-epidemic.html. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

was found on the road with sand rubbed into his eyes and a thin needle sticking in one of them, inserted just like this by an Indian Central Reserve Police Force man. "*Army ha aayi. Yim ha layan mea*," ("Army came. And started beating me."), the words of the child quoted in one of the local dailies[8]. My brain fails to provide any frame. In front of the building another group of volunteers prepares food for the people waiting inside. Our car leaves the hospital court. On the seat behind me, the small girl balances a brown paper bag with the medicine on her knees. Her father points to the ambulance ahead of us. I look at him. He nods. Transport outside the towns, on the main roads, is still highly restricted. Someone waves in our direction "Today they transfer only medicine". A fast farewell, then I switch the vehicle to cover the last kilometres. Two doctors sit next to the driver. They move a bit to the right. Through the small window behind our heads I see other passengers in the back. Nobody is injured. While in the car, all the pictures I had seen via facebook posts of ambulances' bonnets dented by army personal and scattered glass splinters of ambulances' windscreens cracked by soldiers' sticks don't come to my mind. Also, not the reports of security forces beating up drivers and the patients they transport. 15 minutes later I get off as quickly as I got in.

Fig. 1: sustainability (Kashmir 2016)[9]

On one of the many days behind the garden walls – I have forgotten if it was curfew or *hartal*[10]. Mud has left a mark on her trousers' knee. She is

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/6221-pellet-gun-injuries-reported-in-unrest-after-burhan-wani-killing-jk-govt/articleshow/62640795.cms. (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[8] Online version of the Kashmiri newspaper Kashmir Today. https://www.facebook.com/TodayInKashmir/posts/crpf-trooper-inserts-needle-in-eye-of-5-yr-old-says-familysrinagar-kashmir-reade/1119199451469966/. (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[9] The copyright for all photographs belongs to Sarah Ewald.

the lady of her fields. Under her fingers another handful of *haakh* seedlings find a space in the humid autumn ground. Efficient-experienced, like I have seen it in many gardens here. Due to shut-down and protests her office has been closed since weeks. She has intensified work at their home. Side by side we move through the bushes, harvesting what feels like myriads of red chillies, warding off mosquitos. Her husband piles up dry leaves and weeds in a corner, then sets the heap on fire. Ashes for the soil. The smoke makes me choke. “It’s just like tear gas”, his voice from behind my back. His mechanical lawn mower controls the green 10x15 meters patch in front of the house. But then, grass has already been cut short yesterday, you can hear the rasping of blades along the ground. Morning is for picking the big bottle gourds to fill the stocks before winter approaches. A common practice here in Kashmir. Wash, cut in halves, clean, slice. Her hand and knife seem to belong together. Keeping up is a task. 10:4. Or 5, maximum. Though I must be doing my part well enough. “Dear, I want to adopt you”, she repeats twice. I try to hide my grin. The thin snippets are placed row after row under the sun. Tightly laced wicker baskets already keep the air-dried vegetables from the last days. Wind scatters leaves from the trees orange-rain-like over the grass. When I look up, I see his grey-haired head bending downwards. He starts collecting the leaves. “They irritate me”, his hand already stretched out for the next few. When he turns away, I quickly collect some myself. The roar of the lawn mower echoes faintly from the red brick walls. Stone clatters against metal teeth.

From beyond their premises distant noise is growing louder, feet on the road, voices calling like with one voice. They mix with the persistent chirring from the trees and fields. *Harthe’roosh*. I write down the Kashmiri word for cicada in my notebook. Some of these species apparently stay underground up to 17 years till they reach maturity. They then burrow upwards, towards the surface and when they feel the right time has come, they emerge from the dark of the soil. A swarm of them is said to produce sounds up to 120 decibels— equivalent to a military jet aircraft’s take-off. This chirring later mixes with the steady chipping of sickle strokes in the nearby paddy fields.

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[10] *Hartal* is a call for a general strike that is given in Kashmir by resistance groups, like *Hurriyat*, as a form of civil disobedience, often after protesters or civilians are killed by Indian army.

Someone hums a melody, while morning turns to noon. My nose catches bits of dust and sweat, heated up by the sun. Raspy ears tickle my palm. And row by row the harvest workers turn them into a tile shape pattern of long ochre-coloured sheaves. After drying, they will be stacked into spiky bales, the form of large bee hives, visible from far in the fields.

Fig 2: heart (Kashmir 2016)

Some days later a friend sends me a message with a video attached: First the frame is filled completely with yellowish smoke. Someone's scream. Then about a dozen rice bales emerge through the haze. Maybe the collecting point of a village. More than half of these bales are burning. Shielded men in uniform encircle them. People try to pass through the cordon from different sides. Sticks keep them at a distance. The camera is shaking. Suddenly gunshots, the crackling of fire continues, interrupted by a call for evening prayers. There is no gap in the line-up of the uniformed men. In front of the people their harvest turns to ashes. End of the recording. The army from the country of rice fields and farmers' suicides repeats this work pattern in several other places throughout the Kashmir valley.[11] And walks away.

[11] Via the Kashmiri newspaper Greater Kashmir. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_c2YQKJbVs. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

Fig 3: women at work (Kashmir 2016)

We meet at his work place, where he can be found on most days if he is not doing this or that side job he considers to be helpful for others. His ideas about life can disarm you. Though there is disagreement sometimes. “I think our friendship became strong.” “It was always strong.” Together we walk through the narrow alleys of the old city towards his home. Sun light reflections follow us along the rolled down shutters of shops and stalls. He and his family keep an open door for those in need. For friends, and friends of friends, and groups of now school-less children, whose daily routine got disturbed because no classes do happen since weeks due to curfew, or because the army has accommodated its newly arrived soldiers in several state schools’ buildings. People repeat this pattern of privately set up ‘curfew schools’ in several other places throughout the valley.[12]

[12] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-37128457. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

Fig 4: solidarity (Kashmir 2016)

Cooking is not really her favourite activity, but I love the way she does fry spices, nose up in the air to make sure a good mix. Neither she nor her mother ever let me leave without having a second cup of salty noon chai. I sometimes pay back in lemon tea. She has perfected her driving skills on some of the rougher roads of Jammu & Kashmir. Her car takes me along on many days. The valley's public transport is still not running in this shutdown autumn of 2016. Picking up people standing waiting at the roadsides she turns her Maruti car into a small version of a Sumo taxi[13]. We squeeze in while the car fills with kids, grownups, bags, pieces of conversation. Several old women's relieved prayers the moment they climb on the back seats are still in my ear. "Stop being over-sensitive", she says when we part.

[13] Sumo is the name for car's used in public transport in Kashmir. Apart from the driver 9 to 11 people can find space in this public taxi.

Fig. 5: remnants (Kashmir 2016)

A "welcome" in plastic is pinned on one side of his bedstead, incomplete. A polythene bag hanging on a hook, filled with knots and loops of yellow rope. A few signs and stickers around the window. Otherwise, his room is bare. His sister points to the corner where he used to sit to take rest or a cup of tea. The last 'signs' he has left and an army bullet has left in him on a road of his village some weeks back on an early morning in August. My eyes meet the mirror. Its reflection shows the back of the father, sitting on his son's bed.

Fig. 6: elusive/fading (Kashmir 2016)

His family had cleared the room after he got killed on the road. Was it what they call a 'stray bullet'? From a shelf right under the ceiling three yellow and pink plastic toy birds of his children are peeking into my eyes. I walk towards the window. The patch outside looks like a green, gently heaving

sea. Under my fingers, I can feel the wood of the window frame, smooth and cool. “This is his work”, the father tells us. Carpenter has been his profession. The design reminds me of my parents’ house and the windows there, which grandfather and my mother’s brother had built when we were kids. Nobody has touched his work bench in the workshop next door. Wooden dust and locks garland metal.

Fig. 7: hatchu khwaab / wooden dreams (Kashmir 2016)

Early mornings in August, around the days when the South Asian subcontinent celebrates its independence from the British colonial oppressors, on the roads of a village like many villages in Kashmir, several people get killed.[14] A lot of roads in the valley have seen people coming out to gather to tell a state which claims to be theirs what they disagree with. A lot of roads have seen this state’s soldiers, doing what they are paid for, dispersing the protest marches, whereby many are left maimed, blinded, or killed. Maintenance of law and order? Quite some roads have also seen passer-byes just busy with their daily routines not returning home.

[14] https://www.firstpost.com/india/kashmir-unrest-crpf-opens-fire-in-fresh-clashes-toll-rises-to-63-2958346.html. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

Fig. 8: people at work (Kashmir 2016)

Fig. 9: wings (Kashmir 2016)

The sound of her fingers flying over the keyboard. She is into words. And silences. Her own kind of rhythm. She creates words. She collects them. From others sometimes. Exchanges words with them. We exchange some. She gives me a few. One for my impatience. “Wait”. And later: “Get on your toes”. I remember the ventilator air playing with a fold of her scarf in the afternoon when she recites some thoughts about Gaza. “We give birth to your destruction, every time we make love—you count.”[15] Some other afternoon, we hike up the hill top to the lately re-opened old fort of Hari Parbat. Army had closed the doors of the fort for the public when they turned it into one of its base camps in the 1990s after the Indian state’s proclamation of ‘emergency state’ in Kashmir. The garden still contains scattered remnants of the paramilitary forces’ trainings: obstacle track, tripwire field, ropes pulled taut low over the ground to crawl through flat on your belly. From under a tent a metallic reflexion: A group of soldiers cleaning the pieces of their disassembled weapons. Her back against the granite of a window frame, eyes caught by some movement further down. “They walked into my dream silently. Stones became their pillows. Night healed their sore feet and bruised backs. Love-filled, they walked ahead into labyrinths of the dream. Their kohl eyes never blinking.”[16] Her breathless voice counting the steps of our running legs on the long stretching stairs downhill, fast, faster, as if relieved to be in the open again. Then we disappear in a wilderness of apricot trees.

Fig. 10: pan optic (Kashmir 2016)

[15] Line from a poem by Uzma Falak; http://www.palestinechronicle.com/summer-in-gaza-a-poem/. (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[16] Lines from an unpublished poem of Uzma Falak.

He shows me his collection of mobile recordings. Filmed from inside their home. A visual diary. Window frames filled with bleak summer storm, thunder rumbling, window frames filled with streaming and then standing, standing water and floating dogs of the 2014 floods[17], filled with road and people and patrolling forces[18], filled with columns of clouds in dusk light, a muffled animal's howl. It makes me feel like being inside the house's head, memories. "I can't say why, but I do remember you in my prayers."

Fig. 11: prayer (Kashmir 2016)

[17] https://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/jk-floods-how-are-people-in-kashmir-dealing-with-the-natural-calamity/articleshow/43018970.cms. (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[18] https://jkccs.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/occupation-hazard-jkccs.pdf. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

Fig. 12: efficiency (Kashmir 2016)

From Srinagar, one has to switch the vehicle three to four times when traveling by public transport to the piece of land that they chose to create a space where everyone can be student and teacher at the same time. They have negotiated that their work is all about engaging hands, minds, feet, and hearts alike to make things grow, and keep the fire burning. It is about trying to bring together what was, is and could be, in practice and theory. Topics already discussed sitting in that one corner on grass under trees, before they, by and by, build the infrastructure, still roam in my head. How to efficiently generate energy while using as less resources as possible? How to grow your own food safe from the circles of multinational monopolies' fertilizers and pesticides, which harm soil, water, and our bodies? How to live together as if we were all equal? Their place has become a meeting site for people from many backgrounds. *Hu kus, bu kus, teli wan tsu kus*?[19] Do we keep thinking there need to be a closing answer to this question?

[19] Line from the Kashmiri lullaby "*Hukus bukus*"; "Who is he and who am I, then tell me, who are you."

Fig: 13: community building (Kashmir 2016)

Sometimes days or nights are too much. They leave you with no words. Or with not the right words. There is disconnection from tears. They appear when you don't think of them, when doing something ordinary like brushing your teeth.

Fig: 14: dream (Kashmir 2016)

They tell us, their son recently started to trim the hair of people from the neighbourhood. The tools of his barbershop in the attic room of their home are lying there in the shelf as if he has left only five minutes ago. Like nobody has touched them after he got killed on the road in the month of August. Next to a heavy armchair, a green-white dryer is dangling, still plucked in. Dozens of small square shaped boxes filled with razor blades, neatly tucked in a leather belt's pocket, are waiting to get unwrapped to meet with a beard. A first layer of dust already started covering the colours. He had been on the road because he wanted to buy a newspaper.

Fig. 15: lokchaar/ childhood (Kashmir 2016)

Fig. 16: dailies (Kashmir 2016)

With the leaves' shades turning paler, the Indian army announces its operation 'Calm Down'[20]. They 'calm down' during nights, when in hundreds of raids they pick people whom they identified during the days protesting on the roads from their beds. The prisons are filling up with students, teachers, civil rights activists, lawyers, some political leaders. Seven is the age of the youngest inmate, I hear. During the day, outside in the roads, soldiers and paramilitary forces now work with chilli filled PAVA (pelargonic acid vanillyl amide) shells alongside the pellet guns to disperse the protesting people.[21] The powder is so fine, it easily finds its way inside also through the thinnest chinks to stay with you for a while. My first unexpected encounter with PAVAI mistake as an acute allergic reaction.

[20] https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/4/8840/Operation-Calm-Down-Achieves-the-Opposite. (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[21] https://www.firstpost.com/india/kashmir-unrest-chilli-based-pava-shells-too-slow-for-crowd-control-home-ministry-announces-recall-3025760.html. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

Fig. 17: fire (Kashmir 2016)

Inside a home on another day. The pounding of wood on stone, turning the dried chilli peppers to pulp, adding spices, the laughter while handing the pestle round from her son to her mother-in-law to me to her to her son to… Long after my arms' muscles become tired, the sounds continue. Preparing for the next step, she dips her fingers in oil. "They will burn anyway for a couple of days", she says with a shrug of shoulders and a half smile, hands already kneading and forming the dough into roundish shapes. Really red chilli cakes placed on newspaper to dry. A time-tested method to warm you up throughout the cold months. They will make my tongue burn later in winter.

Fig: 18: monochrome (Kashmir 2017)

The door opens. Dodging his outstretched arm, his children leave home, and over the small path that leads from the one-storey house through the faded winter garden they come running to catch the bus to reach tuitions, satchels flying after them. He waits for us. His eyes are not visible behind the sunglasses. Like some others, the Indian soldiers 'non-lethal' pellets did not blind him completely. The vision of one eye came back. The ability to distinguish colours though not. With the help of colleagues, he has shifted his workplace from the collective workshop to a small backside room of his house some weeks ago. They also supported him to figure out a system for weaving the different colours without seeing them. I try to understand his numbers and pattern plans that guide the way how to transform individual twines into the form of one of these pashmina shawls. To finish a piece, he now needs around double the time he used to in the past, he tells us while his wooden needle goes up and down and carefully adjusts the distances between the individual warp threads.

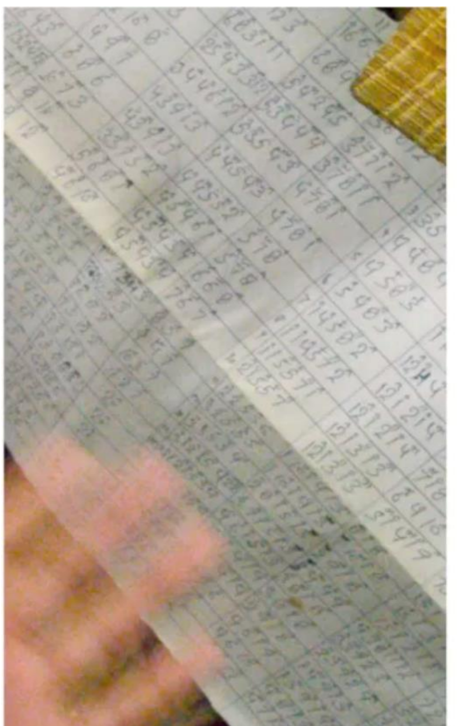

Fig. 19: intricacy (Kashmir 2017)

Hollywood, opposite Lambert Lane, second floor. The left corner table is ours, like when I had come to Srinagar for the first time in 2011. Kashmiri-German session. In front of us the black tea is abundant and strong as usual. I add some milk. My cup rests on the journal he brought along; his article about these last months. "Memoir of a siege", the title reads. "...A crowd began to build up on the main street. I too joined it… people from the adjoining villages poured in and marched through our village… there were people from every social class — daily labourers, students, businessmen, doctors, teachers, old, young… '*Aazadi*, *aazadi*, *aazadi*.' The roar amplified… a mass all-out uprising in the making that would soon spread across Kashmir and push the State almost over the precipice… "[22] We have one hour before he will go back to work. "Wait, wait, wait." You can hear excitement in his voice while he checks the notebook pages to assemble a short sen-

[22] http://kashmirnarrator.com/memoir-siege-life-resistance-repression/. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

tence with the few words he has learnt so far. “Frr-aulene Sarah ist r-ott.” He starts giggling. I join. German plus Kashmiri accent makes of an often said to sound rough language something that produces now smiles. Some letter combinations though we try and try in vain. Same applies for Kashmiri. “*Anyim sui, wavum sui, lötschum panis*.”[23] “*Hatte hoinj, kette sang*”[24].

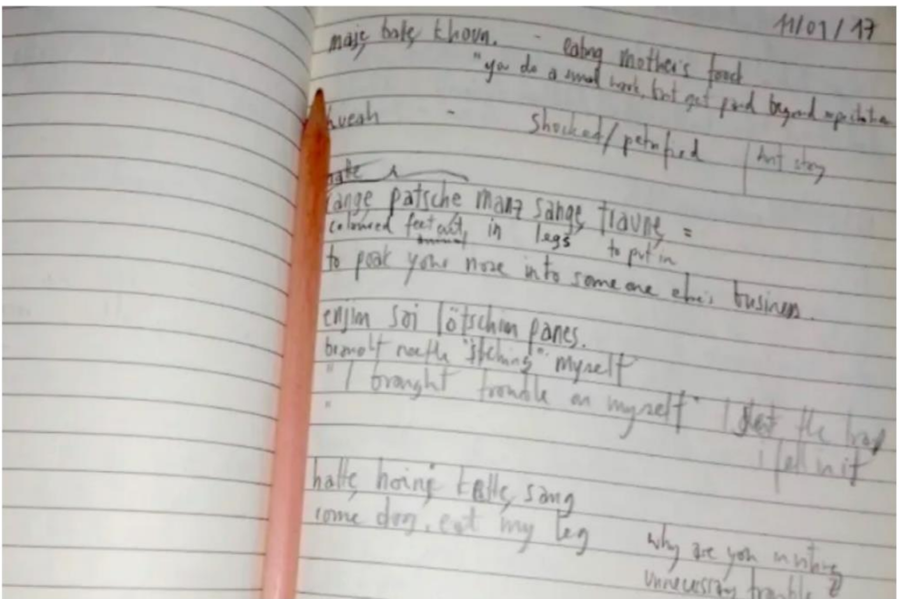

Fig. 20: range patsche / coloured feet (Kashmir 2017)

[23] Translation from Kashmiri: I brought the nettle, I sowed the nettle, and then the nettle stung me (proverb).
[24] Translation from Kashmiri: “Why don’t you come here, dog, and have a bite from my leg” (proverb).

Fig. 21: night shift (Kashmir 2017)

The best way to test Kashmiri beginner skills turns out to be during sumo journeys on the highway from Srinagar to Jammu and vice versa. Knowing that one probably won't meet the co-passengers again seems to create a kind of 'safe' exercising space. And be it this road or something else, these journeys often turn strangers into travel companions. The snow layers on this January afternoon become more persistent the higher we climb. Public and goods transport have resumed after months of shutdown. Around Bon Dialgam from a conversation of two men sitting in the back of the Sumo I come to know about the Srinagar-Jammu-winter-oneway-system and that I have chosen the 'Jammu day'. Unlikely to reach the other side of the pass and Patnitop tonight. Slope slowly ascending, behind the city of, Duru we meet the end of the queue. Fresh flakes start falling. Like a huge iron worm, the vehicles crawl further up the serpentines. Some kilometres away from the Banihal tunnel, altitude almost 3000 metres, in two rows we come to the day's final hold. People try to arrange themselves in their cars for the next hours. With slightly guilty conscience I look behind, where four men probably taller than me share the back seats. Night sets in. Silhouettes in front of our windows, some truckers and sumo drivers in discussion. Now and then, the dark inside the car is lifted by flashing rear lights, a flaring match, conversation bits, a laughter. Ten people try to generate warmth against the snow cold. We exchange dried dates, clothes, one *kãger*[25] pot makes its round till its clambering coals fade. After the fruits are finished, I decide to count the cars till the beginning of the jam. Cold air surrounds my head. Through the small corridor left in the middle of the road I walk ahead,

[25] A traditional way in Kashmir of staying warm in winters, glimmering coals carried in a small wicker basket, which people keep below their clothes.

meeting some eyes behind steamy glass, some sleeping faces. Most of the drivers are still awake and out, night shift. They try to direct the vehicles in one single line, already preparing for the road clearing snow machine awaited for the next morning: pushing, pulling, arranging in well-versed ways, routine, it seems, using free gaps for their manoeuvres. Against the slippery surface they fix the trucks' wheels with stones to keep safe their heavy loads awaited in the marketplaces of the cities and villages. Morning twilight reveals the beginning of the queue. Further up towards the tunnel, I see another line of trucks getting lost in the distance. Like out of nowhere a voice calls, with an offer for hot noon chai! My neighbour from last night whom I had lent my *pheran*[26], puts one of these small *Bakirkhani* breads into my hand.

Fig. 22: hibernation (Kashmir 2017)

The bulb for a second flickers, its glow wire's reaction barely visible when he wakes us up at dawn. "Electricity not easily finds its way to these outer parts of the valley", he says, lighting a match for the candles. In my estimate the power house of the Kishenganga Hydroelectric Plant built by the Indian National Hydro Power Corporation can't be further away than five

[26] Kashmiri cloak.

kilometres from their home. We follow him through a forest turned snow desert past criss-crossing bird traces and unknown footprints towards the lake. Boots crunch over frozen tractor wheel tracks. They reach till the shore. His hands, around 17 years younger than mine, resemble a flexible map reflecting the parameters of his profession. Using a small bucket, they rid the boat of overnight accumulated water, then fix some spots between the wooden planks where new drops appear with scrunched up polythene snippets. In the early morning light, mirror like, the Wular, hazy blue and silent, keeps its secrets. We are four and the rim of our boat almost touches its water. Fishermen float by on our left, their fishing lines waiting to get strained. Suddenly objects appear, soaked, trundling just some centimetres beneath the surface or swimming in groups around an over-water plant or some bow net construction. First plastic yield. His paddle strokes take us deeper inside the lanes of the lake, the sand diggers’ calls become distant.

Fig. 23: home-habitat (Kashmir 2017)

Fig. 24: bagged (Kashmir 2017)

Fingers act like forks. Between our feet more flotsam gathers. A swallow's cry. The deck sways as we change positions. His sister now steers the boat, while he combs through the undergrowth of some small islands, home of a group of horses. After the day's work is done, boat tied to the lakefront, a sack filled with bottles, bulbs, abandoned chapels, unidentifiable plastic pieces extracted from the water's body, in the pale gleam of the evening snow we start running towards white nothingness, two of us dancing in circles, making my head spin. Through the thicket of trees, a faint sound of *Azaan* seems to call us back to the houses.

Fig. 25: slipped (Kashmir 2017)

Fig. 26: siblings at work (Kashmir 2017)

Fig. 27: after work (Kashmir 2017)

Spring and summer... are on another page.

Fig. 28: beat (Kashmir 2017)

I return in September the same year. *Harud*, autumn. Marriage season. 2016 hasn't seen many weddings. This year four friends of mine become wives and husbands. Everyone seems involved and busy with this or that task. From the section where *wazas*, the cooks are working, sounds of the mallets pounding meat float over to the big wedding tent. The air holds the scent of fennel. Two men simultaneously apply filigree dark red *Mehndi* colour patterns on the bride's outstretched hands and feet. Another person is holding a phone to her right ear - last minute arrangements with a smile, and all seems in her control.

Fig. 29: perfect round (Kashmir 2017)

Family and friends roam inside and outside the tent. Short instructions back and forth, the bubbling of *samovar*, laughter, clanging dishes, here and there children's whooping. The groom with his following is expected by tomorrow. But already today many guests will gather. A room inside the house, hands on drums and the lights turn low. To prepare for the long night before the wedding—*mainzeraat*, four of us share the first food-filled *traem*. Not easy to convince her not to push too many meat pieces towards my side of the plate. The beats of *Tumbaknaer* drums increase. One of the younger women takes the lead. Songs for the farewell of their friend, for another family making space for a new member, for two families' idea of becoming one. I can't understand all the words, but her high pitch voice's slight ironic undercurrent

feels like a sub-text to the lyrics. Dancing starts. Spinning tops around two pairs of hands holding tight. Mothers are into it. Some end up lightheaded on the floor, tittering. Another girl gets up to improvise a freestyle. Looking a bit nervous at first, but then precise moves follow. Her arms and legs form a relaxed choreography. All of a sudden the *Tumbaknaers*' rhythm change. More accentuated. Faster. Many voices join in. "*Hum kya chahte*?" The open door and window frames fill with curious men and boys of the family who are still busy outside making sure everything is prepared. "*Hum kya chahte*?" "*Aazadi*"[27]. The sounds of the roads resonate inside the homes. From the other side of the room the girl who did the freestyle winks at me.

Fig. 30: stronghold (Kashmir 2017)

Indo Kashmir Complex. Downtown Srinagar, Nawa Bazar. The premises used to harbour a carpet factory. Sunlight throws a skewed reflection of high, narrow windows on the concrete floor of the big hall. In the early 1990s, the Indian army turned factories, town halls, guest houses, colleges, and hundreds of schools everywhere in Kashmir into detention and torture centres to control the villages and city neighbourhoods; to tortured men

[27] Translation from Urdu: "What do we want? Freedom."

abducted from various places[28]. Landscapes altered through violent cartography– the carpet factory was one of such places. Some years later, a fire incident took place. People from the locality claimed responsibility, I hear. The centre got closed. These days, the long-stretched grey two-storied building in the backyard of the compound hosts several start-ups in the ground floor and half of the second floor. The other half for a few weeks during this September exhibits the work of an artist from India. Around four dozen drawings and paintings cover the bare walls. Ten years ago the artist's engagement with Kashmir started.[29] After some time, she got involved with local artists and journalists and an organization of families who keep confronting the Indian government with questions about the thousands of enforced disappearances of the now nearly three decades of Emergency State.[30] Several elderly women have accompanied the painter and stand next to her while the exhibition is opened.

Fig. 31: endurance (Kashmir 2017)

[28] http://jkccs.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/TORTURE-Indian-State%E2%80%99s-Instrument-of-Control-in-Indian-administered-Jammu-and-Kashmir.pdf. (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[29] http://immersive.himalmag.com/kashmir-a-metaphor-of-pain. (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[30] https://thewire.in/politics/parveena-ahangar-imroz-parvez-awarded-norway-rafto-prize-2017-human-rights. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

How do you memorialize something that is at the same time still on-going? People start walking along the walls. I look at the artist. How these last ten years must have been for her? She is in conversation next to the frame with pencil sketched stone pelters and soldiers made from news clippings. Somehow, despite the fact that they are created through realistic technique, the soldiers appear like templates to me. Why does one continue working on one place for so many years? Yet, the first time she travelled to Kashmir is only now, together with her daughter, her mother, and the paintings. I stop in front of the one with skeletons in the forest. Did she have the unmarked mass graves in mind with several thousands of bullet-ridden or mutilated bodies that could be located all over the valley, and in Doda, Poonch, Rajouri, and Reasi districts in Jammu province, next to fields, schools, and homes, just some years ago?[31]

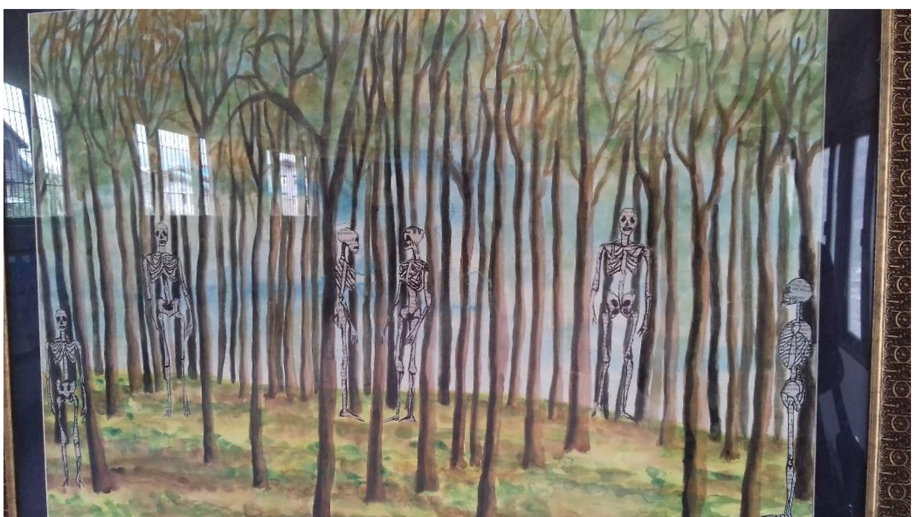

Fig. 32: behind bars (Kashmir 2017)

The findings of years long investigative work of lawyers from a Kashmiri civil society organization forced the Indian state and its army to at least provide a few confessions.[32] Though, when I try to find further legal follow-up's,

[31] https://jkccs.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/buried-evidence-_report-on-mass-graves.pdf. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

[32] https://jkccs.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/facts-under-ground-first-report-on-mass-graves-in-kashmir.pdf. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

nothing can be found in the Indian media. People for sure laugh at you when you try to imagine a world without armies. Do they also laugh when you wonder about the implications of a marketing concept like that of 'incentives' applied in the context of state-employed army personal whom we have assigned authority over death and life through impunity laws?[33] Counting bodies? I look at the painting again and wonder who for me would be the 'real' skeletons in a place like Kashmir.

Fig. 33: chroniclers (Kashmir 2017)

"Welcome to the ghost valley"[34]. My fingers turn a brittle page. On the left side of the desk rests a pile of folders with Kashmiri daily papers from 1993, June till October. The archive's racks are cluttered, chronology maintained in large parts. On the right side a window front. Wind fizzes through a gap. Down in the courtyard, I see the chairs circle, where earlier I had coffee with some members of the Kashmir University student union. Soon after the beginning of the Emergency, the Indian state has officially banned the

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[33] http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2015/3/the-ghosts-of-machil.html. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

[34] Greater Kashmir, 29th August 1993.

union. “Our school is the road,” one of them told me. And on the road, they and others are often. These days, for example, to protest against the on-going illegal detention of hundreds of fellow students and (school going) boys who are in prison since last year’s mass uprising. From the table diagonally opposite, an employee of the Allama Iqbal Library, checking something on the monitor in front of him, nods in my direction over pulled up shawl. Now and then, he turns the front of his gas heater with his foot slightly towards me. I open another folder, June 1993.There seems to be no day with no crackdown by the Indian troopers, looking for Kashmiri rebels, while alongside using the opportunity to loot and vandalize many of the houses they barge into and search. Again, a newspaper headline reads “Operation Bhoot”. *Bhoot* means ghost in Urdu and Hindi. In the papers of summer 1993, I find Kashmiri journalists reporting from across the valley about the “appearance” of what they describe as long-nailed, shrouded, uncanny sound making figures, trying to barge into people’s houses after dark and molest the residents. Apparently, for weeks neither the government nor the general public could make any genuine catching of these nocturnal ‘ghosts’. Difficult to imagine in a place, where with over 600000 stationed soldiers and curfew-bound nights normally the tiniest movement on the road attracts the attention of the eyes inside the bunkers. On the following page, an article talks about the brigades people started forming to patrol their neighbourhoods on their own. An image comes to my mind from last year’s newspaper. A group of armed forces marching on the road on the way to work, the soldier closest to the camera wearing a Skeletor mask. “Whenever some persons amongst the affected localities have tried to wrestle down and capture the ‘*bhoot’*, it has managed to get either inside a security forces bunker or boards a security forces gipsy readily available for him”[35].

[35] Greater Kashmir, 19th August 1993.

Fig. 34: sentinel (Kashmir 2017)

Their front gate is not like usually open. The bell reacts with a faint ring. Steps coming closer, accompanied by a ‘clack’ sound. He peers through the crack in the door. Unlocks. “Are you a braid chopper?” We both laugh and hug. “There is a door code now normally”. When we walk the short distance through the yard towards the house, the long stick in his hands goes clack, clack over the ground. On the veranda, the cat that lives with them and usually gives everyone a hard time entering the house without him whizzing in, does he today somehow look alert as well? Inside, the mother welcomes me with her familiar humour. “Didn’t you write three weeks ago you will come over in two days?” I make her let me prepare the salad for the dinner. Family discussions. Accounts of unidentified assailants breaking into houses and chopping off women’s hair had reached from Delhi and neighbouring states during the summer. Till September, the ‘phenomenon’ had travelled all the way up to Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh[36]. During the last weeks here, I have seen dozens of newspaper and social media pictures of fists clasping braids. There has been another incident in this locality on the day before yesterday, reported by a young woman. Her description of the intruder: a black masked figure, black trousers, black pointed boots.

[36] https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/kashmir-gripped-by-fear-of-braid-chopper/943881. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

Apparently, the person had managed to enter the family's house. The woman said she had fought back. He wasn't successful in cutting her hair. But she showed the marks his blade had left on her cheeks and lower arms. According to one Kashmiri daily over 240 cases have been reported in the valley alone. "One was hiding under a bed, imagine. Bloody pigs", the mother curses through clenched teeth, while pulling out wet clothes from the washing machine. She wants me to accompany her for hanging out the laundry. When she leaves the kitchen, she grabs a stick. Upstairs she tells me to check all the rooms. My first reaction: I want to grin and console her. Then while doing what she asked for, going through room after room, I try to imagine how in a lot of places all over Kashmir, people might do exactly the same thing, keep checking their homes, rooms, inside wardrobes, under their beds, in the evenings, or also again and again during the day, armed with sticks or other tools. Till now, police could not identify a single perpetrator. And people have started patrolling the neighbourhoods on their own. Gates and doors remain shut.[37] Later in the night, the father is out on the road. Noise has woken him up. We rush to the windows. A few minutes later he returns. No braid choppers, but army out for their night raid. The soldiers pick up several people whom they had seen protesting during the day in the *mohalla*. Afterwards, I lay awake listening. The solid clay walls all of a sudden feel thin enough to even hear the hair off the outside roaming dogs scratching along the house.

[37] https://kashmirlife.net/ghosts-90s-back-45975/. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

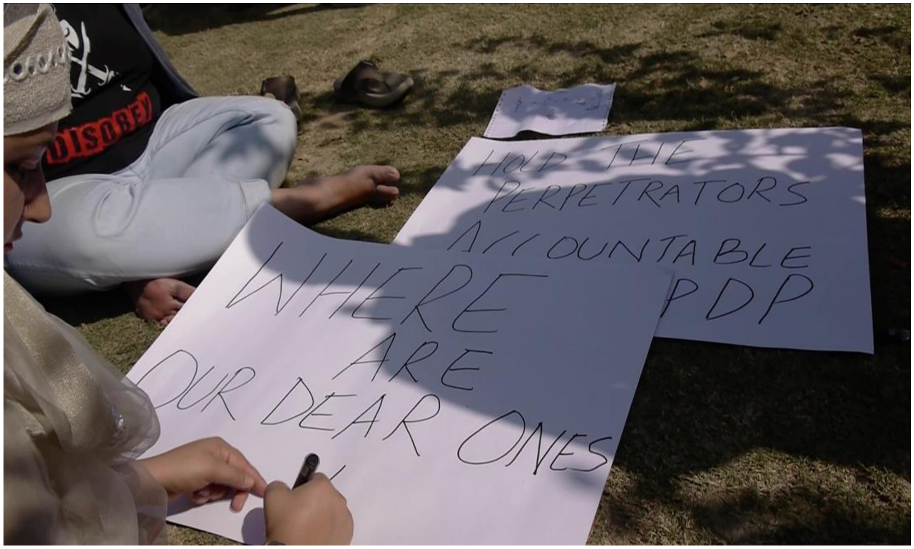

Fig. 35: unflinching (Kashmir 2017)

“Justice for Manzoor and Nasrullah”, she writes in capital letters on a white cardboard. They have gathered in Prataab Park, which is part of Srinagar’s Lal Chowk. Since the beginning of the armed rebellion and subsequent counterinsurgency in 1989 around 8000 to 10000 Kashmiris have been subjected to enforced disappearance by the Indian army[38]. On the 10th of every month, since 1994, family members have organized a sit-in protest in Lal Chowk to remember and claim the whereabouts of the ones disappeared.[39] The Lal Chowk, or Red Square, is one of the central places in Srinagar. Kashmiri freedom fighters in their anti-colonial and anti-Dogra struggle against the last by British deployed governors gave it its name. It is the place where in August 1947 Mahatma Gandhi had no “hesitation in saying that the will of the Kashmiris was the supreme law in Kashmir and Jammu”; (Noorani 2013) where three months later, in November 1947, the first prime minister of an independent India promised the people from Kashmir a plebiscite. “The fate of Kashmir will ultimately be decided by the people. It is not only a pledge to the people of Kashmir but to the world. We will

[38] https://jkccs.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/half-widow-half-wife-apdp-report.pdf. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

[39] https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/kashmir-widows-launch-calendar-remember-disappeared-190127000143885.html. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

not, and cannot back out of it."[40] It is the place where, in 1993, around 1500 Jammu & Kashmir policemen staged protest marches against the torture and killing of one of their colleagues by the Indian Army. Through Operation "Police Control Room" the mutiny was crushed by the Indian forces after a week[41].

Another cardboard. "Where are our dear ones?" Manzoor Ahmad Khan and Nasrullah Khan, are two farmers and herders hailing from the frontier district Kupwara, village Diver, overlooked by a garrison of the Indian Rashtriya Rifles 27. People say it is one of the places where you still can find *begaar*, forced labour, which can mean villagers have to construct and maintain bunkers and residential buildings for Indian soldiers without getting paid. On the morning of 31st of August 2017, both men when moving to the foothill meadows where during summer they graze their livestock, first they had to pass through the garrison to produce their identity cards. They were asked to come in. The newspapers write the Army was looking for information about the hideouts of Kashmiris fighting against the Indian army. Nasrullah Khan was found outside the camp the same evening. "Third-degree torture", according to a local police official, anonymous. In the hospital, they diagnosed kidney failure. "We sold our cow and horse for our father's treatment," according to Nasrullah Khan's son, 13 years old. The other man, Manzoor Ahmad Khan, till date, remains disappeared.[42] She continues writing, "Hold the perpetrators accountable".[43]

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[40] https://mronline.org/2010/11/29/nehru-on-kashmir/ (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[41] https://kashmirlife.net/april-28-1993-when-army-disarmed-rebellious-cops-in-kashmir-103546/. (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[42] https://scroll.in/article/849844/disappearance-of-a-man-in-north-kashmir-leads-to-allegations-of-torture-forced-labour-against-army. (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[43] https://jkccs.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/alleged-perpetrators.pdf. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

Fig. 36: family (Kashmir 2017)

The Lal Chowk is also a place where journalists protest in support of one of their young colleagues, who because of his journalistic work has been in custody of the Indian National Investigation Agency since months, on charges of "conspiring to wage war against the government of India". And today, on an International Human Rights Day, it is a place where the families again try to gather to protest against the practice of enforced disappearance, despite Indian army and Kashmiri police having shut down the whole area. Some people from the media also manage to get through the cordon till Press Colony. Cameras start shooting. "Until my son dies or I die, the search will continue."[44] When the work is done, people pack their equipment or roll their placards and disperse.

[44] http://www.wandemag.com/interview-parveena-ahangar/. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

Fig. 37: line-up (Kashmir 2017)

Old trees man the road. In summers, I imagine them to be like a green tunnel. Earlier this highway connected Srinagar with Muzaffarabad. Now a borderline is cutting through; Muzzaffarabad being part of by Pakistan controlled Kashmir. Crowded army busses rush by. I stop counting when they seem to become as numerous as the trees. Sleet slides down the windscreen. The Baramulla turning to our right. The colony they live in is located a few kilometres west of the town centre. Some years ago, together with others, as part of a resettlement program of the Indian government for Kashmiri Pandits, the Hindu community of Kashmir, they moved from Jammu back to the valley (Duschinski 2017, Kaul 2016, Rai 2011, Kaul 2012). A guard opens the gate for us. Arranged in long rows parallel to the river, the flat-roofed, two-room houses are all white and plain. I see only one, which someone has painted in light blue colour. Most of the entrances are framed by a small garden patch. Remains of *pudina*, *haakh*, and *makay*[45] between dry leaves. It's the weekend when a group of handymen moves from unit to unit to make the plasterboard walls more winter fit. Window sashes wide open, she hands over the interior of their sleeping room to us standing outside. Her husband and one of the neighbours push the remaining furniture towards the centre of the room. The other room and the kitchen are already cleared. Walls ready for the workers. Their belongings rest in neat

[45] Translation from Kashmiri: Mint, collard greens, and maize

piles on several spread-out carpets and blankets next to the colony's fence. I adjust a bundle of school books between some clothes. Behind the wire mesh, a sling of the Jhelum is visible. But this whole stretch of the river doesn't look like the Jhelum anymore. Grey machines in the water roar day and night, extracting hills of sand and pebbles and transform the landscape into an edgy, monochrome geology. Grey November sky reflects in a grey river. I didn't ask them why they chose to move to a colony. They say that they might build a small house on the land the family has kept, after some years maybe. When night sets in, their son and me light a bonfire and roast pieces of maize from the gardens. Through the open door, we can hear low-pitched sounds of the harmonium. Whenever I came to meet them, I saw him playing, eyes closed. We move closer to the fire. His son turns the skewers. He visits one of the local schools here, two years left till college. His parents think he is still too young to tell him too much about this place' past and present. And I wonder if he not already must have come to know more than they assume.

Fig. 38: shelter (Kashmir 2017)

"*Aapko mallum hain, Lhasa restaurant kahã hai*?" ("Do you know where the Lhasa restaurant is?"). He nods, stows his earplugs in a pocket, and reaching back, opens the rickshaw door from inside. The thick plastic cover pretends to give shelter against the cutting winter wind. I try to use my sleeves to warm my hands. When he turns around to offer me his basket of coals, the young man's eyes are hardly visible under the pulled down hood. Over the rising warmth, the blood in my fingers starts prickling. I pass the *kãger* back together with one of the walnuts I have found in my pocket. We chew and drive on. He drops me after Dalgate, at one of the *ghats* where a few *shikara* drivers at the shore of the Dal lake are waiting for some last passengers who dare to come out for a boat ride despite dusk and freezing temperatures. His car is already waiting there. Destination Ganderbal. We head around the lake, towards the Nishat gardens and further in direction of the Hazratbal shrine. Where water ends and where the sky begins is today just defined by a thin strip of pale land, which itself looks like it is about to dissolve. A single boat is sailing in-between. His phone rings. I can hear a female voice. "*Meynish haiz chu tuhund battwe*" ("I have your wallet"). "*Nahenz, mey haiz chu battwe panesnish*" ("No, mine is with me."), he replies. He hesitates. And looks at me, slightly confused. "Where is your wallet?" "Why? I have it. It's with me." My hand checks the left pocket of my *pheran*. Empty. How? I try to reconstruct: You paid in the haberdashery, also the man with the rickshaw, but then… the wallet must have been there, he must have passed it on? ...this woman on the phone? Or she found it? But how then? There is a faint memory of some visiting cards sticking next to the credit card. Also one of a friend in Ganderbal. The friend we are on the way to meet right now. (He later confirms). The woman who helped me out will, two days later when I pick up my wallet, even refuse an invitation for a cup of tea. "I just returned what is yours." We drive on. Music sounds from the car radio: „*Raat haneri nadi thathaan maardi, ariye ariye haan ni ariye*."[46]

[46] A line from the song Paar Chanaa De, by Shilpa Rao & Noori, Episode 4, Coke Studio Season 9, "The night is deathly dark. The river waves surge high around us. Oh listen, girl, don't be stubborn."

Fig. 39: indistinct (Kashmir 2017)

Roadside shops are closing down one by one. In front of us, several young men hop on maybe today's last bus home. How they cling to the rear of the crowded vehicle somehow reminds me of another Kashmiri man. During the by-election in Kashmir in spring 2017, to keep protesters at bay, an Indian army Major had trussed a civilian to the front of his jeep. For around five hours the man was used by this Major as a 'human shield' while driving through the villages of the constituency.[47] "This is a proxy war, and a proxy war is a dirty war. It is played in a dirty way. That is where innovation comes in,"[48] says the chief of the Indian army when he honours the same Major some days later with a medal for his "innovation and sustained efforts".[49]

[47] https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/major-involved-in-kashmir-jeep-row-awarded-army-chief-s-commendation-card/story-iYbtHFUy3GZhZIRP26j4UN.html. (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[48] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/29/india-army-chief-kashmir-protests-man-tied-to-vehicle. (accessed: 13 September 2019)
[49] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-40103673. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

Fig. 40: towards home (Kashmir 2017)

A Delhi spokesman from the ruling BJP party soon after picks up this 'innovation'. Via his online business outlet 'T-Shirt Bhaiya' he is selling the into an illustration converted picture of the Kashmiri man tied to the bonnet of an army jeep. Printed on a T-shirt. Its caption reads "Indian army is saving your ass whether you like it or not"[50]. Several thousands of them, at a prize of 495 Indian rupees, have already been sold, according to the man "wearing one's patriotism on one's chest". The by-election's turnout in Kashmir, with around 200 instances of protests and eight people who got killed, was found to be seven per cent, the lowest participation in the last 30 years.[51]

The bus stops next to a junction. Some of the men jump down from the rear while we take over. Twilight turns to night. "*Kacchiyaan da hunda kacha anjaam ni, eh gal'aam ni*[52]" the speakers sounds fade out. First lights of Ganderbal appear ahead.

[50] https://thewire.in/rights/bjp-leader-kashmir-human-shield-t-shirt. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

[51] https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/crucial-by-polls-underway-in-srinagar-delhi-and-7-other-states-10-points-1679074. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

[52] A line from the song Paar Chanaa De, by Shilpa Rao & Noori, Episode 4, Coke Studio Season 9, "The unsound can only reach an unsound end. This is a truth known to all."

While writing the last paragraphs, the blossoms of the cherry trees outside have turned into the pink greyish mud like layers on the road. I'm thinking of returning to Kashmir in summers.

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