



VISUALIZING JUSTICE: A GRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF DR. B. R. AMBEDKAR'S LIFE AND LEGACY

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Abstract: The graphic novel is a powerful and vibrant medium of literary expression that excels at its task through the employment of its visual and verbal means of expression. It has proved itself to be capable of dealing with any kind of subject matter. The subject of the present research is one such graphic novel that deals with the life and legacy of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. *Ambedkar: India's Crusader for Human Rights* (2018) delves into the portrayal of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's remarkable journey through the medium of a graphic novel and meticulously recounts Dr. Ambedkar's early struggles as an untouchable, highlighting his unwavering pursuit of education despite social barriers and his deep reverence for books. It vividly illustrates his academic achievements, showcasing his unwavering determination to empower himself and uplift marginalized communities. Moreover, the present research critically examines how *Ambedkar: India's Crusader for Human Rights* (2018) depicts Dr. Ambedkar's impassioned advocacy for the rights of untouchables and other Depressed Classes in Indian society. It explores the visual representation of his activist movements and highlights the key moments of resistance and social reform that he popularly initiated. Through powerful imagery and narrative devices, the graphic novel captures the essence of Dr. Ambedkar's tireless efforts to challenge caste-based discrimination and promote social justice.

Index Terms: Caste System, Caste Discrimination, Untouchable, Depressed Classes, Education, Hinduism

I. Introduction

Written by Kieron Moore and illustrated by Sachin Nagar, *Ambedkar: India's Crusader for Human Rights* is a 2018 graphic novel that was published by Campfire Graphic Novels. The graphic novel is a tribute to the great figure of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who played a significant role in shaping contemporary Indian society. Born into the oppressed Mahar caste in the Indian state of Maharashtra in 1891, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar faced systemic discrimination and injustice from an early age because of his caste and was very much distressed at the thought of him and the people of his community being mistreated by the society at large. Ambedkar was born in the Mahar caste, an untouchable community in the state of Maharashtra, and India mostly being a traditional Hindu society relegated the people belonging to such castes to the margins of the society. The untouchables were treated as 'subhumans' in India simply because they were born in a certain caste. Ambedkar, his family and his community experienced a great deal of discrimination at the hands of upper-class Hindus, and this was something that really troubled Ambedkar. While most of the community had accepted their fate and internalized their 'subhuman' status, Ambedkar was a revolutionary figure who rather than accepting and internalizing what was happening to them questioned and challenged it. It was Ambedkar who instilled in untouchables and people of other Depressed Classes the spirit to fight for their basic rights.

Thus, the present graphic novel is a beautiful visual representation of the life and legacy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

In the history of India's struggle for independence and social emancipation, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar stands as an iconic figure celebrated for his unwavering commitment to social justice, equality, and human rights. It is the life and work of Ambedkar that stand as a testament to the power of education, unflinching commitment to social justice, and resilience. Despite Ambedkar having been born in the oppressed Mahar caste, his unshakeable spirit and great appetite for knowledge enabled him to overcome formidable obstacles and emerge as one of the most influential figures in the history of modern India. His journey from being born into the marginalized community of untouchable Mahars to becoming the principal architect of the Constitution of India stands as a testament to the great education and knowledge that he acquired and to the visionary and revolutionary leadership that he displayed during the peak years of his life. The present graphic novel visually explores this journey of Ambedkar from his humble beginnings as an 'untouchable' to his pivotal role in drafting the Indian Constitution and championing the rights of marginalized communities. Through their vivid illustrations and narrative storytelling, Kieron Moore and Sachin Nagar bring to life the struggles, triumphs, and enduring legacy of a man who dedicated his life to the pursuit of knowledge, equality and human dignity. Furthermore, the graphic novel deals not only with Ambedkar's early life, his education and his concern for the untouchables but also with his profound concern for the people of other depressed classes as well. He represented not only the untouchables of India but also labourers, both from field and factory, and women, and his logical arguments while representing and fighting for these people profoundly reflect the kind and quality of education and knowledge that he acquired. He would fight for the rights of such people even if it meant going against the wishes of established figures of Indian politics like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

The range of subject matter that the medium of graphic novel is capable of dealing with is enormous. It deals with fantasy and science fiction, romance and relationships, literary adaptations, horror and thriller, humour and satire, educational and informative, autobiography and memoir, and historical events and biographies. It encompasses the aspects of both the fictional and the nonfictional realms of narratives. However, it is important to note here that graphic novels are increasingly inclined towards the nonfictional realm. An increasing number of critically acclaimed graphic novels are nonfictional in nature, and autobiographies and biographies are two of the most explored genres in the history of the medium. The present graphic novel, *Ambedkar: India's Crusader for Human Rights* (2018), is a detailed biography of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the life and work of Ambedkar is so beautifully presented in the graphic form. Furthermore, this is not the first time that the life and story of Ambedkar were presented using the medium of graphic novel. Published in 2011 by Navayana, *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* was a graphic novel that dealt with Ambedkar's experiences of untouchability and how he fought hard to eradicate caste-based discrimination. However, *Bhimayana* limited itself only to Ambedkar's experiences of untouchability across the country and predominantly dealt with how Ambedkar fought against this evil of caste system and untouchability. It did throw some light on his political standing but it primarily concerned itself with his experiences as an untouchable. The present graphic novel, *Ambedkar: India's Crusader for Human Rights* (2018), on the other hand, deals extensively with his early life, his education, his fight against the evil of untouchability, his political viewpoints and how he influenced the political scene of India, his disagreements with the top political leaders of the Indian National Congress, and how he played a significant role in drafting the Constitution of India. The graphic novel also deals extensively with his religious conversion when he converted from Hinduism to Buddhism. Thus, the present graphic novel, *Ambedkar: India's Crusader for Human Rights* (2018), is a comprehensive account of the life and legacy of the great Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

The present graphic novel, furthermore, is not just a superficial introduction to the life and work of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar but a detailed exploration of the ideologies that Babasaheb held very dear to his heart. The extensive research that the creators must have carried out in order to create this graphic novel is very much evident in the way the graphic novel has been created. Its text-heavy captions and commentaries, alongside its vivid illustrations, convey a deep understanding of the life and legacy of Babasaheb. Thus, the present graphic novel is a must-read for anyone who wants to acquaint themselves with the life, work, ideology and legacy of this great man.

II. A Graphic Exploration of the Life and Legacy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

As mentioned earlier, *Ambedkar: India's Crusader for Human Rights* (2018) deals not only with Ambedkar's experiences of untouchability but with a whole lot of things that include his birth in the untouchable Mahar community, his life as a student devoted completely to educating himself, his fondness for books and knowledge, the movement that he initiated for the liberation of the untouchables from the shackles of the caste system, his concern for other depressed classes of society including labourers and women, his religious conversion, his role in drafting the Constitution and how he influenced the political scene of India by his visionary leadership and ideologies. The medium of graphic novel lends itself perfectly to the representation of his life, work and legacy. The graphic novel opens with Ambedkar as a ten-year-old child belonging to the untouchable community of Mahars and the very first page presents Ambedkar and his brother Anandrao being kicked and thrown out of the cart they were travelling in simply because they were untouchables. Thus, the graphic novel begins with this very mistreatment that Ambedkar and his brother received because of their caste. The second page of the graphic novel presents that aspect of Ambedkar's personality that would make him what he became in the decades to come: his ability to question and challenge the established notions and his keen sense of understanding. When Ambedkar and his brother were asked by an innkeeper to drink from the muddy stream of water passing by, Ambedkar instantly questioned his brother why they couldn't enter the inn to drink water but his questions remained unanswered. Rather, his brother said, "Don't complain, Bhimrao. Just drink up and we'll get on the road again" (6). Anandrao here stands for the whole untouchable community that has accepted and internalized whatever treatment they have received at the hands of the upper-caste Hindus. Bhimrao, on the other hand, even though he was a ten-year-old child, displays a strong sense of understanding and questioning when he said, "Anandrao didn't answer my question, but from that day onwards I began to understand I would spend my life being degraded simply because of the caste I'd been born into" (6), and this was something that troubled Ambedkar and later propelled him to stand for the rights of the depressed classes. The medium of the graphic novel lends itself perfectly here when Ambedkar discovered through his extensive readings how the caste system had emerged in India. Presenting a full double-spread on pages 8 and 9 as shown in fig. 1, the medium of graphic novel plays a significant role in making the readers understand, visually and verbally, how the caste system emerged in India. Ambedkar's words in this context are worth studying here. He says, "The caste system is derived from the four Varnas of ancient Hindu society, which categorised people on the basis of their occupation. Then, caste became hereditary and a label" (8). Thus, the caste system, when it emerged, was nothing but just a system of categorisation that was based on what people did for a living. However, Ambedkar's concern lies with what happened later on: it became hereditary and a label that stuck with people for the rest of their lives. It began to define people and determine how they would be treated irrespective of their occupation now. Ambedkar's arguments in this regard are worth quoting here. He says,

"Empires rose and fell. Castes divided into sub-castes. But one thing remained constant—the untouchables were the lowest rung of the ladder. They were not allowed to touch anything used by the other castes, and the other castes would not touch anything used by them because they were considered impure. . . . As I grew up, it became evident to me that Mahars did not enjoy the same life as higher-caste Hindus. We were restricted to the most degrading of jobs, such as street-sweeping and scavenging. We had to beg for scraps of food. We worshipped the same gods as the Hindus, but were not allowed in their temples. And, as I found out that day, we were not allowed to drink from the public wells" (8-9).

Thus, the graphic novel begins with that aspect of Ambedkar's life that later played a significant role in making him the champion of the depressed classes of society. It was the days of his early life that troubled and instilled in Ambedkar the undying spirit to fight for the untouchables. It was his father's words that made him what he later became in life. His father said to him, "Work hard, learn as much as you can and then you'll know how to fight back" (10). Thus, this became the mantra of his life and he set out to learn and acquire as much knowledge as he could.

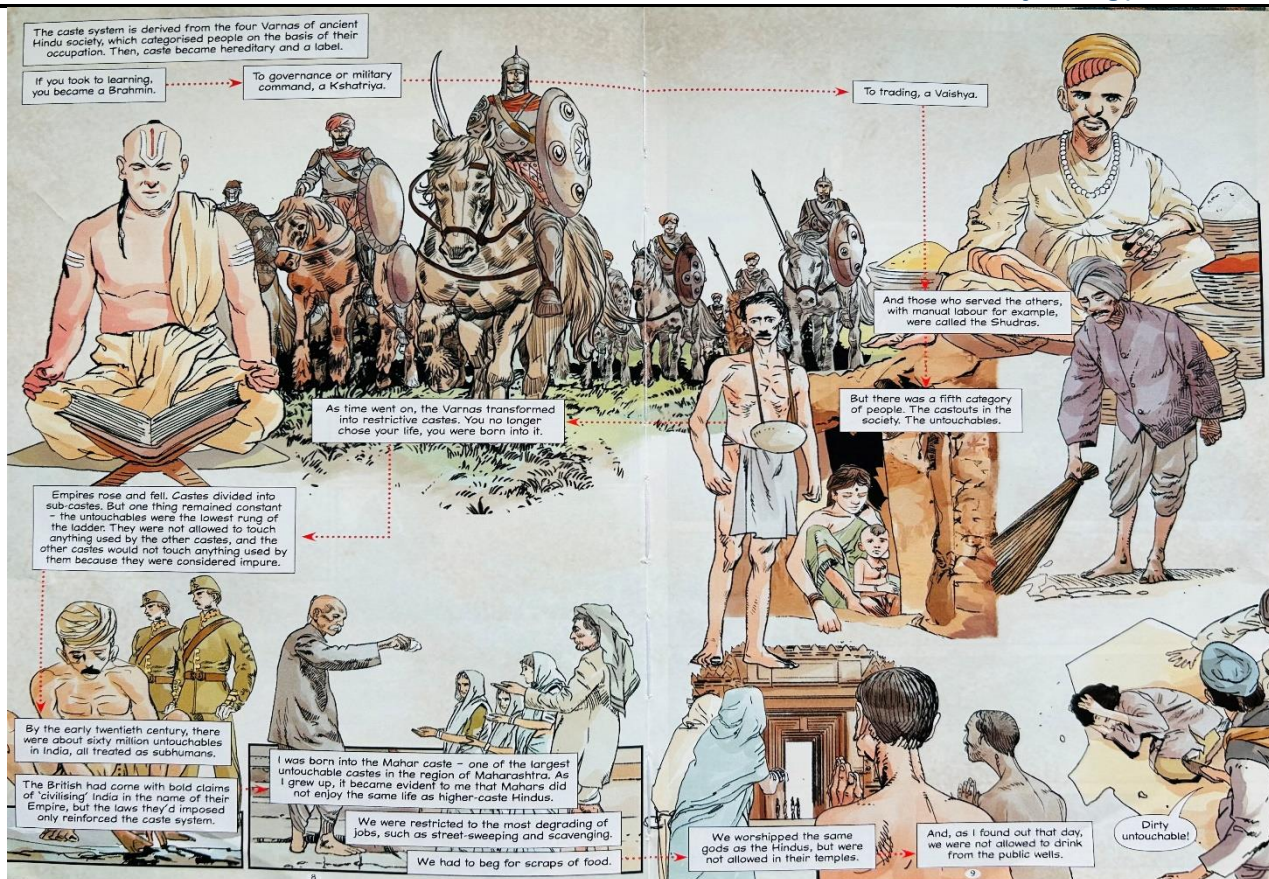


Fig. 1: A visual representation of how the caste system emerged in India and what it has turned into over the course of time

Ambedkar's life was all about acquiring education, knowledge and wisdom. His fondness for books and knowledge was very much evident right from the early years of his life. He was good at studies but what consumed most of his time, as can be seen in the graphic novel, was not the books prescribed by the school but the ones that he inconveniently read to acquaint himself with the caste system and the history of India. He passed the final exam of high school in 1907, a rare achievement for a Mahar, and went to New York for further studies with the financial aid of the charitable Sayajirao Gaekwad III, the Maharaja of Baroda. Maharaja's aid helped him acquire prestigious degrees and more knowledge abroad but what ignited a spark in Ambedkar was the way in which he was treated in New York. To him, New York "represented hope, freedom . . . the opportunity to lead a better life" (25). Everybody was equal in New York and this was something that really fascinated Ambedkar. To put it in his own words, "I'm eating with a tablecloth and napkin! Waiters smile as they serve me! My water comes from the same source as everyone else's! There are so many things I can do which would never be possible there [in India]. It has opened my eyes. Society does not need castes. It does not need untouchability!" (26). Thus, besides the quality education that he received in New York, it was also the culture of the city that influenced Ambedkar and ignited in him the spark to stand and fight for the untouchables and many other depressed classes of society. To put it in his own words again, "My experiences and studies in America left me with a deep reverence for justice and equality" (29). Thus, his personal experiences in New York coupled with his undying hunger for knowledge and wisdom played a significant role in shaping Ambedkar's ideologies that would later enable him to master the cause of the oppressed and the depressed sections of Indian society. But when Ambedkar returned to India four years later, he was again back into a society that was casteist and treated people based on the community they were born into, and this time the discrimination fell even harder on Ambedkar because he had been accustomed to equality and freedom in New York. He writes that "for five years when he was abroad, the consciousness of untouchability was wiped out of his mind but on return the situation was heart rending" (qtd. in Lakshmisha). He wasn't allowed to drink from the same bottle that his colleagues did and this upset him greatly. Nonetheless, Ambedkar's knowledge and wisdom were all set to inspire him to stand for the rights of the depressed classes of society. Coming to how the medium of graphic novel has lent itself to the telling of Ambedkar's educational journey, it is important to reiterate here that books were the most important part of Ambedkar's life, and every time the graphic novel talked about Ambedkar's engagement with books, the panels devoted to the visual representation of such an engagement were relatively bigger in size and dimension

compared to rest others. Such panels depicted Ambedkar writing something in the middle of a large panel, him sitting in the middle of New York libraries with a full view of the library, and sometimes him carrying six to seven books at a time with a background that depicts the huge libraries of New York. Such a representation symbolises nothing but the sheer significance the books have in Ambedkar's life. It helps consolidate the image of Babasaheb Ambedkar as a 'Symbol of Knowledge'. Thus, to an attentive reader, the graphic novel is not just Ambedkar's story in captions and commentaries but also in the images that accompany them.

After his early life and education abroad, the graphic novel talks about the real struggle of which Ambedkar was a major part. He had begun his movement of emancipation for the untouchables by setting up the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha, which meant 'Association for the Welfare of the Ostracized', and opened hostels and libraries for the people of the Depressed Classes. However, what made him a hero for the untouchables was his march to the Chowdar Tank, popularly known as Mahar Satyagraha, along with thousands of other untouchables and drinking water from it. In a speech that he made to the untouchables a day before the march, he said,

"My friends – for too long we, who are condemned as untouchables, have contented ourselves to eating carrion and crumbs, as the higher castes would have us do. We must root out from our minds this idea that there is hierarchy in the society, and that we have no standing. A great injustice has been don't against you, but access to water is your natural and legal right. We will march to the Chowdar Tank together, and drink!" (51).

This was the first of such instances wherein Ambedkar led the untouchable community to fight for their own rights. He had instilled in his people the thought that "all men are born equal and all die equal" (59), and a direct consequence of this new spirit was one of the most important events in the history of India's struggle for social emancipation: the burning of *Manusmriti*. In the words of one of Ambedkar's supporters, "The *Manusmriti* is a symbol of inequality, cruelty and injustice towards the Depressed Classes – it should be publicly burned!" (59). The untouchables and people of other depressed classes, under the leadership of Ambedkar, as shown in fig. 2, publicly burnt *Manusmriti* on December 25, 1927. In the words of Ambedkar, "That evening, the old, oppressive laws were burned, to usher in the new age of equality" (60).

Besides what the researcher has discussed, Ambedkar was also an active member of the Indian political scene. This was the time when two movements were parallelly going on: Ambedkar's movement of social emancipation for untouchables and India's struggle for independence from the British. Even though the later movement appealed to a greater number of Indians, Ambedkar was still demanding the social emancipation and protection of the untouchables. For him, the issue of untouchability held more significance than independence, because according to him, "With such massive inequality within society, it would be reckless to return to Hindu rule without a plan to alleviate the suffering of the depressed classes" (28). He further adds, "We must help bring about independence, for no country is good enough to rule over another. But nor is any caste. I cannot support the Civil Disobedience Movement, for revolutions simply transfer political power from one party to another. We must not accept any transfer of power that does not come with real social change!" (69). Clearly for Ambedkar, the interests of the untouchables were more important than the political independence that the Indian National Congress was trying to achieve. At both the First and the Second Round Table Conferences, Ambedkar was an important speaker who represented the untouchables of India and raised his voice against the prevalent social evils. He even had an altercation with Gandhi when it came to the rights of the untouchables. He said, "Gandhi's aim for self-rule was noble, but his vision for a free India would strengthen the caste system that oppressed my people. His words were a declaration of war against us" (77). Thus, Ambedkar was an important figure in the history of Indian politics who never shied away from asserting the rights of his people.



Fig. 2: Ambedkar and his followers publicly burnt Manusmriti

The graphic novel also presents in detail how independence came about for India. The strong visuals presented on pages 130 and 131, as shown in fig. 3, give a sense of what the people of India must have felt on that day and how the atmosphere must have been. The pages depict the Viceroy announcing India's independence, the newspaper which runs the headline of India's independence, Nehru delivering a speech a day before the independence, Jinnah addressing the people of his community, the British flag being brought down and the Indian flag being hoisted at the Red Fort. And it was just around this time that Nehru offered Ambedkar the post of Law Minister in his ministry and gave him the task of drafting the Constitution. Although Ambedkar was not keeping well during this time of his life due to age, he was still so passionate about his work and wanted to work as much as he could. On November 25, 1949, when the work on the Constitution was nearing its end, Ambedkar delivered a speech in the parliament which is beautifully presented on the text-heavy page 141 of the graphic novel as shown in fig. 4.



Fig. 3: Scenes of India's Independence

Babasaheb died on December 6, 1956 and the graphic novel vividly presents the scenes of his funeral but the next page of the graphic novel, page 165, is a visual tribute to the great figure of Babasaheb whose idol, as shown in fig. 5, is facing the Indian parliament and the sunrise symbolizing the new direction that he had shown to the Indian society, both politically and socially. His work was the beginning of a new dawn for the depressed classes of society.



Fig. 4: Ambedkar's address to the assembly after the Constitution was made

One of the most striking features of the graphic novel is the style of visual representation that it adopted while depicting the figure of Dr. Ambedkar. When the graphic novel begins, the figure of Ambedkar is like a common man and he is just another man in the crowd. However, it changes as the story moves forward. After he educated himself and returned to India to champion the cause of the oppressed, the visual representation of his figure changes drastically in the sense that it only grew in size throughout the graphic novel. The figure of Babasaheb is clearly visible in his blue suit that he wears most of the time. This slowly and gradually increasing size of the figure of Babasaheb throughout the graphic novel was a metaphor for the growing stature of Babasaheb. He was only growing in popularity due to his education, knowledge, wisdom and his desire to fight for the oppressed. Thus, the present graphic novel is a vivid and beautiful account of the life and legacy of the great figure of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar who popularly became Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.

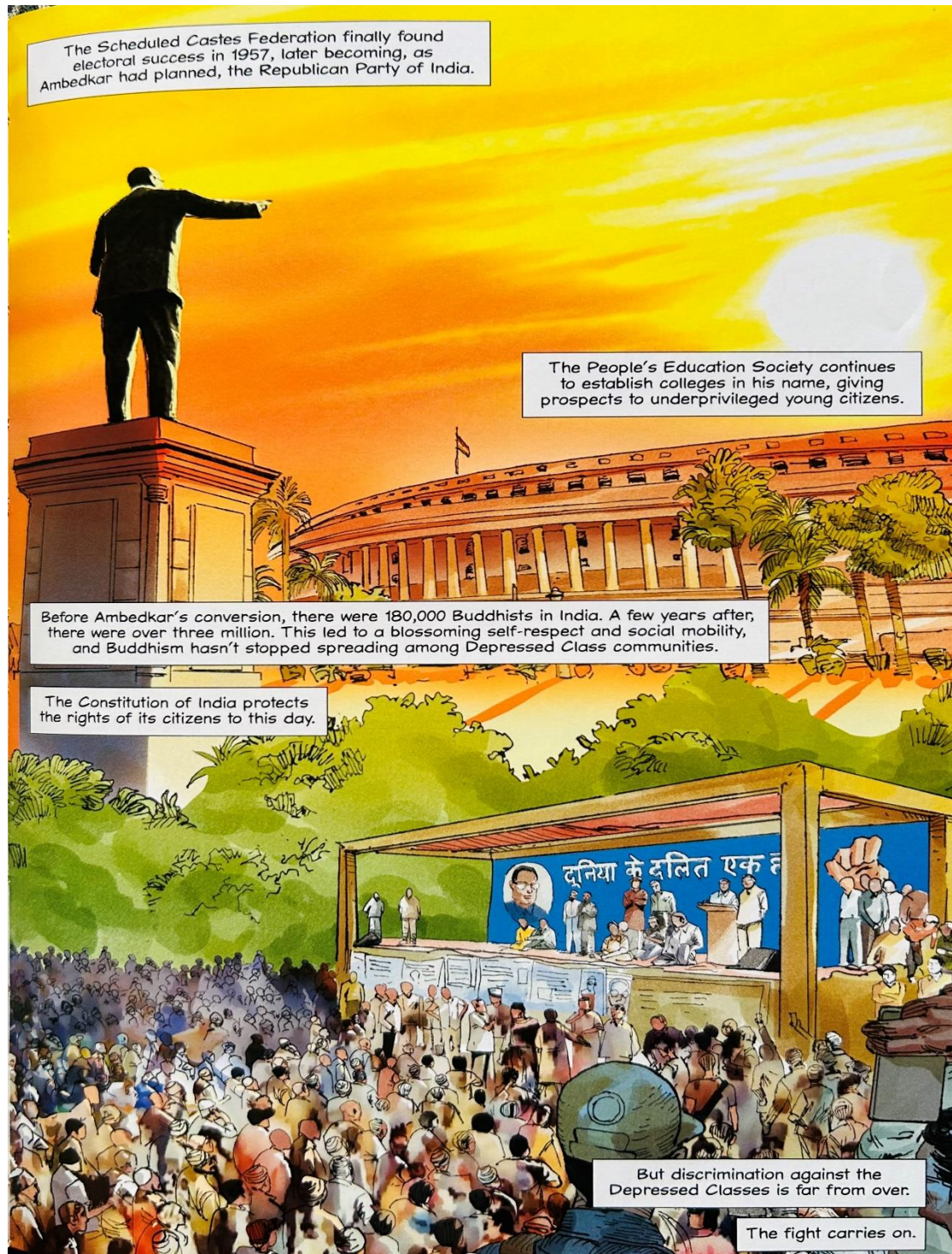


Fig. 5: The figure of Babasaheb Ambedkar facing the parliament and the sunrise symbolizes the dawn of a New India

III. Conclusion

The present graphic novel, *Ambedkar: India's Crusader for Human Rights* (2018), sheds light on the extraordinary journey of one of India's most influential figures. Through the lens of graphic storytelling, the narrative has vividly depicted Dr. Ambedkar's early struggles as an untouchable, his relentless pursuit of education, and his unwavering commitment to social justice and human rights. The graphic novel not only portrays Dr. Ambedkar's personal triumphs and achievements but also serves as a powerful testament to his tireless advocacy for marginalized communities. By visually capturing key moments of resistance, solidarity, and reform, the narrative highlights Dr. Ambedkar's unwavering resolve to challenge caste-based discrimination and dismantle oppressive social structures. As we reflect on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's legacy through the medium of graphic storytelling, it becomes evident that his principles and values remain as relevant and impactful today as they were during his lifetime. Through his unwavering courage, resilience, and determination, Dr. Ambedkar continues to serve as a beacon of hope and inspiration for all those who strive for a more just, equitable, and inclusive society. The words of Gail Omvedt provide for the perfect concluding remarks. He writes in his book *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India* (2004),

Ambedkar's 'western' image symbolizes a claim by Dalits to the heritage of the ages, a rejection of Brahmanic and other forms of narrow cultural nationalism and a modernism that even today represents the height of India's Enlightenment tradition. If Gandhi was Bapu, the 'father' of a society in which he tried to inject equality while maintaining the 'Hindu' framework, Ambedkar was Baba to his people and the great liberator from that framework. . . . While Gandhi fought for freedom from colonial rule, Ambedkar fought for a broader liberation from exploitation and oppression. . . . like Marx he was not simply a philosopher reinterpreting the world but a leader of those who wanted to 'reconstruct the world' by abolishing exploitative social structures" (xv-xvi).

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