

STORY BOXES

In 2003, Drawn & Quarterly, world's leading publisher of graphic novels, released a pamphlet called 'A Drawn and Quarterly Manifesto' with an aim to help confused booksellers who did not know which section to store "graphic novels" in. Around the time of its release, Chris Oliveros, founder and editor-in-chief of Drawn & Quarterly said, "Many of the bookstores that do have a graphic novel section are selling *Maus* next to *X-Men*, which is just wrong because they're two very different books for two very different audiences. It's kind of like having cookbooks and putting them in the gardening section."



Oliveros' concern probably sums up the problems that the graphic novel "genre" faces even today, especially in India. While graphic novels in India are getting their due recognition for the craft, impeccable storylines, innovations, originality et al, a lot of challenges still persist. Most bookstores don't have enough stocks of graphic novels and those which stock a few, usually shove them in the 'Comics' or 'Children's Books' sections.



Kyoorius decided to talk to a few established Indian graphic novelists to give you an in-depth view of the space through a two-part series. Here is the first one.

This cover page is illustrated by Jasjyot Singh Hans.



Patil's debut novel
— *Kari*

AMRUTA PATIL

By Payal Khandelwal

"A young, deeply introverted, asocial and queer woman" is how Amruta Patil has often summed up the protagonist of her debut graphic novel *Kari*. When *Kari* released in 2008, it took the country by storm and unsurprisingly, got a lot of global attention and has been released in various international languages since. Despite the unusual protagonist, the intense storyline interspersed with dark humour, incidental queerness and two attempts of suicide, for Patil, *Kari* was all about spontaneity and youthful lack of big-picture vision.

Released a few months back, Patil's *Adi Parva*, the first part of the colossal trilogy project based on the *Mahabharata*, *Vishnu puranas* and the tradition of oral storytelling, raises a whole lot of questions and refuses to give any answers. During the launch, Patil confessed that the book almost takes a cheeky pleasure in doing that. She feels that mythologies are mainly about the human psyche. Also, in *Adi Parva*, the Sutradhar (narrator) is not a man, unlike all the Indian scriptures, but the female river *Ganga* who Patil talks about as someone who straddles both the celestial and terrestrial, who is a queen and an unsentimental mother.

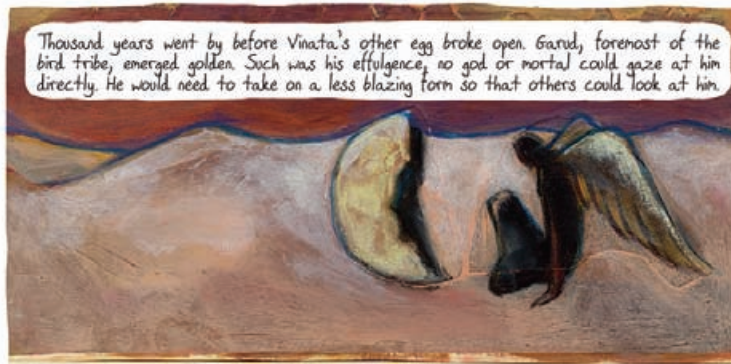
Needless to say, if the graphic novel genre can be called a movement, then Patil is one of its most avant-garde and chief leaders. She never expected the kind of response that *Kari* managed to garner. "My first thought was that of abject gratitude that someone had agreed to publish me at all. I was just keen to tell an intimate story well and to learn about the publishing process. I have been lucky to have gone the distance with HarperCollins India, and for what the book is, it received large amounts of love," she says.

Adi Parva has already received tremendous positive reviews. This time around she had a slightly different expectation though. She says, "People can be unpredictable and polarized in



She wasn't my kind of woman and that's why, that night she was. This wine is the Blood of Christ. Brings the truth out of a woman sooner than any confession box does. Makes you trust a stranger with your life, your car keys, your best-guarded secret.

Pages from her latest novel — Adi Parva



their reaction to familiar things looked at in an atypical fashion. The soul of the epic lies so very close to our collective psyche, I knew that people would certainly respond. What I had no way of gauging, was what the nature of the responses would be—acceptance or resentment, curiosity or hostility.”

Even though she is relieved that the reception is favourable, she does not want to spend any undue energy thinking about *Adi Parva* anymore as this would detract her from the “unselfconscious movement” that the sequel requires. She is currently in the process of researching and scripting Part 2, which is tentatively called *Sauptik Parva*. She also continues to do some form of graphic journalism with her short pieces for various national and international magazines like *Art Review*, *Time Out*, *Internazionale* and *Tehelka*.

Some of the recurring themes in Patil's work include *memento mori*, sexuality, myth, sustainable living, the aspiration for beauty and grace, and the unbroken thread of stories

passed down from storyteller to storyteller through the ages. While *Kari* had a black & white and grey (charcoal) look, there is a heavy use of acrylic colour on paper in *Adi Parva*.

Describing her work process, she gives us the example of *Adi Parva* where the painting part took a year and the rest about three years. “The *abhyas* (exercise) continues on a day-to-day basis for months on end. The very basic sketching happens simultaneously. The actual grunt work—the final pages—happens in a short burst of energy and effort,” she says. She generally does not discard any of the sketches for many reasons like her recycling ethic, desire to chronicle personal growth and also out of a practical need to actually get the job done.

There is no doubt that *Kari* is one of the most important and path-breaking books in the genre which made the space easier for future entrants. Patil thinks that the graphic novel space has definitively become airier and better organized but she also feels that there will be a scramble for (publishing) opportunities and resources. Citing one recent work that caught her attention, she says, “It's very exciting to see work like *Sudershan (Chimpanzee)*—original storyline, good writing, non-imitative artwork.”

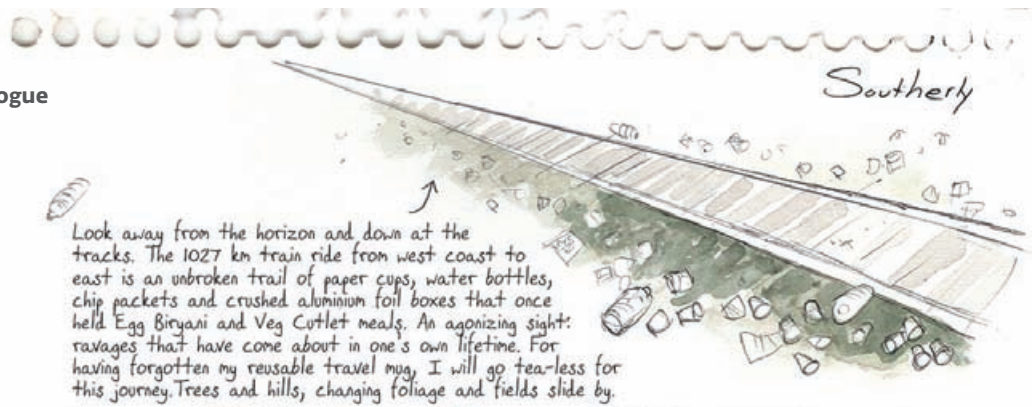
Patil is a firm believer of the story being more important than the form and wants to work on a novel post her trilogy project. “I am willing to play with a permutation and combinations of text and image in varying proportions to see what the story needs most. And when required, I am open to leave illustrations out entirely. As a personal challenge too, I want to see if I have what it takes to keep aside the safety blanket of pictures and still do a competent storytelling job.”

amrutapatil.blogspot.com



Adi Parva

Carnet de Voyage |
Sketchbook-Travelogue
| Southerly



Look away from the horizon and down at the tracks. The 1027 km train ride from west coast to east is an unbroken trail of paper cups, water bottles, chip packets and crushed aluminium foil boxes that once held Egg Biryani and Veg Cutlet meals. An agonizing sight: ravages that have come about in one's own lifetime. For having forgotten my reusable travel mug, I will go fear-less for this journey. Trees and hills, changing foliage and fields slide by.



Indian Railways fosters an easy intimacy. Unknown person #1 borrows my phone charger wordlessly. Unknown person #2 watches my bags while I buy fruit on some railway platform at 11 PM. In the interest of cramped knees, two gents who were strangers until now, have figured out a seating configuration that works. Neither feels obliged to make small talk on account of the odd proximity. They are hypnotised in unison by the Tamil MP3 playlist excreted by a cellphone.



In the 60 seconds before she disappears from eyeshot, I register a woman washing clothes in a lotus pond in the middle of what can only (and quite arrogantly) be described as 'nowhere'. It is lotus pond with lotuses, mind you, not water lily pond with water lilies.

1. EVICTION NOTICE

Solo flying is for the wage. Central note of a bedtime is conforming no more here for mutation, resolution, address. Mother, who has long suspected the extent of my address, will do all she can to have no escape detection.



Why draw the attention of the neighborhood towards your body when you have such a pretty brain?

Susceptible to flattery, I change into relaxed, carefree attire - until I learn that the attention was about camouflage, not pretty brain. Modesty isn't a quiet cultural fetish. It's a survival tactic. Ten angry years and one broken marriage later, mother's gentle diplomacy can't save me. I have been asked to vacate my home. Building Society finds my individualism stark and viscous great left corner.



It's infuriating to be thirty-three-years-old and have to prove oneself like this.

But I'm determined to attempt the path of Charm (as opposed to path of Confrontation) in winning my landlady over.

THE PECULIAR HOMELESSNESS OF INDIA'S ODD DAUGHTERS

I come to gender wars with great reluctance. For more vital planetary issues need human attention and time. Recent events, however, force me to explore a phenomenon I call the peculiar homelessness of India's odd daughters. Enforcers of this homelessness belong to different socioeconomic strata, and offer guide.



This homelessness is as much a denial of safe physical home as it is of safe emotional refuge.



Refuge is transactional - pay by our rules and you are safe. Refuse and be locked out.

Most fairly women here have their own lock-out stories - some terrifying, others more commonplace. All these stories have one shared default: systemic sympathy lies with the oppressor, not the oppressed. In fact, the oppressed are viewed with sympathy for not being trouble with their address, asking for it. The stories that follow are all true.

Peculiar Homelessness
of India's Odd
Daughters (Compiled for
Internazionale Magazine)

ORIJIT SEN

By Payal Khandelwal



When *River of Stories* was first published in 1994, most bookshops refused to stock it as it didn't fit into any of the categories that they displayed. "Perhaps they weren't sure of what to make of the contents either," says Orijit Sen, the book's author who is now often referred to as the first graphic novelist of India.

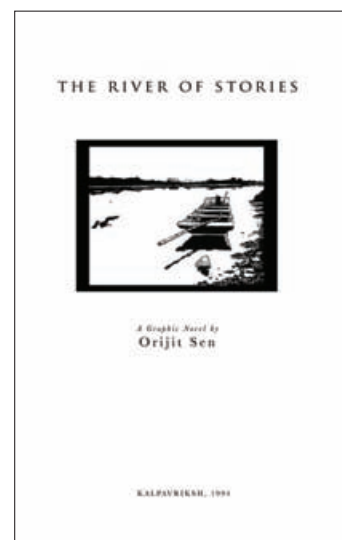
Sen, in his early thirties, spent about three years of his life on his "magnum opus". The book was created and produced with the help of a small grant that Kalpavriksh — a Delhi based group of environmentalists that Sen was active with — secured from the Ministry of Environment. Initially, the book was only stocked in the design and crafts shop People Tree in Delhi, which Sen had started with his wife.

While the initial days were disheartening, today Sen is happy that his book has inspired many people. He says, "I think the work of people like Sarnath, Parismita, Amruta, Vishwajyoti, Appupen and many others has really opened up the possibilities of the kind of subjects and styles that the genre can encompass today. Publishers, the media, and some arts funding

organisations have been receptive enough to support the trend." He, however, is "cautiously optimistic" about the state of the art these days. Even though Indian comics have come a long way since 1994, a genuine, diverse and thriving graphic novel or comics culture is not exactly round the corner and the genre definitely needs more passionate publishers and promoters, he feels.

While the market has undoubtedly matured a bit now, one of the biggest stumbling blocks for graphic novelists had always been the perception that anything with pictures and text is a comic book targeted at children. Sen's comics universe is much larger than that. "Comics (or 'Comix') is the name the medium acquired in its early existence as a contemporary form of popular, graphic storytelling, with its own visual language and conventions. Eventually, great practitioners of the medium expanded its universe — creating wonderful characters, stories and artworks in the process. When we discard the term 'Comics', we also discard the incredibly rich history that goes with it." He puts 'Graphic Novel' as a genre under comics that usually features a long narrative authored by one or two collaborators, which is often political, or 'adult' oriented and smaller in format than traditional comics.

The River of Stories



Emerald Apsara



Talking about the themes in his work, Sen says that he is very inspired by the many histories and diverse geographies of the Indian subcontinent. "I'm interested in depicting contemporary, closely observed realities (in both narration and art), and their conflicting interplay with alternative, historic and imagined realities." He is also fascinated by the way people's notions of the external world are shaped by the inner emotional and intellectual worlds they inhabit and graphic narration, he feels, is a particularly conducive medium for the exploration of such parallel realities. "It's the way, for example, that Bill Watterson's character Hobbes switches so effortlessly between being a stuffed doll and a walking talking tiger in the 'Calvin and Hobbes' strips," he says.

Sen feels extremely moved and angered by the unjust and destructive nature of our society, and as an artist, feels compelled to engage with the social and ecological problems of our times. *River of Stories* is a thinly fictionalized version of the 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' which critiqued the development model of that time. Sen actually spent time and worked with the Adivasi community which was being dislocated due to the dam project.

He's also worked on "Telling Tales", a column for *India Magazine*, over a period of almost two years. His brief for the column was to collect real life stories from people around him—stories that revealed something interesting about contemporary Indian life—and turn them into comics. "The column presented a set of slice-of-life stories dealing with, among other things, the wit of a high class *Hijra* on the Rajdhani Express; the trials of adopting a new Buddhist name; the guilt of a teenage encounter with prostitutes etc." He has also worked with local Manipuri artists to create comic books for HIV/AIDS related issues in Manipur.

On the drawing board, Sen fills his story with deeper, sometimes very detailed research

on one hand, and allows his imagination to run wild on the other. Talking about his creation process, he says, “My stories often emerge from small everyday observations or encounters and I like to build up narratives around these ‘seeds’ in my head over time. On paper, I usually begin by making a series of thumbnail sketches. I move these around, edit and make notes around them and I might simultaneously make larger sketches of a few individual frames to get a feel of the characters and visual styles.” For him, words come in well after the visual. “I approach them cautiously as words, dialogues and texts, if used carelessly, can flatten out the nuanced shades and multiplicities of meanings that images hold,” he says.

The final stage is the making of the page layouts and artworks, now-a-days on his computer. “I draw the whole story as a series of double-spreads as I think of the double spread as *the* most important constituent unit of a comics narrative. As for the text, I type



Love in Punjab

everything in but once it's finalised, I hand-write on top of the typed layer as I prefer the final manual engagement, and the resultant personalized irregularity of it.”

Sen is currently working on *Hair Burns Like Grass* — a project inspired by Kabir's poetry. Two chapters of this work-in-progress appeared in the Pao Anthology of Comics last year. He has also just completed a short piece of work which will appear in another anthology — on partition related graphic stories from various South Asian countries — in August this year.



Hair Burns like Grass

Kalasha Kala

