



Picturing The Nation: Cultural Memory, Resistance, And Tradition In Indian Graphic Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Indian English graphic novels have become a lively and interesting way to tell stories, mixing words and images to explore what makes India unique—its history, traditions, and memories. This paper looks at how some Indian graphic novels rewrite and rethink India's past, myths, and modern social and political issues. Using ideas from visual semiotics and cultural studies, it focuses on how pictures tell stories that become a powerful way to express cultural resistance and shape identity. By closely examining works like Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva*, Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories*, and Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor*, the paper shows how each panel is packed with meaning that goes beyond just the words. These stories cover a wide range of topics—like environmental issues, city life, myths, caste and gender struggles—and they paint a picture of India not as a single, unified nation, but as a complex mix of different cultures talking to each other. The paper also looks at how traditional Indian symbols, myths, and current political debates are all woven into the artwork, giving us a deeper look at how India's identity is changing. By decoding the way these stories are told visually, it becomes clear how graphic novels challenge official histories, bring voice to those who have been unheard, and open up new ways to remember and understand culture. In the end, this paper argues that Indian English graphic novels are more than art—they are spaces where culture is negotiated, resisted, and remembered. They invite readers to think critically about what it means to belong to a nation and who gets to tell that story.

Keywords: Indian Graphic Novels; Cultural Memory; Visual Semiotics; Resistance; Mythology; National Identity; Indian Society; Tradition

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, graphic novels have become a powerful way to tell stories worldwide. Combining striking visuals with compelling storytelling, these books are far beyond pictures—they're layered works that dig into themes like identity, history, politics, and culture. In India, English-language graphic novels have developed into a unique form of expression, capturing the country's rich diversity of traditions and social issues. They smoothly blend narrative with vivid artwork, creating a space to examine cultural memory, resistance, and tradition, especially as India continues to evolve as a nation. This paper explores how some Indian English graphic novels portray the concept of the nation—through both images and ideas—by emphasizing historical narratives, mythological elements, and social critiques. In India, the idea of nationhood is complex, intertwined with a history of conflicts, varied cultural identities, and ongoing inequalities. Mainstream stories often offer simplified views, glossing over uncomfortable truths and marginalizing certain groups. Conversely, graphic novels open a window for alternative voices. Their use of powerful visuals, nonlinear storytelling, references to other works, and distinctive art styles challenge dominant narratives and help bring marginalized voices into focus.

By weaving images and words together, these stories create a rich, multi-sensory experience that influences how we understand identity and belonging. When these graphic novels blend historical reflection with innovative visuals, they imagine the nation not as a static map but as an energetic, often contested cultural

space. Benedict Anderson's famous book, 'Imagined Communities,' describes the nation as a community shaped through shared stories, rituals, and symbols. In India, this imagined community is often fractured along lines of caste, class, gender, religion, and language. Graphic novels are a unique space where these divisions are not only visible but also reimagined. Their ability to present multiple perspectives simultaneously, organize time and space creatively, and depict diverse voices helps tell stories from different vantage points—enabling marginalized groups, reclaiming myths, and visually expressing resistance.

This makes Indian English graphic novels a powerful tool for exploring how storytelling through images reshapes our understanding of the nation. This paper focuses on three key Indian English graphic novels: Orijit Sen's 'The River of Stories' (1994), Amruta Patil's 'Adi Parva' (2012), and Sarnath Banerjee's 'Corridor' (2004). While each offers a unique perspective on India as a nation—varying in their storytelling techniques, artistic styles, and themes—they all demonstrate how visual narratives can engage with memory, tradition, and resistance to critique modern India. These graphic novels are beyond entertainment; they act as cultural conversations, encouraging us to rethink the stories and histories that shape our sense of national identity. Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories*, often regarded as the first Indian graphic novel, centres around the controversial Narmada Dam project and its environmental and human consequences. Drawing upon real-life activism, tribal folklore, and ecological themes, Sen's work critiques developmental nationalism and the erasure of indigenous identities. Through a montage of tribal art-inspired visuals, documentary realism, and mythological references, the novel constructs a counter-narrative to state propaganda. The river in the story becomes a metaphor for cultural continuity, memory, and resistance—flowing across temporal and spatial boundaries to remind readers of the cost of progress.

Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva* offers a fresh and powerful way of looking at the Mahabharata. Instead of a simple retelling, she reimagines the opening chapters of the epic through the voice of Ganga, the river goddess who is also a cosmic storyteller. Patil weaves feminist and ecological perspectives into her art, creating visuals that feel both sacred and rebellious. Her paintings, influenced by Indian miniature art and modernist styles, form a layered, immersive space that invites readers to see myth in a new light. *Adi Parva* isn't just a story retold; it's a re-envisioning that humanizes mythological characters and celebrates the philosophical richness of oral traditions. By giving Ganga a voice, Patil challenges patriarchal and Brahmanical interpretations of cultural memory, turning her graphic novel into a space of spiritual resistance and storytelling enablement.

Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* offers a vivid, almost personal reflection on urban India in the wake of liberalization. With its fragmented storytelling, playful illustrations, and dark humour, Also, the graphic novel's use of intermediality—drawing from literature, oral storytelling, cinema, performance arts, and digital media—adds depth and richness to its cultural significance. Considering India, where storytelling has historically been a multimedia experience—think epics, scroll paintings, puppetry—the graphic novel naturally extends this bright tradition. It breathes new life into traditional forms while also questioning and reshaping them. For instance, Patil employs the trope of the narrator-as-deity, which both honours classical Indian storytelling and challenges it by shifting the perspective to a female gaze. Similarly, Sen's portrayal of tribal folklore combined with journalistic realism blurs the lines between myth and history, art and activism, encouraging viewers to see these elements as interconnected rather than separate.

In today's India, with rising political divides, cultural uniformity, and efforts to rewrite history, these graphic novels play an essential role. They offer an alternative way of expressing culture that's critical for keeping democratic conversations alive and preserving diverse historical narratives. Thanks to their unique mix of visual storytelling and broad accessibility, graphic novels connect with a wide audience—including students, activists, scholars, and everyday readers—encouraging them to think critically. They act as a kind of counter-archive, keeping alive marginalized stories, questioning sanitized myths, and creating space for voices of dissent and imagination.

To sum up, Indian English graphic novels are a powerful way to visualize the nation — not as a fixed image, but as a bright, ongoing conversation about culture. By exploring how certain graphic novels engage with cultural memory, resistance, and tradition, this discussion hopes to add to broader conversations around visual literacy, narrative influence, and the impact of art on shaping public understanding. These visual works do beyond depict the country; they challenge, dissect, and eventually re-create the idea of the nation itself.

2. Theoretical Framework

The foundation of this research is rooted in an interdisciplinary approach that brings together visual semiotics, cultural memory studies, and theories of nationhood. These perspectives allow us to explore how Indian English graphic novels depict, challenge, and reshape notions of the nation through an energetic interaction of images and words.

At the core of visual analysis, and particularly relevant to our work, is semiotics—especially the ideas of Roland Barthes. In his book *Image-Music-Text*, he argues that images go beyond simple depiction; they carry deeper connotative and ideological meanings. When it comes to graphic novels, visuals aren't just there to look good—they serve an active role in shaping the narrative, layered with cultural, political, and historical significance. This idea aligns well with Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's approach in *Reading Images*, where they see images as structured texts governed by a kind of 'visual grammar.' This includes elements like gaze,

composition, use of colour, and framing—all of which play a semiotic role in influencing how audiences interpret key themes like memory, identity, and resistance in works such as *Adi Parva* and *The River of Stories*. Scott McCloud's idea of the "gutter"—the space between comic panels—brings another layer to understanding by showing how meaning isn't just in the images or words, but also in what's left out. This open space encourages readers to fill in the gaps, creating a richer, more layered story. Silence and fragmentation become not just narrative choices but acts of resistance and tools for reflection, making the story more engaging and thought-provoking.

The study also references **Jan Assmann's** concept of **cultural memory**, which describes how societies maintain and pass down shared experiences and identities through symbolic means. In this context, graphic novels act as "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*), especially when they retell myths or reimagine historical events. This approach not only challenges mainstream historical narratives but also helps bring attention to marginalized voices that might otherwise be overlooked.

3. Visual Culture and National Identity in Indian Graphic Novels

Indian English graphic novels provide a distinctive visual perspective on what it means to be Indian. Rather than portraying the nation as a straightforward, unified entity, these works depict it as a complex, multi-layered, and sometimes fractured space. By blending powerful imagery with compelling storytelling, these novels challenge dominant, one-sided representations of India and offer a fresh understanding of the country through the lens of personal experiences, cultural memory, and critical social commentary.

In Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories*, the focus is on how environmental and tribal struggles shape the nation's identity. The Narmada valley stands out as a powerful symbol of a fight where indigenous communities, forced to move due to government-led development projects, stand up for their cultural rights. Sen's artistic choices—tribal-inspired motifs, earthy colour schemes, and flowing, scroll-like layouts—connect the story to India's rich folk visual traditions, giving cultural identity back its voice from the margins. The visuals challenge the neat, modern look usually associated with progress, instead emphasizing a country dealing with displacement and environmental challenges.

On the other hand, Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva* offers a fresh perspective on India's mythological roots through Ganga's point of view, blending feminine and philosophical themes centred on tradition and self-awareness. Her art style combines modernist influences with traditional Indian symbols, using muted colours, flowing lines, and non-linear panel arrangements that suggest both continuity and change. This approach portrays India as an ongoing dialogue between the old and the new, myth and reality, femininity and strength.

Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* paints a picture of a fragmented urban India, full of people feeling alienated as they navigate the chaos brought by economic liberalization. His gritty, realistic illustrations, combined with biting satire, portray a nation out of sync with its past and somewhat disillusioned with its present. Together, these graphic novels use their visuals to critically explore what it means to be Indian today. Their artistic choices do more than tell stories—they visually represent the contradictions, tensions, and diversity that make up Indian identity in the postcolonial world.

4. Cultural Memory and Visual Storytelling

Cultural memory is an essential aspect of Indian English graphic novels, serving as a way to preserve and explore traditions, trauma, and change from multiple perspectives. Unlike official histories that often emphasize dominant narratives aligned with the state or majority viewpoints, these graphic works offer a space for more personal, marginal, or politically sensitive memories. By blending words and images smoothly, they change memory into a visual experience, inviting readers to connect with the past on both an intellectual and emotional level.

In Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva*, memory is shaped by myth. By retelling the Mahabharata through the eyes of Ganga, the river-goddess and narrator, Patil turns the epic into an energetic record of moral questions, spiritual reflections, and cultural history. Her water-inspired colour scheme, elegant calligraphy, and layered visuals evoke how memory flows and evolves across generations. The storytelling isn't straightforward; instead, it reflects the often fragmented and cyclical way we remember—much like India's rich oral traditions, where stories meander and loop back through time.

Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* thoughtfully blends folklore, oral histories, and journalistic reporting to explore collective memory. The novel emphasizes the environmental and human impacts of the Narmada Dam project, weaving tribal voices into the fabric of the nation's cultural narrative. Utilizing indigenous visual styles, maps, and symbolic icons acts as a form of counter-memory—questioning official records and giving dignity back to voices often overlooked or silenced.

Using the lens of visual semiotics, these novels turn memory into a tangible experience—through facial expressions, textures of the environment, spatial layouts, and symbolic visuals like rivers, ruins, and shadows that are mnemonic cues. They often place scenes from the past alongside present moments, blending myth with reality, and creating a meaningful conversation across different times.

By translating memory into visual stories, these graphic novels do more than preserve culture; they invite readers to reflect on the power structures shaping what's remembered and what gets forgotten. In this way, they are cultural interventions, challenging historical erasure and keeping our collective memories alive.

5. Myth, Resistance, and Tradition: Reimagining the Past

Indian English graphic novels challenge the idea that myth is fixed or unchangeable. Instead, they create a lively, often debated space where tradition is both deeply respected and subject to new interpretations. These visual stories don't just retell classic myths; they also question and sometimes even challenge mainstream perspectives, offering alternative stories about resistance, identity, and enablement. Through this approach, myth becomes a powerful lens for reflecting critically on society and engaging with social and political issues. In Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva*, the Mahabharata is brought to life through the perspective of Ganga, a divine storyteller who offers a thoughtful and compassionate view. These retelling challenges traditional patriarchal and Brahmanical narratives by emphasizing the significance of women, nature, and marginalized communities. Patil's artwork—featuring soft blues, rich reds, and shimmering gold—draws upon sacred imagery, while her non-linear storytelling style emphasizes the complexity and multiple layers of meaning rather than simple right or wrong. By weaving myth into her narrative, she creates space for ecological consciousness, feminist perspectives, and spiritual questions, encouraging readers to see ancient stories through modern lenses. Similarly, Orijit Sen's 'The River of Stories' weaves together tribal mythology and folklore as a form of resistance. In his work, the river is more than a natural feature—it's a sacred symbol deeply embedded in indigenous cosmology. By depicting these myths alongside contemporary activism, Sen blurs the lines between legend and everyday reality, emphasizing that tradition can be a powerful tool to challenge state violence and prevent cultural loss.

These novels redefine our understanding of myth by making it energetic and interactive, rather than fixed. Through visual storytelling, they allow myth to be reshaped with layered imagery, symbolic details, and changing viewpoints. This approach challenges simplified, uniform versions of Indian tradition and emphasizes its diverse voices. In this way, myth becomes a lively force—both aesthetically and politically—through which the past goes beyond remembered, but vividly reimagined and reinterpreted.

6. Visual Semiotics: Panels, Symbols, and Silence

The visual language used in Indian English graphic novels is essential in communicating messages that go beyond just the words on the page. By thoughtfully incorporating **panels**, **symbols**, and **silence**, these stories use visual cues to draw readers in more deeply, hint at underlying emotions, and express unspoken forms of resistance. It's not only about what is depicted, but also how it's presented—and sometimes, about what isn't said at all.

In a graphic novel, each panel works much like a sentence in a conversation, with its rhythm and style. The way you size, shape, and position panels helps set the flow and pace, guiding how the reader interprets the story. For example, Amruta Patil often opts for asymmetrical panels that flow smoothly from one to the next in her work, such as in *Adi Parva*. This approach mimics the natural flow of myths and meditation. She intentionally uses pauses, like open gutters, to slow down the reading experience, inviting quiet reflection. This technique draws from both traditional Indian art and modernist design, creating a rich, contemplative viewing experience.

Symbols—like rivers, veils, ruins, animals, or broken objects—carry deep cultural and philosophical significance. In **Orijit Sen's** *The River of Stories*, the river functions both literally and symbolically: representing life, memory, and the threat of destruction. Similarly, in **Sarnath Banerjee's** *Corridor*, everyday objects such as worn-out books, faded posters, and cluttered urban spaces stand as symbols of cultural decline and feelings of alienation amid India's swift modernization.

Silence—whether expressed through silent panels, empty spaces, or lingering visual pauses—is a powerful tool for storytelling. It can evoke feelings of trauma, encourage reflection, or emphasize unresolved tension. At the same time, silence opens up space for readers to interpret and emotionally engage with the narrative. For instance, Banerjee's strategic use of silence in emotionally intense scenes emphasizes the sense of emptiness and fragmentation characteristic of modern urban identities.

In this way, visual semiotics enhances the graphic novel into a layered narrative platform. It provides a rich canvas for subtle commentary on culture, identity, and resistance—where the choice of what is included, how it's presented, and what is left out all carry equal significance.

7. Conclusion

Indian English graphic novels have become important cultural works that combine artistic visuals with thoughtful storytelling. They offer new ways to explore ideas about nationhood, memory, and identity. By blending images with narration, these graphic stories go beyond traditional writing to create a rich, multi-layered experience that connects readers to both current issues and historical contexts. They also challenge

dominant narratives about India by displaying its diversity, internal debates, and ongoing changes, presenting a more complex and realistic picture of the nation.

As this study has demonstrated through the analysis of works like **Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories***, **Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva***, and **Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor***, the Indian graphic novel uses visual storytelling not just to reflect society but to question, disrupt, and reimagine it. Each of these texts reclaims cultural memory through symbolic imagery, challenges political narratives through visual resistance, and engages with tradition through reinterpretation rather than repetition.

Importantly, these novels shift the focus from centralized, state-sponsored visions of the nation to localized, fragmented, and marginalized voices. The visual language of these works—through panel design, symbolic representation, colour schemes, and the strategic use of silence—acts as a semiotic battlefield where meaning is constantly negotiated and redefined.

Moreover, the reimagining of myth and the visual retelling of cultural history in these texts offer a form of resistance against cultural erasure and historical amnesia. By inserting feminist, ecological, tribal, and urban perspectives into national discourse, these graphic novels become active agents of cultural production and critique.

In conclusion, Indian English graphic novels are more than just literary or artistic artifacts—they are dynamic, visual counter-narratives that invite readers to reflect critically on the idea of India. They picturize the nation not as it is officially written, but as it is lived, questioned, and continuously reshaped through memory, resistance, and tradition.

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