

GRAPHIC NOVELS AND TRADITIONAL ART FORMS: THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The visual language of graphic novels is increasingly becoming a powerful tool of expression. Originally known as the comic books, contemporary graphic novels are being acknowledged as a potential medium for handling serious issues. Recently, a great changeover in the thematic concerns and the art style of Indian Graphic Novels has been witnessed. This hybrid medium of text and image is addressing to the sensitive issues and questions of the contemporary modern society and also establishing a cultural identity through its artistic (visual) expression. The conventional style of comic sketching and caricaturing on paper is being replaced by the traditional art forms from different cultures and regions of India. This shift has brought about a change in the perspectives or the ways of 'seeing' both Indian Graphic Novels and Indian visual art forms. The paper purports to establish a connection between these two with a proposition that the graphic novels are a potential mode of preserving the traditional art forms of India and helping them gain recognition globally so that the Indian Graphic Novel can also create a distinguished identity in verbal-visual literature like that of Japanese Manga. The paper is an endeavour to examine how traditional art forms are being contextualized in contemporary times and how they are effectively registering the resistance against the stereotype and the negligence especially of women and Dalits in the Indian society itself.

KEYWORDS: Indian graphic novels, Tribal/Traditional Arts, Heritage, Cultural Identity, Visual Art

RESUMEN *Novelas Gráficas y Formas Artísticas Tradicionales en India*

El lenguaje visual de las novelas gráficas se está convirtiendo en un instrumento de expresión poderoso. Originalmente conocidas como comics, las novelas gráficas contemporáneas son reconocidas en la actualidad como un medio potencial para tratar temas serios. Somos testigos de cómo, recientemente, se ha producido un cambio tanto en la temática como en el estilo de las novelas gráficas indias. Este medio híbrido compuesto de texto e imágenes está abordando temas y cuestiones sensibles en el ámbito de las sociedades modernas y también está estableciendo una identidad cultural a partir de su expresión artística (visual). El estilo convencional y esquemático del comic y la caricatura impresa se está viendo substituido por formas artísticas tradicionales de distintas culturas y regiones de India. Este movimiento ha producido un cambio en las perspectivas o en los modos de "ver" tanto las novelas gráficas como las formas artísticas visuales.

indias. Este artículo pretende establecer una conexión entre estos dos medios de expresión a partir de la propuesta de que las novelas gráficas representan un modo de preservar las formas de arte tradicionales de India y, a la vez, contribuyen a su reconocimiento a nivel global, de modo que la novela gráfica india pueda crear también una identidad diferenciada en la literatura verbal-visual como la que posee el manga japonés. El artículo representa un intento de examinar cómo las formas artísticas tradicionales se insertan en el momento actual y cómo se muestran de manera efectiva como una forma de resistencia contra el estereotipo y la negligencia que se da especialmente en el caso de las mujeres y la comunidad Dalit en la propia sociedad india.

PALABRAS CLAVE: novelas gráficas indias; arte tradicional; identidad cultural; artes visuales

The dialogue between the ‘textual’ and the ‘visual’ in the post millennial era has created a hybrid space which has potentially opened possibilities for new dimensions in literature. This hybrid form is realized as graphic novels in literature worldwide. The narrative art or the visual narratives, which have been the longstanding traditions in human civilization, are becoming now a much more popular and powerful medium of expression due to their multimodality (Cohn, 2017) and their ability to be more interactive due to their pictorial and textual hybridity. On one hand, this multimodal hybrid space is accommodating the issues relevant to the modern reader, on the other, it is negotiating the cultural identity through its textual content and graphic style.

Graphic novels have emerged in Indian literary landscape at the advent of the twenty first century and after an initial struggle for gaining recognition as a serious form of literature, they have started creating for themselves a space in mainstream literature. However, several scholars still do not consider them an established part of serious literature the reason for which probably is that the graphic novel has its origin as a comic book. Nonetheless, it can be said that these adult comic books largely deal with the serious questions and issues of human life which are sometimes controversial or taboo. Moreover, the graphic novel has evolved not just in its thematic aspects but also in terms of its artistic style and now it is attempting to break away from the traditional style of comic books.

In the Indian context, a great changeover in Indian graphic novels has been witnessed in this last decade in terms of its responsibility to manifest the national and cultural consciousness. The adjective ‘Indian’ or ‘Indianness’ is making more sense now than ever before. The term ‘Indianness’ is generic and finds its specific meaning as per the context. However, Indianness here means the essence or the spirit of India in artistic and creative expressions that embed its cultural,

social, historic, and political aspects. India is a multicultural country and Indian culture is a conglomeration of several diverse cultures, therefore, in the present context the term talks of the content, and theme, and their presentation (the characters, the style of caricaturing, the choice of colours, motifs, symbols, art form), all that reflect Indian sensibility in a peculiar way that distinguishes it from any other culture.

It becomes imperative to state here that the internationally acknowledged comic series *Amar Chitra Katha (ACK)*, was the pioneer in making it more culture oriented as it was started as an attempt to inculcate Indian cultural values in the young generation of India. It can be stated categorically that it has predominated the visual culture and literacy of comics in India and largely dealt with the religious and cultural narratives focusing on Hindu mythology and nationalism. Though it was criticized by many for its politically-religious undertones (McLain, 2005; Bose, 2009), it remains undeniable that it constructed the cultural and national identity of Indians to a great extent then.

The present-day graphic novels deal with wide ranging issues that are not just the comic books with the set conventional style of themes and graphics, nor are they mere representations or impressions of the mythological texts or the lessons of morality as guided by religion. Instead, they are the expression of Indian sensibility and portrayal of the Indian angst rendered by the socio-cultural and political scenario of the country. They are creating the cultural space of India in their visual narratives but, at the same time, they are also trying to redefine and reinterpret things by challenging the myths and the cultural normativity in their scope. The graphic novel does not shy away from the candid representation of issues like partition, women's sexuality, child sex abuse, migration, and other serious issues more relevant to contemporary India that the comics never dared touch upon.

In its act of redefining the pre-established, the artists and the authors have also done experiments on the art style of graphic novels which sometimes extend to the content too, in their effort to become the 'preserving force' for the endangered traditional art forms. These experiments can be seen as an act of reinstating the roots or the 'Indianness' in their artistic style which makes Indian

graphic novels a cultural discourse even more intensively. The illustrators and the writers are finding the traditional art forms of India much more suitable as graphics for their narratives.

Here it is important to understand what is meant by the phrase 'traditional art forms' in the present context. The term 'traditional' is an umbrella term which includes the folk and the aboriginal in it. Aboriginal or tribal art is essentially traditional, but all the traditional or folk is not necessarily tribal. Although it is difficult to establish a universal definition of art, we can simply understand it as an expression with creativity, aesthetics, and emotional power. Typically, this expression mostly relies on 'visuality' as in painting, sculpture, and dance, since the other art forms like poetry, stories and songs are the by-product of language and thereby make a literature which can be multimodal viz-a-viz print, visual or auditory.

Before the evolution of literary traditions, people used pictures and visuals to express themselves. The earliest paintings are found in caves and later on, with the evolution of civilization, people started creating murals i.e. drawing pictures and sketches on the walls and floors of their houses. Thus, from the caves, these paintings shifted on to the leaves of trees, wood, animal skins, scrolls, and walls etc., and with the changing times, sequential art became popular and people started 'reading' them. The art of storytelling using visuals is a well-known phenomenon across all the cultures of the globe, including India, that may have different names and different formats varying from region to region. In India, Pattachitra [*Pattacitra*], the ancient painting of Odisha and West Bengal sung for Lord Jagannath [*jagannāth*]; Phad [*phaṛa*], the cloth based sequential art sung for the deities Pabuji [*pābūjī*] and Devnarayanji [*devanārāyaṇajī*] in Rajasthan; Kavad [*kāvaṛa*], the wooden temple fully inscribed with stories from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* also from Rajasthan; Chitrakathi [*citrakathī*] in Maharashtra depicting the stories from the two Hindu epics; and, Cheriya scrolls of Telangana with mythological stories, are the famous examples of this sequential art which are colourful, bright, religious in nature, inspired by mythology, and are accompanied by the oral storytelling tradition.



1. Phad

Picture Credit: artisera.com



2. Cheriya Painting

Picture Credit: merikalamurti.medium.com



3. Kavad- the wooden temple

Picture Credit: scroll.in

These are the art forms that are associated with storytelling. However, there are many other art forms from different regions of India namely Kalamkari [*kalamakārī*] from Andhra Pradesh, Madhubani [*madhubanī*] or Mithila [*mithilā*] from Mithila in Bihar, Gondī [*gondī*] from Madhya Pradesh, Warli [*varlī*] from Maharashtra, Patua [*paṭuā*] from Bengal, Mughal, Rajasthani etc are the painting styles that have their own features that distinguish them from one another. These famous painting styles are used by the illustrators for the motifs which are closer to the Indian lifestyle that include nature, religion, myths, legends, their way of living, their random activities of gatherings, institutional rituals, festivities, and merrymaking, etc. Most of these art styles are made by the members of certain tribal and non-tribal communities from different regions who have been doing it for generations. These generations-old art styles are known for their use of colours (acquired from nature) on walls or cloths which are used as canvas for their expressions, and their tools for creating these paintings are also mostly natural things like wood, clay, straw, and cotton.

Oblivious of the rich traditional heritage of their art, Indian artists kept following the art style in comics as practised by the UK and the US until recently. The only Indian comic series that set the trend of Indian artistic style was *Amar Chitra Katha* which tried to recreate the mythological imagination using bright colours and forms akin to Indian sensibility. Thus, the traditional art forms were long forgotten for their roles in the storytelling tradition of India and their dismemberment from the literary tradition pushed them off-stage and consequently, the initial comics creators had no tradition to follow but that of the West. However, in recent times, the art movements in India and the recently emerged international market for the tribal and traditional art of India have given sudden impetus to the revival of these art forms. The artistic styles mentioned above have already started gaining wide recognition due to globalization and allied reasons, and have been adopted by graphic users for different purposes like for interior designing, fashion industry, etc. Recently, the Indian Railways also have ventured an initiative in this direction and have had the interiors of some stations and exterior of some of its trains painted with different traditional art forms (“Stories on a station wall”, 2018) and the Bihar Sampark Kranti Express train is a moving gallery of Mithila art (Ministry of Railways, 2018).

The graphic novelists with their post-modernist approach to art and content have also made experiments and have found them successful. There is not a very long list of such narratives that are followed by traditional or tribal art motifs but this practice in graphic novels would soon make a mark. The use of Mithila or Madhubani folk art in *Hanuman's Ramayan* by Nancy Raj and Devdutt Pattnaik in 2009 and also in Karipa Joshi's *Miss Moti* in 2016; the use of Gond art in *Bhimayana* by Durgabai Vyam along with her husband Syubhash Vyam; the use of Patua art in Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* by Moyna Chitrakar in 2012, and the use of miniature paintings from Rajasthan in *Lie-Traditional Tale of Modern India* by G. Bhatia in 2010; are a few to mention that have gained critical attention of scholars. Along with such novels, the comic strips by Manjula Padmanabhan in 2014 used Mithila art, the web comic series *Royal Existentialist* by Aarthy Parthasarathy uses Mughal paintings; all this reiterates that illustrators are contributing to bridging the traditional art form with the popular ones. Not only in English graphic novels, the incorporation of such paintings is being used in Hindi graphic novels as well. The Hindi graphic novel *Biksu* in 2019 by Rajkumari also uses Madhubani art for its pictorial representation.

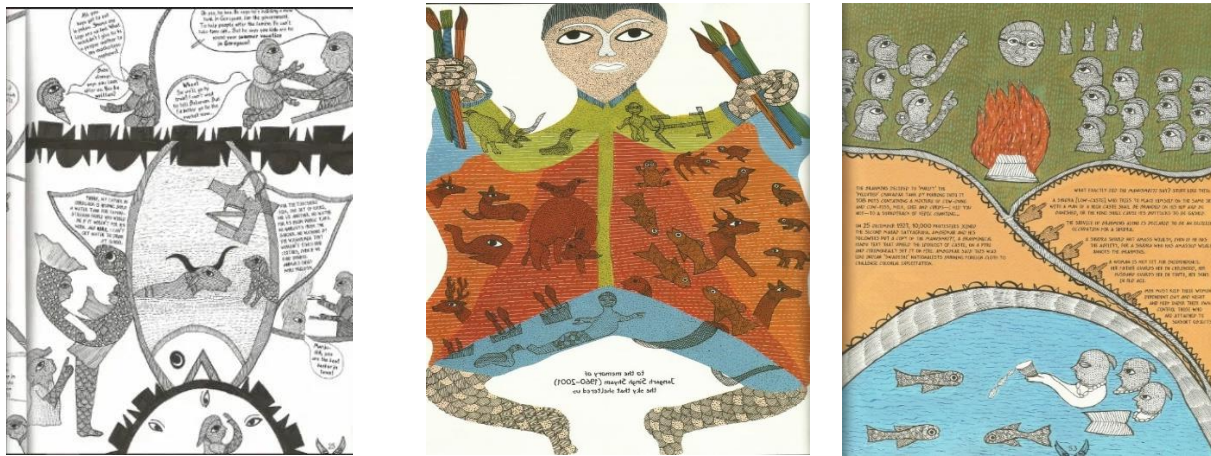
It is to be noted here that very few artists creating these art forms in the graphic narratives are the members of the communities or the regions that have traditionally been doing it for generations although most of the other illustrators are only either trained as art students or inspired by these art styles in general. For example, the artists of *Bhimayana*, Durga Bai Vyam and Subhash Vyam belong to the Gondi tribe, and Moyna Chitrakar of *Sita's Ramayana* belongs to the Patua tribe; whereas the other artists like Rajkumari of *Biksu*, Kripa Joshi of *Miss Moti*, and many more do not have a family tradition of making these art forms but are influenced by the motifs and style of the traditional Madhubani paintings. However, most of the illustrators, to a large extent, ensure that they do not change the basic rules of forms, colours, shapes, symbols even when they are creating all this in a new medium that interacts more with digital tools and graphics. However, some of the illustrators have not used these art styles a great deal, thereby, the flexibility and subjectivity of the illustrators can be observed in their artistic use of these art forms. Nonetheless, such experiments in graphic novels make the Indian graphic novel a distinct entity that echoes the cultural identity and heritage of India categorically.

In the context of the pictorial representation of contemporary Indian graphic novels, E. Dawson Varughese also interprets the idea of 'Indianness' in her critique, which emerges from the observation and analysis of some contemporary renowned Indian graphic novels and her experiences in a workshop of Indian graphic artists in 2019 in New Delhi. In her article, Dawson Varughese elaborates upon post-millennial Indian graphic novels and the 'real India' as opposed to the India imagined in *Amar Chitra Katha*. In her words,

The *ACK* series is renowned for its bright colour schemes and clean line drawing alongside its detailing of a character's features and the visualisation of personal traits, whilst the post-millennial body of Indian graphic narratives is characterised by much darker tones, sepia washes, muted hues and sometimes indistinct line work, resulting in an overall moodier aesthetic. (8-9)

She also claims that 'colouration' affects the way things are perceived and that the bright colours manifest 'a celebratory Indianness' as practised earlier whereas contemporary graphic novels, which are less bright and monochrome with unorthodox 'graphic narratives' (9), signify the post-millennial 'real' India which is oftentimes 'ugly' (10).

The present paper argues that Dawson's idea of 'Indianness' in graphic novels emerges from those contemporary graphic novels that perceive the contemporaneity of 'urban,' 'modern' and 'young' India which is not rooted in its traditional culture, especially in its visual expression. However, the use of tribal and classical paintings such as Patua, Madhubani, Gond etc. expresses a different Indian sensitivity and using them along with the unconventional narratives also manifests the 'real' India which is culturally rooted in its visual expression and less influenced by the 'western' and 'modern' visual literacy. The following are a few images from *Bhimayana* in English and *Biksu* in Hindi.



Pictures from *Bhimayana*



Pictures from *Biksu*

The traditional, folk or the tribal art forms in all respects have the most elemental styles since they are influenced by the universe, nature, and general human life. Dots, dashes, lines, flowers, hills, animals, birds, rivers, human figures and cultural and religious symbols and deities are integral parts of traditional paintings. It is a 'universal creative act' since the symbols and motifs the folk/tribal artists create, 'are decoded as Jungian archetypes, the designs as mandalas and so on, arising out of common universal collective consciousness' and mostly such repetitive, archetypal shapes and patterns are made in 'pre and post meditational states' (Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, n.d.). In the postmodern era, people want to have a connection with the past and the present; with the modern and the native; with the urban and the rural together. This instinct of human life can be significantly traced in present-day graphic novels. Traditional art uses symbols and the graphic mode has used this symbolism advantageously. It has given freedom not only to the writers and the illustrators to manifest their ideas, but the readers also have freedom to interpret these symbols.

Since the graphic novels exhibit visual language, which is basically the understanding of the visual elements in a communication system and when we take 'text' as a visual symbol for an idea, literature as an art also becomes a part of the same visual language besides the images and pictures. Interpretation of this 'visuality' or 'visual language' is known as semiotics wherein all the signs and forms have a meaning attached to them, though the meanings are culturally influenced. Also, the interpretations of the cultural iconography have a significant role to play in it. These cultural signifiers are now being considered apt for relating the narratives by the contemporary writers who, with the help of these arts in the digitized forms, are trying to make their works more grounded in the cultural fabric of India. What makes traditional art forms more appealing to native Indian readers is probably the archetypal consciousness among people which is genetic. Traditional art forms give individuals an opportunity to connect with elemental life and their roots and thereby the inclination towards traditional art forms is justified. Also, these tribal arts are the manifestations of culture and ethnicity and therefore, translate the readings into people's cultural identity.

What makes this mode important, and how the artistic style and the narratives affect each other, are two significant questions of this discourse. This interaction of the graphic narrative and the art

gives a new meaning to both the modalities which otherwise may not seem as powerful as they become when they are used together. The hybrid medium makes the unsaid look loud and clear and what the words do not say can be perceived there easily. Scholar and critic Simon Burton states,

Images appear on the page, the distinction between the two different types of representation (visual and textual) is both simultaneously highlighted and blurred. Images alter or support textual interpretation in a way that requires different strategies of reading and subsequently, a different way of critically analysing them. (92)

Undeniably, the two media affect each other and create a new meaning. As John Berger says, “seeing comes before words” (1), which affirms that the visible or the image comes before the text or words, so the first thing a reader sees on the paper is the image while reading graphic novels.

Elaborating upon the visual culture of America in the context of ‘word’ and ‘image’ and its significance in cultural representation, Mitchell (1996) says, “word and image is a kind of shorthand name for a basic division in the human experience of representations, presentations, and symbols” (51). In his book *Picture Theory* (1994), he states that ‘culture’ and ‘representation’ are inseparable and that “the tension between visual and verbal representations are inseparable from struggles in cultural politics and political culture” and that “the issues like gender, race and class or beauty, truth and excellence are all coverage on question of representation [...] It is also the name of a kind of basic cultural trope, replete with connotations that go beyond merely formal or structural differences” (3). He further claims that representation of word and image is affected by “ideological divisions” (5).

Thus, the pictures along with words are not mere stylistic devices that deviate the reader from the text, but rather they are responsible for the representation of cultural identity and ideology within a particular culture. Thus, even though the representation of culture through picture and word is subjective and political, the role of this hybrid mode in establishing a cultural identity cannot be neglected. In the present context, it can be said that the use of folk/traditional/tribal art forms impact the meaning of these visual narratives by situating them within the socio-cultural and political sphere of India and without that they cannot be interpreted. Besides its cultural significance, stylistically, this visual language of graphic narratives gives enough time and space to the reader to pause and muse over, and, also to realize the opportunity of rereading and

reinterpreting the verbal and the visual. The artistic style with all its colours, shades, shapes, and spaces sets the atmosphere for the narrative. It controls and navigates the imagination of the reader-spectator in a way that the textual narratives alone cannot do. The traditional art styles used by these artists suddenly make the reader aware of the cultural background of the narrative and the politics of class, race, and gender.

Graphic novels have also helped women writers a great deal to decide and depict how they want their characters to be seen. Kripa Joshi using Mithila art through *Miss Moti* has undertaken to slash the gender stereotypes and the parameters of beauty set for the female gender which cause overweight women to become crippled though not physically but psychologically. A similar stance has been taken in the novel *Sita's Ramayana* which has been illustrated by Moyna Chitrakar, a Patua Artist from Bengal. What is the most remarkable thing is that Moyna's Sita is a dark-skinned woman that makes her more relatable to Indian women, whereas, Sita, in most works, is portrayed as per the conventional notions of beauty which is marked by fairness of skin.



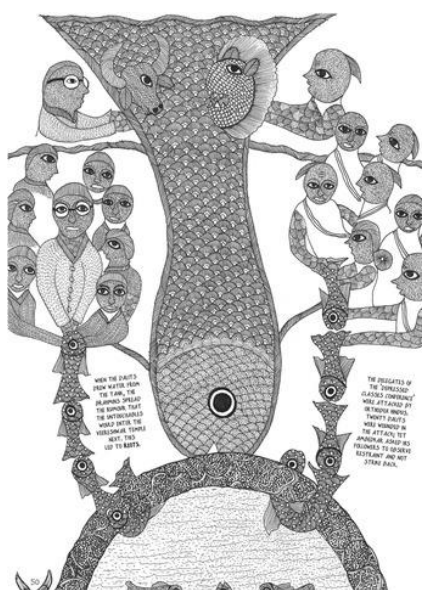
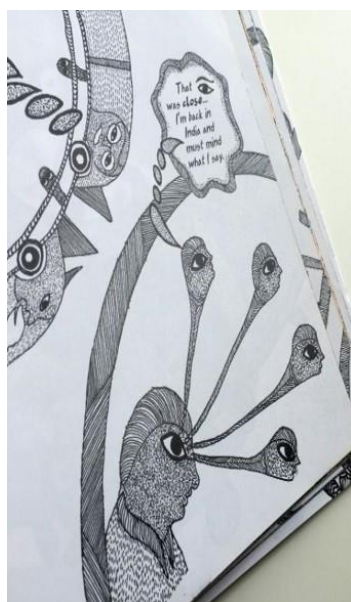
Pictures from *Sita's Ramayana* by Samhita Arni

These women illustrators have tried to obliterate the long-established typecasting of the female body and its paradigms which have been fostered by males so far especially in Superwoman comics. Their colour, size, and carriage all are drawn for ordinary women who can identify themselves with the characters. *Kari* by Patil, Moyna's *Sita*, and Joshi's *Miss Moti*, are the works where the women have been depicted with 'real bodies' which are not fantasized to make them more relatable. Although Kripa Joshi, who belongs to Nepal which was earlier known as a part of the cultural region of Mithila, does not follow the rules of Madhubani rigidly but instead she uses the overall creation using the basic elements of nature inspired by this art only.



Picture from *Miss Moti* by Kripa Joshi

Similarly, the experiences and issues of Dalits have also found their expression in graphic novels through such paintings. This power of expression is realized in *Bhimayana* illustrated by Durgabai and Subhash Vyam, the Gond artists who upheld, “We’d like to state one thing very clearly at the outset. We will not force our characters into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is *Khulla* (open) where there’s space for all to breathe” (Natarajan & Vyam, 2011:102) The artists depict the life and times of Ambedkar and his struggle through untouchability, marginalization and casteism in India. Their art is full of symbolism and nature is the biggest motif there. The use of animal shapes to draw the speech balloons designates whether it is a positive statement with a bird shape or a discouraging one that has the sting of a scorpion. Also, the thought balloons with a mind's eye and the use of a colour scheme to set the atmosphere and the psyche also make the narrative and the characters better understood and more realistic.



Pictures from *Bhimayana* by Shrividya Natarajan

Thus, the graphic novel with traditional art has become a potential tool for the often-marginalized sections of society who want to be heard, seen, and understood appropriately. Indian graphic novels have created an ‘alternative space’ that “accommodates the voices that usually fall outside the realm of socio-politico-cultural discourses” (Mehta, 2010: 173). Ana Merino (2010) states that the graphic novel is also seen as a ‘cultural space’ that offers the possibility to represent the ‘subaltern subjects’ (para. 2).

The success and the power of the graphic medium can be measured through the fact that in the year 2018, in an initiative to preserving and promoting the cultural heritage, the Government of West Bengal in collaboration with UNESCO and *banglanatk.com* has come up with three such graphic novels that deal with the traditional art forms of Bengal that are close to disappearing. *Experiencing Chhau* (*Dekhe Elam Chhau*) on Chhau tribal dance; *Raibenshe Rocks* (*Ajo Aache Raibenshe*) on the folk martial dance form; and, *The Tale of a Lost Leg* (*Harana Payer Kissa*), on the little-known puppetry from Nadia district of West Bengal (Singh, 2018). Thus, not only in the art style but thematically too, traditional art forms are occupying space in the postmillennial graphic novels of India.

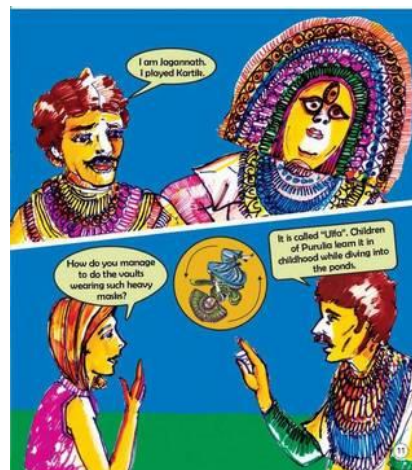


Image from *Experiencing Chhau*

To conclude it can be said that the folk/traditional art forms of paintings, storytelling, and dancing with their imperilled existence in the digital world are now receiving global attention through the medium of graphic novels. Their canvases have shifted from walls and cloths to the glossy papers of present-day graphic novels and even further to the web. The contemporary graphic illustrations in novels from non-Western countries that have global reception are becoming the representatives of their culture and society across the globe. This has both empowered their artists and gained them recognition too. Although it is true that India is culturally diverse and so are its art forms, a wholesome practice can be adopted by keeping these art forms, belonging to different cultures of India, under the larger umbrella of Indian traditional art forms so that these art forms, which are the soul to the body i.e., India, hopefully, may help the Indian graphic novel establish itself as a genre like Japanese Manga with its distinct and defining features embedded with national and cultural identity that makes it a cultural discourse.

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