



QUEST OF FREEDOM: EVOLVING WITH THE 'PICTURE-STORY'

SARNATH BANERJEE TALKS TO THEREWILLBETIME

Q. Doab Dil has a very interesting storytelling format...can we call it a work of graphic non-fiction?

ANS: Maybe. We can call it that. But not everything in this is non-fiction. There are elements that are imaginary. The core elements on which the work stands could be non-fiction, but that led to fictional elements too, so we could say that this is somewhere midway.

In today's context, there's not much difference between fact and non-fact anyways. When you are saying that you are providing 'fact', it's not always true, and everyone knows that. The moment someone says that I am giving you a fact, that entire concept is suspect – a rather tall claim.

So this idea of 'fact' in a 'non-fact' society – it's all intuitive, all connected to learning. It is related to understanding of the world. Say someone (a University professor, for instance) tells you

something with great force and conviction – and you start believing him since he is somewhere placed in some high and hallowed academic position – then it's your own fault; it's your lack of instinct. That means the very basic of your understanding faculty is weak; you didn't learn how to go deep into a subject to comprehend whether it's a 'fact' or otherwise.

For any society, to claim that you are providing 'fact' is a tall claim – so maybe the style is non-fiction, but I won't call the entire work non-fiction. Rather I would say that non-fiction has been used as a springboard for further imagination.

Q. I have read your earlier work, there was at least a semblance of 'fiction' there in the storytelling – I mean evolving characters and all. Linear treatment was never there I admit – but this one walks a different path altogether? So how did you come up with something like 'Doab Dil'?

ANS: I won't say this is an outstandingly different treatment. What happened is, there was a lot of over-indulgence on the idea of 'Graphic' novel. So this was my attempt to move out of that stereotype - the issue was, is it really necessary for everyone to write a 'graphic novel'?

Secondly, it occurred to me, that this concept of 'picture-story' – you can call it a visual narrative, illustrated text or picture book, whatever – this has an age-old history. Starting from Shahnameh to Codex to medieval texts - it's a fascinating history - a bit of text and some images.

What I felt was, using this format, using text and images simultaneously, gives you more freedom to express. You are not boxed by the format here. This is like running amok in 'garer maath' (the maidan, or open space at the heart of Kolkata).

I personally feel, the quantum of understanding that you need to have about text and images in this format is much more than the Graphic novel.

The alchemy that you are creating here, it's new - and it gives me an opportunity to explore beyond the usual.

And this has a huge tradition – say the illustration books of Japan. They also have illustrated performances, illustrated manuals. And if you look at Persia, there's Shahnameh. Mughal miniatures also relied on text with images. Go to medieval era, there are many examples of manuscripts with rich illustrations.

Q. So, as a basic reader, how do I differentiate between a graphic novel and a comic book? Is there at all any need to differentiate?

ANS: That's a whole lot of bullshit – this attempt to create a differentiation between a graphic novel and a comic book. Whatever is a comic-book is also a graphic novel – those who set them apart are basically talking nonsense. The publishers want to give a high-sounding name to it – they want to give some sort of legitimacy to it so they come up with fancy categories. It's all the same.

Q. So how do you go about planning a book – is it image first and then the words come in, or it's the other way round – is there a rule or methodology that you follow? Or you just allow it to happen as it happens?

ANS: There's a loose method, yes. You can say my work is more like a musical composition. Say when Rabindranath used to compose a song, he used to mouth a few notes and then write a few words, and then again put tunes to those words, or arranged words to match tunes - some of that worked, some didn't. At times the tune required change of words and phrases. Say the tune is fabulous, but the words going with it is not up to the mark. So it's like – sometimes you write to the tune, and sometimes the tune determines the words. The final result takes shape out of this interactive process.

And then there is this matter of approach – what is it that you are trying to say, and how. It often happens that you write something very dramatic, but the presentation takes a nosedive, since it doesn't match your words.

Look, I am a learner as well; it's not that I know everything. This entire process is about learning. Why does one get into art? There are people who take up art as a medium of self-appreciation, or therapy. For me, my art is all about learning; I am still learning, how to go about it.

Q. Your academic learning must have played a role too. From that perspective can I ask you – for my young friends here who want to get into the field of comics writing, how should they prepare for a career like that?

ANS: Well, if you are a dumb idiot, then are not likely to do anything significant. See, if your sole intention is to write comics to impress your neighborhood 'boudi' or you want to write comics to make a lot of money – it usually doesn't work out that way.

You will need to develop the ingredients inside you. Your work will reflect your inside. No possibility of cheating there.

For me, it's very important to build this foundation. It's not just about learning to draw good pictures.

Q. So how do we create this foundation?

ANS: It's similar to how we all have done it. By reading lots of books, listening to whole lot of music, getting in touch with other people – it's all about creating a rich cultural interior. This 'interior' will shape your concepts.

You have to live your life spontaneously – that's important; you won't be able to hoodwink that aspect.

Yes, I agree, there are a lot of people, not only in our own country but worldwide, who have based their entire career on hoodwinking - but I won't really consider that to be a model for success.

There's a difference between how successful you are as a person, and how successful your comics is.

Say tomorrow you decide to write a comic book on the life of Deepika Padukone or Sachin Tendulkar, and it becomes a bestseller, that doesn't mean much to me. Or maybe you base a comic book character on Akshay Kumar and that becomes a runaway hit. But if you really want to do in-depth and high-level work, there's a lot of labor involved, reading involved – it's absolutely necessary to culture yourself.

And why just comics, this applies to everything else.

Specifically for comics, I feel that one should get involved with and imbibe a wide variety of visual and oral cultures. Preparation is an absolute necessity here.

I think it's a good thing that young minds are getting into various forms of comic book writing – but one thing that is not happening here is adaption. Like say, adoption and adaption are two very important principles of mine.

There's a lot in terms of visual culture and literature that's lost, or getting lost. If those obscure works of literature could be adapted in the form of comics, I believe that would be a fabulous learning experience.

That's what I teach my students – that they should work with a text.

Q: Yes, I do remember ‘The Barn Owl’s Wondrous Capers’ – I felt it was hugely inspired by ‘Hutum Pyachar Naksha’ – that 18th century Bengali classic by Kaliprasanna Singha?

ANS: Yes I took the name and inspiration from that book, but the story was different. What I mean to say is – even if I had taken the story from there and adapted it, there’s nothing wrong in it. Say if you are making ‘ghana-da’ in comics or adapting Tarashankar Bandopadhyay’s ‘Arogya Niketan’ for comics ... in fact I have done that. I am writing ‘Arogya Niketan’ as a comics book.

Look at the exciting premise. It’s a 1950’s setting near Murshidabad involving quack doctors. The story has whole lot of rural characters and ambience; creating all that characterization and setting up the backdrop is such a delightful prospect.

For me, it’s about a history of beliefs. Say, on that era, when someone has caught typhoid – how are the rural doctors diagnosing it? Remember, there are no hospitals and scientific analysis is a far-fetched idea in the space.

So within that context - how are the relationships between the characters evolving?

The possibilities are endless.

It’s basically to keep the mind active – like Sidhu Jyatha.

At this stage I am not really doing this to get it ‘published’ per say – but let’s see.

