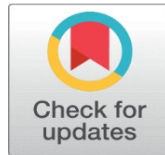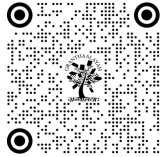# THE EVOLUTION OF INDIAN ILLUSTRATION AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL COMMENTARY: FROM ANCIENT MYTHOLOGIES TO DIGITAL

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ABSTRACT

Unravelling from the ancient mythological depiction to the digital narratives of today, the journey of Indian illustration has been long. This paper will show just how, with great care and critical detailing, Indian illustration emerged as a practice in social commentary. From a historical perspective, it entails how illustrators have used their art to mirror and criticize issues in society in a bid to advance social change. The methodology of the research will be a qualitative analysis of historical art pieces, besides the literature review. The objective is to understand Indian illustration as a device for social commentary and its evolution. In essence, the hypothesis is that Indian illustration has faced continuous changeability towards changing social contexts, effectively acting like a mirror and critic of societal dynamics.

Keywords: Indian Illustration, Evolution of Illustration, Social Commentary, Historical Perspective, Digital Transformation

1. INTRODUCTION

The legacy of Indian illustration spans hundreds of years and includes many types of art such as miniature painting, picture writing, and present-day graphic designs. Apart from being a means of self-expression for artists, these drawings and paintings capture various aspects of Indian life such as politics or culture over time. An important way Indian illustration has developed to reflect society is through its shift from old-fashioned methods into something more modern while still being a social critique. In British colonial rule, illustrators in India began using it as protest and social commentary after various sociopolitical changes. It finds manifestation in

prominent figures like Raja Ravi Varma and Satyajit Ray, through their pieces that broke all conventions and shed light on the injustices around them in the community. These were forerunners of other younger artists who still face current ills in society with their illustrations to prove that artworks of this nature are still as relevant today as ever before in identifying salient features of life within the country.

Additional exploration into the historical arcs and factors influencing Indian illustration can yield important new understandings of how visual art shapes and mirrors socio-cultural dynamics in India. This essay discusses the historical trajectory of Indian illustration as a vehicle for social commentary, highlighting its ability to address a wide range of societal issues from ancient times to the present when we live in a digitally transformed world. This research aims a comprehensive understanding of how Indian artists used their images to engage with societal issues.

2. OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this research is to trace the evolution of Indian illustration as a tool for social commentary from ancient times to the present digital age. It seeks to identify key periods, notable artists, and significant themes that have shaped this evolution.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative methodology, including:

1) **Literature Review:** Comprehensive review of existing literature on Indian illustration, including books, journal articles, and archival materials. Key sources include works by Mitter (1994), Dehejia (1997), and Ghosh (2015)

2) **Art Analysis:** Examination of significant artworks from different periods, including ancient manuscripts, medieval miniatures, colonial illustrations, and contemporary digital art. This analysis will focus on identifying themes, techniques, and the social messages these works convey.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

After a thorough and systematic exploration of the available data on Indian illustration, one can arrive at interesting conclusions about its history, theme and criticism of society. The basis of this article is the works of such influential authors as Dehejia (1997), Mitter (1994), and Ghosh (2015) et al. Below is an overview of their contributions to understanding Indian illustration:

Partha Mitter (1994) is known for his research on fine arts and national identity in colonial India. Mitter's publication 'Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations' examines how art, politics and selfhood intersected within the colonial context. He examines the way Indian artists reacted to Western influences and considers how these were shaped by nationalist ideologies in terms of their response. Additionally, it examines a period of cultural hybridisation when there emerged an engagement between orientalism and nationalism within colonial art history discourses/myths for instance he talks about under British rule what was illustration used for and who consumed them- thus revealing 'how Indian illustration fashioned as visual arts form which functioned both as cultural resistance and also as social critique.'

Vidya Dehejia (1997) is a prominent art historian whose work focuses on Indian art and aesthetics. Her book 'Indian Art' offers a broad view of the artistic traditions in India with specific reference to the illustration. Dehejia's research investigates religious and cultural contexts for Indian illustrations, as conduits of spiritual narratives, moral lessons, and social norms. She provides an understanding of what these visual stories signify symbolically or allegorically.

Sudeep Ghosh (2015) is known for his research on graphic novels and visual narratives in India. In The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique, Ghosh explores the evolution of visual storytelling in modern India, including the role of illustration as a medium for social critique. He analyses contemporary illustrators and their engagement with political, social, and cultural issues through visual narratives. Ghosh's work is instrumental in understanding how Indian illustrators navigate complex themes and contribute to societal discourse.

Besides these, there is also another material which is the literature on Indian illustration, which consists of books, journal articles, and archival materials that also enrich the understanding of its evolution and significance. Through the texts, the themes of the symbol of religion, the representation of the culture, the application of political satire, and lastly the involvement in social activities are also seen this way. This literature illustrates the fact that Indian illustration is not only a diverse but a dynamic inventive tool, which also contains aspects of social commentary and using it as such contributes to the emergence of those social issues. Through the integration of insights from a range of academic research, this comprehensive critique establishes a more subtle perspective on historical, cultural, and artistic Indian illustration.

5. ILLUSTRATIONS AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN ANCIENT INDIAN TEXT

Ancient Indian texts are popularly known for their rich storyteller traditions, which usually would have the pictures as a very important part of the books. These pictures worked as visual aids in addition to being meaningful tools of social dialogue. These artworks offered insights into the social, political, and cultural life of their times by representing social norms, moral issues, and cultural values.

Early Beginnings: Harappan Civilization: The first Indian illustrations can be traced back to the age of the Harappan Civilization (circa 2500–1900 BCE), where seals and pottery were adorned with their elaborate designs and motifs (Figure 1). These initial modes of visual representation were the forerunners of more complex illustrations to be found in the older texts. The seals also illustrated animals, mythological beings, and geometric patterns and in this way, they performed both decorative and communicative functions (Kenoyer, 1998).

Religious and Mythological Texts: Ancient Indian literature was highly influenced by religious and mythological texts which essentially added more to their meaning through their visual overtones discussing societal issues. Among these were the Ramayana and the Mahabharata which were mainly portrayed with painterly pictures of different stories that taught morals and ethics. For instance, in the Mahabharata, the illustrations were a polyptych in which they were alternated with the moral and unethical sides of the characters thus making the social issues of dharma (duty) and righteousness adverse to the binary thinking (Dehejia, 1997). The Bhagavata Purana was usually accompanied by detailed narratives of the life of Lord Krishna which also influenced the illustrator's creativity in the sense that spirituality was expressed not only through cutter worship but also through

engagement with the social issues based on moral values such as rightfulness, untruthfulness, genuineness, and humbleness (Goswamy, 1986). These visual narratives served as accessible means to impart moral values and social norms to a largely illiterate populace.

Jain Manuscripts: Jainism's visual manuscripts are a perfect example of using art as a tool for social commentary. The Kalpa Sutra, a must-have religious literature, is often supported by detailed illustrations depicting the lives and teachings of the Tirthankaras (Khandalavala & Chandra, 1960). These images conveyed ideas such as non-violence (ahimsa), truth, and asceticism, which Jainism stressed very much. Jain presented the stories through drawings that showed the consequences of greed, dishonesty, and violence, which resulted in a didactic effect. They functioned as a medium for perpetuating the community's moral standards and a platform for addressing social norms that do not conform to these standards. Both devotional and educational materials, these illustrations are instrumental in the dissemination of complicated theological and moral concepts in a quite understandable way (Granoff, 2009).

Buddhist Manuscripts: Buddhist manuscripts, especially those from the Pala period, are notable for their detailed and expressive illustrations. Texts like the Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom) featured depictions of the Buddha's life and Jataka tales, which narrate the previous lives of the Buddha (Dehejia, 1997). These illustrations were not just religious icons but also conveyed deep philosophical and ethical teachings. The murals of Ajanta Caves (2nd century BCE to 480 CE) are illustrative narratives that accompany the Jataka tales—stories about the previous lives of the Buddha (Figure 2). These murals are more than just beautiful treasures; they are also teaching instruments designed to teach followers moral and spiritual values. The Jataka tales were moral fables that condemned social vices like corruption, envy, and injustice while encouraging virtues like compassion, charity, and knowledge. The visual portrayal of these stories made them more engaging and memorable, effectively imparting Buddhist moral precepts to a wide range of audiences.

Secular and Historical Texts: In addition to religious scriptures, historical and secular texts were also being written that included illustrations that had comments on political issues and social life. Arthashastra, an ancient Indian work on statecraft attributed to Kautilya (Chanakya), though primarily a text-based work, was later illustrated in different manuscripts. They often showed situations of ruling, functioning, and military strategy, thus directly or indirectly passing moral and ethical judgment on the leaders' stewardship and power (Rangarajan, 1992). This happens to be so since the artwork of the Panchatantra was conceived of animals, the real human personhood was portrayed through the accompanying verses that discussed societal norms and behaviours. The stories were accompanied with pictographs which, in connection with human vices, made remarks about, honesty, and intelligence and, at times, rebuked the negligence and the evil actions of the people.

Hindu Epics and Puranas: The Mahabharata and Ramayana, two of the greatest Hindu epics, have inspired numerous illustrated manuscripts (Figure 3). The illustrated versions of these texts, such as the Persian-influenced Mughal Ramayana, created during the 16th century, demonstrate the blend of narrative and visual storytelling. These illustrations not only depict key scenes but also provide cultural and historical context, enhancing the reader's understanding of the text (Losty, 1982).

Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3

Figure 1 Pot with animal motifs, Harappa Civilization **Source** Barakat Gallery	**Figure 2** Mahajanaka Jataka, Ajanta Caves **Source** The Metropolitan Museum of Art	**Figure 3** Hindu Epics and Puranas **Source** www. wikipedia.org/

5.1. THEMES AND TECHNIQUES

Religious and Mythological Themes: The religious themes are predominant in the illustrations within the ancient Indian texts. Be it the life story of the Buddha, the escapades of Rama and Krishna, or the images of Tirthankaras in Jainism, the aim is to promote religious devotion as well as the language of the scriptures. The messages are generally instructive, directed at leading one to the spiritual realm and ethical disposition.

Mythological Narratives: Mythological tales are a core subject of Indian art. Such narratives frequently present the exploits and battles fought between gods and heroes, as in Rama's journey in the Ramayana, or Arjuna's endeavours in the Mahabharata. These stories contain many symbols and are usually used to represent moral and ethical teachings (Kramrisch, 1955).

Symbolism and Iconography: Ancient Indian illustrations are rich in symbolism. For example, the lotus flower, frequently depicted in Buddhist and Hindu art, symbolizes purity and spiritual awakening. Similarly, the Jain manuscripts often use the svastika and other auspicious symbols to convey religious messages. The iconography is intricate, with each element was carefully chosen to represent specific ideas and values (Fisher, 1993).

Figure 4, Figure 5

Figure 4 Lotus, Symbolism in Buddhist Art **Source** www.wikipedia.org	**Figure 5** Jain Symbols **Source** www.jainpedia.org

Stylistic Features: In the stylistic characteristics of Indian illustrations, there are different but at the same time, very similar features that include the use of vibrant colours, delicate patterns and expressive characters. The perspective in the picture usually is more of a symbol than a realistic thing; the size and the position of the figures show their spiritual status rather than their physical proximity (Kramrisch, 1955). Such colours as red and greed were likely used to embody the virtues and the vices, whereas the depictions of certain animals and symbols carried cultural and moral connotations (Mitter, 2001). There have been several graphic and metaphorical representative patterns used in art, allowing artists to hide their social criticisms creatively. So, for instance, the artist might have described the situation by showing a good king under the tree and elucidating that good governance and protection were being materialized, while his opposite would have been portrayed in disorder and darkness.

5.2. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IMPACT

Educational Role: Illustrations in ancient Indian texts played a crucial educational role. They were used to teach moral lessons, religious doctrines, and cultural values. For instance, the murals of Ajanta and the miniatures in Jain manuscripts served as visual aids in religious instruction, making complex ideas more accessible to a broader audience (Coomaraswamy, 1934).

Preservation of Cultural Heritage: These illustrations have also been instrumental in preserving India's cultural heritage. They provide insights into the clothing, architecture, and daily life of historical periods, offering a visual record that complements literary descriptions. The illustrated manuscripts are invaluable resources for historians and art historians studying ancient Indian society and culture (Brown, 1997).

Influence on Later Art Forms: The influence of illustration in ancient Indian texts has been tremendous on the later art forms, like the Mughal miniatures, the Rajput paintings, and modern Indian art. The techniques, themes, and stylistic elements developed in these early works have been adapted and reinterpreted by subsequent generations of artists, ensuring the continuity and evolution of India's rich artistic heritage (Goswamy, 1992).

6. ILLUSTRATION AS A MEDIUM OF SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

One of the most important periods of Indian history was the medieval period, which spanned from the 8th to the 18th centuries. The era was marked by a series of political and social upheavals (Dutta, 1978). The cultural countryside was vibrant with a variety of Hindu, Muslim, Jain and Buddhist impacts congregating the artistic and literary traditions of the time (Asher, 1992). No doubt, it was in this context that art and visual documentation became the most arresting media that constructed medieval Indian society. These illustrated manuscripts, which were both colourful and historical, basilicas, and other painted works of the time, on the one hand, displayed the ethical and mythological themes of the religious scriptures, and on the other hand, they represented the contemporary social conflicts reflected in the religious minority policies, gender issues, and political hierarchies.

The Role of Illustrations in Medieval Manuscripts: Medieval manuscripts from India are important preserved data with pictures that served both aesthetic and didactic purposes. The illustrations were not done just for decoration but were integral to the narratives, often adding layers of meaning and facilitating deeper

engagement with the text. Illustrations in manuscripts such as the Bhagavata Purana, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata provided visual representations of mythological and religious stories, thereby reinforcing cultural values and societal norms (Dehejia, 1997).

Political and Social Commentary: Artists receiving support from the monarchy often portrayed daily court life, battles, and political occurrences, unconsciously finding fault with or celebrating the deeds and characters of monarchs. In this case, Mughal paintings were very popular and depicted court ceremonies as well as battles. They were more than historic records. They were also expressions of the righteousness, boldness and courage of the rulers (Beach, 1978). These illustrations were a means of legitimizing the ruler's authority and promoting the ideals of good governance.

Jain and Buddhist Illustrations: The illuminated Jain and Buddhist manuscripts of the medieval period commenced social commentary as well. Jain art, for instance (Figure 6), frequently demonstrated the lives of the Tirthankaras and portrayed moral stories that taught non-violence, truth, and asceticism (Khandalavala & Chandra, 1960). Such representations were the way through which moral stories in Jain scriptures were presented, stigmatizing materialism and moral degeneracy on one central issue, which is the timelessness of humaneness and honesty. The Buddhist manuscripts produced under the Pala dynasty included illustrations that communicated philosophical teachings and stories from the Jataka tales as well. The objective of these illustrations was the public literacy program, which stimulates and motivates the readers to cultivate ideals of compassion, wisdom, and the impermanence of the material world (Dehejia, 1997).

Mughal Miniatures: The Mughal period (16th to 18th centuries) was a golden era for illustrated manuscripts and miniatures. The Mughal emperors were great patrons of the arts, and their ateliers produced works that not only glorified the empire but also subtly critiqued it. For instance, the Akbarnama (Figure 7), a chronicle of Emperor Akbar's reign, contains illustrations that celebrate Akbar's policies of religious tolerance and social reform while also depicting the harsh realities of warfare and political intrigue (Goswamy, 1992).

Rajput Paintings: In the Rajput courts of Rajasthan, miniature paintings often reflected the social hierarchies and gender norms of the time (Figure 8). However, these illustrations also contained elements of social critique. Paintings from the Rajasthani school often depicted the heroism of local rulers and the valour of their women, subtly questioning the Mughal dominance and advocating for regional pride and autonomy (Craven, 1997).

Bhakti Movement and Social Reform: In the Bhakti and Sufi movements, which were more focused on personal devotion instead of ritualistic practices, much illustrative work was inspired by the movement to deal with religious and social issues (Figure 9). The movement apart from personal devotion to deities like Krishna and Rama, especially stood for the challenge of the old caste system, the religious establishment by the medieval Indian society and they promoted social inclusivity (Schomer, 1987). Illustrations like the ones in Gita Govinda and some Puranas were very common, and they portrayed scenarios of divine love and devotion. They also depicted the ideas of equality brought up by the Bhakti saints (Hawley, 2005). The art pieces were used as visual sermons coming from people who acted like they were the god of the social change that was supposed to be done and the god of the spiritual equality that should be in the world.

Figure 6, Figure 7

| **Figure 6** Jain illustrated manuscripts, Kalpsutra **Source** Art India | **Figure 7** Akbar holds a religious assembly of different faiths at Fatehpur Sikri, Akbarnama **Source** www.wikipedia.org |

Figure 8, Figure 9

| **Figure 8** Krishna lifts Mount Govardhan, Rajput Miniature Painting **Source** www.britishmuseum.org | **Figure 9** Bhakti & Sufism Traditions **Source** www.wikipedia.org |

6.1. REGIONAL STYLES AND THEIR SOCIAL IMPACT

Medieval India was a diverse region; that is apparent in the various styles of illustrated manuscripts, each with its specific way of social commentary. For instance, the Rajput and Pahari schools of painting have created unique styles that usually include local legends, folklore, and daily life, thus commenting on the social and cultural practices specific to the region (Goswamy, 1986). These illustrations often highlighted the virtues of heroism, loyalty, and love, while subtly critiquing social injustices and the hardships of common people.

Challenging Social Norms: Illustrations in texts like the Gita Govinda and various Puranas often portrayed scenes of divine love and devotion, highlighting the moderate messages of the Bhakti saints (Hawley, 2005). These works served as visual sermons that advocated for social reform and spiritual equality.

Educating and Inspiring Reform: The scholastic nature of many illustrated texts helped educate the public and inspire social reform. Jain manuscripts, for instance, not only conveyed religious teachings but also promoted ethical conduct

and social justice. Similarly, Mughal miniatures often depicted idealized visions of governance and social harmony, encouraging echoing of these ideals.

Promoting Cultural Synthesis: The blending of Persian, Indian, and Central Asian artistic traditions in Mughal miniatures, for instance, reflected and facilitated the cultural integration that characterized the Mughal Empire. This synthesis was itself a form of social commentary, advocating for the coexistence and mutual enrichment of diverse cultural traditions (Beach, 1987).

7. THE INFLUENCE OF COLONIALISM ON INDIAN ILLUSTRATION

Colonialism profoundly impacted Indian illustration, transforming it from traditional forms to a blend of indigenous and Western styles, and significantly altering its role in social commentary. This period witnessed a dynamic interaction between Indian artists and European influences, resulting in the creation of new artistic expressions that both reflected and critiqued the evolving socio-political landscape.

7.1. INTRODUCTION OF WESTERN TECHNIQUES AND STYLES

With the invasion of the 18th century, British colonial rule introduced Western techniques and styles of art to India. The British founded art schools in India, such as the Government School of Art in Calcutta in 1854 (Figure 10), which was meant to promote European art traditions of the academy (Mitter, 1994). Under it, Indian artists began to learn the use of new media like oil painting and printmaking and Western principles of art, such as realism and perspective. During this time, a Company style, also known as the Patna School or Murshidabad Style of painting, involved Indian artists beginning to work with European techniques in rendering Indian subjects (Figure 11). These were the works typifying the use of Indian miniaturist techniques applied within European realism, often acting like a document for the British, with their detailed realistic depiction of Indian flora, fauna, architecture, and lifestyle (Archer, 1992). Though these illustrations came forth primarily for colonial patrons, they began including social realities and subtly commented on the cultural and economic impact of British rule. The patronage system, which had inspired Mughal and Rajput painters, was gradually eroded under British rule, and a definite shift—both of focus and purpose—was made towards Western-forms-inspired art. This shift resulted in the marginalization of traditional artists and brought a transformation in themes and styles of Indian illustration (Losty, 1982).

Figure 10, Figure 11

Figure 10 Government School of Art, Calcutta
Source www.wikipedia.org

Figure 11 Group of Courtesans, Company Style
Source www.wikipedia.org

7.2. THE BENGAL SCHOOL OF ART AND NATIONALIST SENTIMENTS

The Bengal School of Art, initially started by painters such as Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose and developed further by other artists like Jamini Roy, Venkatappa, Souza, and KG Subramanyan, was a way to revive Indian artistic traditions as a response to the dominance of Western styles. The independence of this movement from larger nationalist movements is noticeable, as it did not aim to challenge the establishment of free India, but rather to genuinely establish the reformation of Indian traditional art by telling the story of individual nationalists who worked for their nation (Mitter, 1994). The traditional works of Tagore sprang from his interests in Mughal miniatures, Rajput paintings, and Japanese wash techniques. His painting "Bharat Mata" (Figure 10) is iconic, symbolizing the nation as a serene, spiritual mother figure (Mitter, 1994).

Nandalal Bose's art is identified by its simplicity, utilization of natural forms, and stress on Indian themes. His portrayal of the Congress party's publications and his posters for the Haripura Congress Session in 1938 serve as the exemplification of how art was used to mobilize public opinion and inspire nationalist sentiments (Sivaramamurti, 1970). His masterpieces depicted the respect of labour, the marvel of rural life, and the soul of self-reliance, which are the same as Mahatma Gandhi's views on an independent India (Parimoo, 1982). The use of light colours, flowing lines, and detailed artefacts was their signature style (Pal, 1997).

Various other artists like Gaganendranath Tagore, Asit Kumar Haldar, and Mukul Dey are major names connected with the Bengal School. Each contributed to the movement's ethos through their distinct art collectively working towards a renaissance of Indian art that was both modern and rooted in tradition (Guha-Thakurta, 1992). Bengal School artists found numerous influences in paintings like Mughal miniatures, Rajput and folk art. They, in their illustrations, mainly depicted the lost warriors of Indian civilization, some mythology and rural life, thus turning the art into a source of national pride and a symbol of cultural resurrection. Through their works, these artists not only celebrated India's rich heritage but also critiqued the cultural erosion brought about by colonial rule.

Figure 12, Figure 13

Figure 12 Bharat Mata, Abanindranath Tagore
Source www.kamat.com

Figure 13 The Haripura poster, Nandlal Bose
Source artsandculture.google.com

7.3. RISE OF POLITICAL CARTOONS AND SATIRICAL ILLUSTRATIONS

During the colonial period, the introduction of print technology and newspapers alongside periodicals provided an additional platform for social and political commentary through illustrations. This new medium set the stage for political cartoons and satirical drawings, two powerful tools that were used to criticize colonial rule, reveal societal hypocrisies, and draw the public to the right side of the issue. Not just being amusing pieces of art, these drawings also showed the interconnectedness of culture and politics, as they pointed out the growing alienation and the Indian people's eagerness for freedom.

Titles like The Indian Charivari (1872)(Figure 14) and The Oudh Punch (1877) (Figure 15), which were early examples, used humour and satire to argue against the government and society (Lelyveld, 2005). These initial cartoons became the foundation of the longer tradition of political satire in the post-independence period. Apart from many others, the most remarkable person who operated in this field was Gaganendranath Tagore, a leading artist and cartoonist of the early 20th century. Cartoons of his that are very sharply critical of British colonial rule and Indian society (Dutta, 2008) were published in several journals like Modern Review and Bharati.

The illustrative work of Tagore humorously and satirically portrayed the manifest absurdity and injustice of the colonial administration, which were thus seen as very powerful tools of social criticism. After India gained independence in 1947, political cartoons became one of the main means for criticizing the government and country leaders.

Figure 14, Figure 15

Figure 14 The Indian Charivari	Figure 15 The Oudh Punch
Source www.artisera.com	**Source** www.wikipedia.org

7.3.1. KEY FIGURES AND PUBLICATIONS

Gaganendranath Tagore: Gaganendranath Tagore's cartoons are exemplary in their ability to combine humour with serious critique. His illustrations often portrayed British officials as bumbling and out of touch, while also highlighting the

complicity of Indian elites who supported colonial policies. For example, his satirical series "Reform Screams" (Figure 16) critiqued the superficial nature of colonial reforms and the disconnect between British administrators and the Indian populace (Guha-Thakurta, 1992).

Shankar Pillai: Shankar Pillai, commonly known as Shankar, was another prominent cartoonist whose work became synonymous with political satire in India (Figure 17). Starting his career in the late colonial period, Shankar's cartoons were published in newspapers like The Hindustan Times and later in his own magazine, Shankar's Weekly. His illustrations were known for their incisive commentary on British policies, Indian politics, and social issues (Nayar, 2009). Shankar's work continued to influence Indian political cartoons well into the post-independence era.

Figure 16, Figure 17

Figure 16 Reform Screams by Gaganendranath Tagore
Source www.prinseps.com

Figure 17 Political Satire by Shankar
Source www.wikipedia.org

7.3.2. THEMES AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY

The themes of political cartoons and satirical illustrations during the colonial period were diverse, addressing a wide range of social and political issues. These included the critique of colonial exploitation, the struggle for independence, social reforms, and the contradictions within Indian society.

Colonial Narratives and Portraiture: With British rule, the thematic focus of Indian illustration changed. The scene was now dominated by colonial narratives, portraits of British officials, and depictions of colonial life. All these illustrations were mostly used as a sort of recording and legitimizing the British presence in India. The portrait illustrations of the Indian princes and British officials were conducted to underline the hierarchical nature of colonial society (Wheeler, 1999). The idea exchange led to an interaction whereby Indian and European artists created new artistic forms, which had fused traditions. This cultural exchange, while often unequal, resulted in a dynamic and evolving artistic landscape (Metcalf, 2007).

Anti-Colonial Sentiments: The cartoons dedicated a profound method for the nation to express its anti-colonial feelings. They were used to illustrate the plunder of Indian resources, the race-based superior attitude of British authorities, and the very severe conditions of colonial rule. These works not only educated people about such problems but also unified the victims against the common oppressor. For instance, cartoons illustrating the Jallianwala Bagh massacre depicted the brutality of British repression and the need for a unified resistance (Nayar, 2009).

Social Reform and Nationalism: Other social reform issues were the focus of many political cartoons, e.g. the caste system, gender inequality, and the need for education. Through the portrayal of these points, illustrating artists strengthened the nationalistic movement colossally that not only aimed at giving independence but also at reconstructing and updating Indian society. Satire and visual nature make these somewhat esoteric issues easier to learn about and appreciate in cartoons. Cartoonists built a common visual language of resistance, which helped a diverse range of Indians bond into a feeling of unity and common purpose. This was particularly important in a country like India, riven by differences in language and culture that so often stand in the way of collective action.

Fusion of Cultures: The colonial period in history also saw the influences of Indian and European cultural elements in illustration. The new hybrid style was established by the combination of Indian subjects with European techniques as adopted by different artists like Raja Ravi Varma. Varma's treatment of Hindu gods and goddesses in the most realistic and Westernized ways instantaneous in their popularity, greatly influenced Indian art (Chaitanya, 1994). These hybrid styles that emerged during the colonial period sustained themselves in Indian art until well into the 20th century and contributed much toward the rich diversity of contemporary Indian illustration today (Kapadia, 2002).

8. CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ILLUSTRATORS AND THEIR SOCIAL COMMENTARY

A group of Indian artists is using art to portray several social issues like gender equality, conservation, and politics. It's a result of the use of online platforms through which different artists can address the topics that currently affect society the most and, therefore, express their viewpoints that are not only contemporaneous but also relevant. This kind of engagement has positioned the illustrators as very important voices in the public discourse on social issues. (Sen, 2016).

The Rise of Digital Illustration: Consequently, digital media is one of the factors that has significantly changed the accessibility and range of Indian illustration as a means of social commentary. It has changed the face of illustration by introducing new tools and platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and independent blogs for artists to have access to a bigger audience. Visualizing new transnational dynamics, methods, and social interventions, digital illustration has become a vehicle of exploration, defamiliarization, and resistance. Political satire has been greatly improved by the increasingly popular use of animated cartoons, memes, and interactive illustrations which has in turn thus escalated the degree of interaction and impact. Social media and online publications have become both the stage and the message for contemporary illustrators while the latter also contribute to digital galleries through which the former informally relate with foreign fans. This transformation of the medium demonstrates its developmental prospects intertwined with adapting technologies (Gombrich, 1971).

8.1. KEY CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ILLUSTRATORS

Orijit Sen: He is one of the leading faces in contemporary Indian illustration, mainly recognized for his arson works in the genres of graphic novels and mural-related projects. Most of his work skirts along politically charged and environmentally charged issues. It is interpreted that technique mixing is a way to get real-scene representations into strong, compelling narratives. His serial graphic
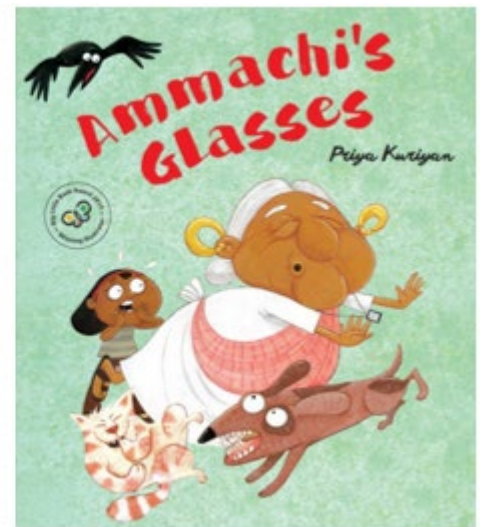
novel, River of Stories (1994) is regarded as the first Indian graphic novel and brings into focus the ecological and social impact of the Narmada Dam on the Narmada River. It brings out, through the intricately detailed illustrations and storytelling, how the big development displaces Indigenous communities and causes ecological distortions (Sen, 1994).

Priya Kuriyan: She is another highly noted illustrator whose work centres on social justice and gender equality. Her illustrations regularly make their appearance in children's books, magazines, and online platforms. Humour and empathy were, therefore, to her, ways of explaining the complex social issues. In her works on children's books, such as Ammachi's Glasses (2017), and graphic novels related to issues like gender roles, education, and family dynamics, among others, she conveys humour and sensitivity through illustrations. The vibrant colours and intricate characterizations are the hallmarks of Kuriyan's body of work and make her commentaries accessible to everyone (Ghosh, 2015).

Figure 18, Figure 19
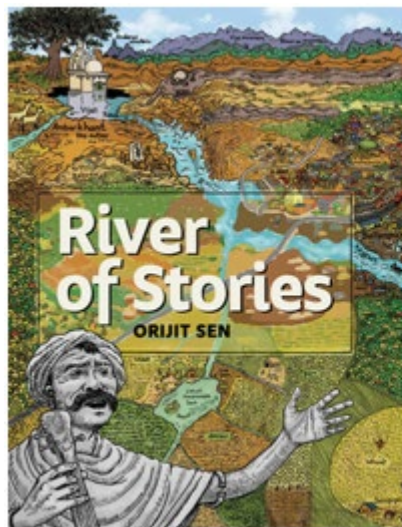
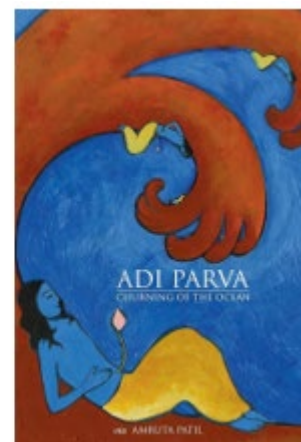| **Figure 18** River of Stories, Orjit Sen **Source** www.wikipedia.org	**Figure 19** Ammachi's Glasses, Priya Kuriyan **Source** Tulikabook

Rohan Chakravarty: An illustrator and cartoonist, he practises his art to spread ecological awareness. He is the creator of the famous "Green Humour" graphic novel. His cartoons have variables in the themes of wildlife conservation, climate change, and sustainable living. Chakravarty has taken to digital media, thereby garnering an international audience for it, making the ecological advocacy effective and spread out (Bengaluru, 2020).

Amruta Patil: Another influential contemporary illustrator and graphic novelist is Amruta Patil. Her work focuses on themes of mythology, gender, and identity. Her two graphic novels, Kari (2008) and Adi Parva (2012) have already merged traditional Indian mythology and modernity and given ancient tales a feminine voice in their telling. Patil takes inequality in patriarchal norms and issues of sustenance about gender and sexuality through her illustration in modern India (Patil, 2012).

Figure 20, Figure 21
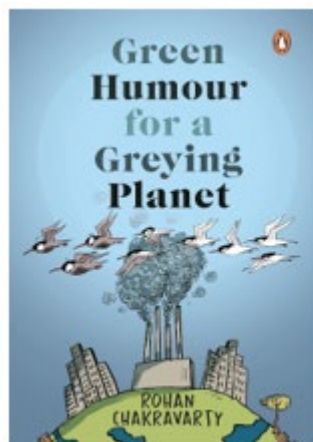
Figure 20 Green Humour, Rohan Chakravarty **Source** India Penguin	**Figure 21** Adi Parva, Amruta Patil **Source** Bookworm Trust

8.2. THEMATIC FOCUS AND EVOLUTION

Thematic focus of illustration in contemporary India touches on issues such as environmental sustainability, gender equality, political corruption, and human rights. One can ask here how much all this has changed with the changing socio-political atmosphere in India, not to mention a growing consciousness among artists who use the platform for advocacy and change. From Orijit Sen and Amruta Patil, illustrators who change the role of traditional art in India by inclusions of modern narratives with global issues through often merging the personal and the political into strong visual commentaries, reaching out to very different audiences.

9. CONCLUSION

Indian illustration has acted throughout history largely as a medium for social commentary. Take, for example, artists like Raja Ravi Varma, who in his illustrations showed several social aspects, caste discrimination, women's rights, or other dilemmas—making people realize and getting debates started in society. Not only is such illustration visually beautiful; but it is also a strong weapon with the help of which the norms of society can be changed. It is in the detailed imagery and symbolism that Indian illustrations often carry deep cultural and political meanings, thus proving to be an effective way of communicating complex ideas to a wider audience.

Illustrators have catered to themes such as poverty, colonialism, and interfaith tensions; thus, some of them made huge contributions toward shaping public discourse and attitude. Indeed, today, their works are still highly valued and very much studied about impact and relevance toward current social issues. In fact, through their very works, these illustrators ensured that a legacy lived beyond them in this world and transcended time to inspire new generations of artists and social activists alike. According to Nayar (Nayar, 2016), it is the digital revolution that increased only the scope and influence of Indian illustration further, thereby allowing artists to converse with an audience worldwide and contribute meaningfully to the prevailing social and political discourses. This literature review explored the meaning of illustration as a medium for social commentary, echoing the struggle among those artists who use their representations and creations to

challenge norms and inspire change in the name of creating a more inclusive and equitable society.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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