

Between Image and Word: Testimony, Trauma, and Documentary Ethics in First Hand: Graphic Non-Fiction from India

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Abstract

The rise of graphic non-fiction in India signifies a striking shift in the undercurrents among documentary practices, literary forms, and visual culture. Compiled by Orijit Sen and Vidyun Sabhaney, *First Hand: Graphic Non-Fiction from India*, Volume 1 (2016) assembles twenty-two narratives that span across various genres including biography, autobiography, oral history, documentary, commentary, and reportage. This anthology is particularly important as it shifts experiences typically conveyed through journalism or prose into the innovative realm of sequential art. Present intellectual discourse aims to deliberate how *First Hand* addresses the epistemological and ethical challenges associated with depicting lived experiences through an iconotext. Through detailed analyses of selected stories—such as Neha Dixit’s and Orijit Sen’s “The Girl Not from Madras,” Ishita Sharma’s and Priyanka Kumar’s “The Edge of the Map,” and Dhvani Shah’s “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back”—the article posits that the anthology goes beyond merely rendering documentary content visually accessible; it emphasizes the mediation inherent in acts of witnessing. The graphic format provides both immediacy and detachment, combining evidentiary strength with interpretive ambiguity. By drawing on trauma theory, testimony studies, graphic narrative theory, and ethics within documentary contexts, this article suggests that *First Hand* establishes an ethical framework for witnessing wherein readers must navigate the gaps between reality and representation, testimony and reconstruction, image and text. Thus, its documentary effectiveness lies not in presenting an illusion of direct access to truth but in revealing the processes by which reality can be narratively constructed.

Keywords: Graphic Non-Fiction, Testimony, Trauma, Documentary Ethics, Witnessing, Visual Narrative, *First Hand*, Indian Comics, Graphic Narrative, Memory

Introduction

Historically, the drive for documentary representation has been linked to formats asserting closeness to factual reality—such as journalism, photography, oral histories, archival records, ethnography, documentary films, and autobiographical narratives. In contrast to these forms, comics and graphic narratives have often found themselves in a precarious cultural position between popular entertainment and serious literary or documentary work. The rise of graphic non-fiction has disrupted this dichotomy by illustrating how drawing techniques like sequentiality and visual framing can effectively coexist with textual narration to serve as nuanced tools for historical and social reflection. Within the Indian landscape specifically, *First Hand* represents a crucial intervention.

The importance of *First Hand* extends beyond its role as a groundbreaking compilation within Indian graphic non-fiction. Its significance stems from the representational complexities highlighted by its title: "first hand" suggests immediacy and authenticity tied to eyewitness accounts yet each narrative is inherently mediated through narrators' interpretations alongside artistic choices such as layouts or captions. Consequently, the title establishes a productive tension between expectations for direct testimonies versus the inevitable mediation involved before reaching readers.

This tension becomes even more pronounced when addressing themes related to suffering. Several narratives within this anthology tackle issues like displacement, gender-based violence, political oppression, environmental damage, marginalization, and development repercussions. For example, "The Girl Not From Madras" recounts journalist Neha Dixit's investigation into trafficking involving an Assamese girl in Haryana; "The Edge of the Map" scrutinizes dislocation linked with major developmental initiatives; while "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" discusses mining's impact on Goa.

Thus, the primary inquiry transcends mere representation questions regarding *First Hand*. Instead, it focuses on what transpires when reality is transformed into graphical narratives: What additional insights do images provide? What aspects might they obscure? How does juxtaposing imagery with textual narration influence reader responses toward suffering? Most importantly—what are artists' ethical responsibilities when reconstructing another individual's experiences?

This article contends that *First Hand* reframes documentary witnessing away from claims about straightforward factual representation towards an ethically nuanced interaction among visuals, testimonies, memory, and interpretation. Its diverse narratives reveal how depicting traumatic events experienced by marginalized communities necessitates careful consideration rather than serving solely as neutral documentation. Choices concerning frame selection, panel sequencing, reconstruction methods employed, and even silence play significant roles within these testimonies. Therefore, *First Hand* posits that understanding true documentary value resides not within eliminating mediations but rather making them perceptible so readers become secondary witnesses who engage with distances separating events from their representations.

Graphic Non-Fiction & Documentary Truth Challenges

Graphic non-fiction occupies a unique space within contemporary narrative discourse because its authority relies on a medium conspicuously shaped through artistic construction. While photographs are traditionally viewed as direct indexes capturing light reflections off real-world subjects, drawing lacks similar mechanical qualities since it originates from an artist's interpretation. Ironically, this perceived limitation can manifest into strengths regarding documentaries—since artwork does not aspire towards portraying unmediated realities, it encourages audiences to acknowledge interpretative efforts behind representations.

This notion holds particular relevance for *First Hand*. Although grounded firmly within authentic

socio-political contexts, narratives cannot simply replicate past occurrences as if pages serve clear windows onto historical truths. Instead, artists must reimagine locations, populations, talks, memoirs, and incidents, resulting ultimately in representations asserting factual gravity while recognizing formal constructions involved.

Scholarship surrounding graphics increasingly acknowledges this capability. Hillary Chute argues among others that comics possess potential power regarding historical testimonies due largely because their visual-verbal elements allow various temporalities alongside different modes of witnessing coexisting simultaneously. Marianne Hirsch's post-memory concept also proves pertinent here—as mediated portrayals transmit experiences never directly encountered by readers. The audience thus doesn't literally gain firsthand witness status; rather texts facilitate encounters mediated through another person's experience.

Furthermore, First Hand amplifies these concerns via genre diversity. Its contents encompass, biography, audiovisual commentaries, reports, documentation alongside oral histories consequently resisting singular models defining authoritative documentaries. First-person perspectives differ significantly compared against investigative reports whereas oral traditions don't operate identically relative biographical reconstructions. Yet all adhere strictly under comic visual grammar guidelines leading inevitably toward fruitful contradictions whereby approaching lived realities reveals greater visibility concerning representational mediation itself.

Testimony and Witnessing Ethics Considerations

Testimony assumes heightened importance especially when engaging traumatic experiences since trauma cannot merely be encapsulated intact via storytelling. Cathy Caruth's influential ideas underscore disruptions existing between event, memory, narration suggesting trauma resists immediate comprehension resurfacing instead fragmentarily or displaced later. Testimony evolves therefore beyond simple information transmission—it becomes engagement confronting struggles inherent while representing lived moments previously endured. Shoshana Felman along Dori Laub similarly elucidate testimony signifying instances where witnessing unfolds –not merely statements delivering already established meanings but relationships formulating connections amongst speakers transmitting witnessed events towards listeners absorbing accounts shared. This relational aspect remains vital amidst grappling issues presented through graphic-non-fiction lenses.

Readers frequently assume listener roles becoming secondary witnesses encountering situations spatially temporally socially emotionally distant from personal realms. The illustrated page stands transformed into sites facilitating exchanges turning testimonies, visual-verbal dialogues raising urgent ethical dilemmas: how best might one depict another individual's sufferings without reducing those hardships solely towards spectacles? Such queries intensify especially evident surrounding chronicles detailing gendered violence marginalization exemplified aptly via "The Girl Not from Madras." Originating from Dixit's journalistic pursuits focusing upon trafficking incidents involving Assamese girls forced marriages executed subsequently across Haryana (Codesign), this topic presents obvious voyeuristic risks. Potential pitfalls elevate further considering illustrations could heighten these dangers showing scenes lacking photographic evidence altogether.

Nonetheless absence photographic proof yields crucial distinctions ethically—reconstructed visuals cannot misleadingly masquerade under authentic documentations instead proclaiming interpretations thereby compelling readers recognize layers leading toward structured narratives crafted originally before them. Herein lays potentialities for graphical forms producing meaningful ethics. Instead of presenting unrestricted access to victims' realities ,narratives highlight processes underpinning reconstructions made

visible throughout storytelling journeys undertaken together.

“The Girl Not From Madras”: Vulnerability Reconstruction Ethics

“The Girl Not From Madras” stands out prominently showcasing exemplary forms incorporated into documented graphical storytelling found within First Hand. Emerging directly stemming from Neha Dixit's investigative report investigating trafficking cases concerning Assamese girls brought forcibly marriages across Haryana alongside orchestrated adaptations created collaboratively sharing insights originating originally captured journalistically –this transformation underwent multiple stages. Mediation exists at every step amongst layers unfolding:

1. Lived Experiences Faced.
2. Testimonies gathered during investigations conducted initially.
3. Artistic reinterpretations realized thereafter.
4. Readers' subsequent engagements interpreting final outcomes delivered eventually...

Thus, irony emerges surrounding phraseology relating back toward ‘first-hand’. No absolute unmediated accesses exist—the outcome presented constitutes carefully arranged testaments relayed onward conveying intricate chains linking sources together.

Violence and Representation in Graphic Narrative

The elements of suggestion, framing, spatial organization, facial expressions, body language, and written testimony can evoke an understanding of suffering without turning it into mere spectacle. It is crucial to differentiate between 'showing' and 'making visible' in this context. Showing refers to a direct visual representation, while making visible involves establishing the conditions that allow an otherwise overlooked reality to become comprehensible. The power of graphic narratives lies predominantly in the latter definition.

Moreover, these narratives complicate the dynamics between visibility and invisibility. The experiences of victims encompass aspects that cannot be entirely depicted; trauma extends beyond what is illustrated. Aspects that remain unillustrated can be as impactful as those that are presented. Gaps, transitions, omissions, and shifts in viewpoint enable the narrative to recognize that no representation can fully encapsulate the experience it seeks to convey.

Orijit Sen points out that graphic non-fiction lacks a singular method for achieving the interplay between text and image; each narrative demands its own unique formal approach. This observation is critical for grasping the ethical implications of First Hand. Documentary truth cannot rely solely on realism; it emerges through formal decisions tailored to the specific experience being portrayed.

The Edge of the Map”: Development, Displacement, and Counter-Mapping

In “The Edge of the Map,” Ishita Sharma and Priyanka Kumar shift attention from personal trauma to systemic displacement. Their narrative explores the human impacts of extensive development projects in Jharkhand and Odisha by incorporating quotes and insights from individuals affected by such initiatives. The title provides a key conceptual lens: while maps typically offer objective spatial information—defining territories, boundaries, routes, resources, and administrative divisions—traditional mapping may overlook vital human experiences within those areas. Hence, the “edge” becomes a metaphorical concept indicating where official cartographic knowledge fails to capture lived realities.

This graphic narrative addresses that shortcoming by creating a counter-map focused on development. Rather than viewing land merely as abstract space, it reintroduces memory, habitation patterns, displacement issues, and community aspects into spatial representations. The ethical importance of this

endeavour lies in redistributing visibility. Development discussions often hinge on statistics, policy documents, maps, compensation data, and institutional jargon. In contrast, graphic narratives shift representation's focus from large structural processes to individual lives.

Consequently, this narrative challenges what might be termed an administrative perspective: while bureaucracy may portray displacement as a quantifiable impact of infrastructure development; for those displaced individuals involved it signifies disruption or destruction of their connections to place. Graphic storytelling brings these conflicting viewpoints into alignment visually.

In this setting, images and words mutually enhance one another's meanings: words convey testimony and political context; images illustrate how displacement manifests physically. Neither medium alone suffices—the visual can depict an environment while language articulates its significance for inhabitants; conversely visual representation can show spatial relationships obscured by verbal descriptions. Thus, "The Edge of the Map" derives its documentary strength from interdependence rather than hierarchical structures.

“One Step Forward, Two Steps Back”: Ecological Witnessing and Landscape Politics

Dhwani Shah's "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" applies First Hand's documentary principles to environmental themes by focusing on mining activities in Goa which threaten its natural landscapes through extraction practices. Contemporary reviews characterize this work as an insightful examination of mining's repercussions for local ecosystems. Environmental narratives present unique challenges because ecological harm cannot always be distilled into individual testimonies; landscapes do not testify like people do. Their degradation must instead be conveyed through human observations combined with scientific knowledge and visual evidence.

Graphic narratives excel at addressing this issue since they can represent landscape temporally: a single panel might depict a location at one point in time while sequential panels showcase its evolution over time—allowing readers to perceive environmental change as an ongoing process rather than a fixed state. The title itself reflects inherent contradictions within developmental modernity: economic growth often coincides with environmental decline—and thus critiques simplistic notions equating development with progress automatically. The graphic format allows this contradiction to manifest spatially: industrial facilities alongside excavated areas or roads juxtaposed with vegetation create coexistence within one representational framework—the landscape itself serves as evidence.

However, the narrative introduces ethical concerns around nostalgia too; depictions of ecological loss may romanticize an idealized past. A comprehensive documentary must avoid simplifying ecological politics into mere dichotomies between pristine nature versus destructive modernity—critical questions revolve around who profits from extraction efforts versus who bears its consequences along with whose definitions shape prevailing notions about development itself. Again, here First Hand exemplifies how visual testimony holds political potential by altering perceptions regarding what constitutes evidence.

Between Image and Word: The Grammar of Witnessing

A core innovation within First Hand resides in how images interact dynamically with language—neither element takes precedence over the other but together forge meaning via techniques like juxtaposition or sequencing among others. Scott McCloud highlights closure's essential role within comics whereby readers mentally construct links across distinct visuals. This principle deeply influences documentary narratives since readers don't simply absorb complete events—they actively reconstruct relationships occurring among panels thereby becoming participants themselves regarding documentaries' meanings.

Notably, the gutter—the gap separating panels—becomes significant especially when dealing with trauma

narratives. It denotes absence where events transpired between two visuals may only be inferred but not overtly displayed. In such contexts, gaps function ethically by resisting fantasies suggesting everything could possibly find representation.

Similarly, image-text relationships unfold intriguingly. Captions might fill informational gaps left unaddressed visually whilst imagery could complicate or even challenge verbal accounts. Speech balloons preserve testimonies whereas visual framing situates them in socially broader contexts leading ultimately towards productive friction emerging out of documentary truths. An image might seem immediate yet language introduces uncertainties. Captions assert factual claims whereas drawings reveal reconstruction. Testimonials claim authority but surrounding pages remind us someone selected framed reproduced them all demonstrating tension isn't defect—it defines ethical condition intrinsic form itself.

Trauma Silence and Limits Representation

Trauma studies provide further insight concerning formal strategies employed throughout First Hand. Trauma often embodies fragmentation, repetition, belatedness, silence and difficulty narration. Graphic storytelling captures these traits through disjointed panels disrupted timelines visual reiteration vacant spaces muted dialogues transitions requiring reader inference. However, it's essential not to categorically label every fragmented depiction 'traumatic' lest we risk aestheticizing suffering. The stronger argument posits graphics offer formal tools allowing testimony struggles represented without pretending pain fully translates language. Silences appearing across frames thus gain ethical weight—not indicative victims lacking voice but acknowledgment insufficient representations exist. This notion proves pivotal since ethics mandates restraint; representations risking suggestive complete comprehension of another's experiences render ethically questionable. Responsible documentaries retain something that eludes possessiveness readers. First Hand navigates spaces balancing revelation withholding, striving to illuminate overlooked realities yet simultaneously reminding audiences visibility remains constructed.

Reader as Secondary Witness

Perhaps the most notable ethical achievement rests upon positioning the assigned reader. The conventional journalistic audience perceives consumption mainly informationally however readership engaging graphic documentaries encounters information differently requiring simultaneous interpretation across various modalities including textual testimonies, sequences framing silences relationships. This invites what might be termed secondary witnessing—the reader hasn't experienced events nor heard statements directly from original witnesses instead facing testimonies filtered through several mediating layers necessitating awareness regarding distance involved.

Readers ought neither dismiss mediated representations nor view them transparently accessing reality—instead adopting critical proximity allows closeness whilst acknowledging experiences belong distinctly to others. Particularly relevant becomes representations of marginalized communities wherein privileged audiences risk consuming others' sufferings merely cultural curiosities and emotional spectacles. First Hand counters tendencies presenting social structures beside individual anecdotes thereby intertwining documentary pedagogy asking readers reconsider normalized realities obscured bureaucratic languages or media repetitions.

Documentary Ethics Beyond Objectivity

Conventional ideals surrounding documentary representation frequently align objectivity; yet First Hand suggests credibility does not necessitate eliminating perspectives. Each narrative involves choices about subjects, framing, and emphasis. Reflexive documentaries expose their own construction, allowing audiences to see how scenes are organized and perspectives chosen, making them ideal for exploring

contested realities.

The anthology features 22 contributions across 6 literary modes, presenting diverse perspectives instead of a single narrative. It includes multiple voices and experimental forms, stemming from over 50 applications. Ultimately, it serves as both a collection of stories and an alternative archive of contemporary Indian experiences. *First Hand: Graphic Non-Fiction from India* occupies an important position in the development of Indian graphic narrative because it challenges the assumption that documentary authority belongs exclusively to prose, journalism, photography, or conventional historical discourse. Its twenty-two narratives demonstrate that comics can become a serious mode of testimony, reportage, oral history, environmental documentation, biography, and political commentary. (Google Books)

Yet the anthology's importance extends beyond generic innovation. Its most compelling contribution lies in the ethical tension it establishes between the immediacy promised by “first hand” experience and the unavoidable mediation of graphic representation. “The Girl Not From Madras” demonstrates how an individual experience of trafficking and forced marriage becomes a layered testimonial narrative through the movement from lived events to journalism to graphic reconstruction. “The Edge of the Map” exposes the inadequacy of official spatial representations by placing displaced communities and their memories within the visual field of development. “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” transforms landscape into environmental testimony, showing how visual representation can document processes of ecological degradation that exceed individual experience.

Across these narratives, the relationship between image and word remains neither complementary nor merely decorative. It is epistemological. Images provide spatial and affective forms of evidence; words provide testimony, context, explanation, and historical specificity. Their interaction generates a documentary form that is simultaneously immediate and mediated. Most importantly, *First Hand* demonstrates that ethical documentary representation does not depend upon pretending that mediation does not exist. On the contrary, the ethical force of graphic non-fiction emerges when mediation becomes visible. The drawing tells the reader: this reality has been reconstructed. The caption tells the reader: this experience has been narrated. The sequence tells the reader: these events have been ordered. The gutter tells the reader: something remains beyond representation.

The anthology therefore replaces the fantasy of transparent witnessing with a more demanding model of mediated witnessing. The reader is not granted ownership of another person's trauma. Instead, the reader is asked to recognise the distance between self and other, event and narrative, experience and representation. In this respect, *First Hand* does not simply bring neglected realities into view. It also teaches its readers how difficult seeing can be.

Its documentary ethics ultimately reside in that difficulty. The anthology's images do not abolish the distance between witness and reader; they make that distance perceptible. Its narratives do not claim to reproduce reality perfectly; they demonstrate the labour required to represent it responsibly. And its fusion of image and word does not resolve the problem of testimony; it gives that problem a visible, spatial, and formally complex shape.

The movement from event to testimony, from testimony to image, and from image to reader thus becomes the central ethical trajectory of *First Hand*. Between image and word lies not merely a gap but a space of negotiation—a space in which documentary truth is continually constructed, questioned, and ethically challenged.

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