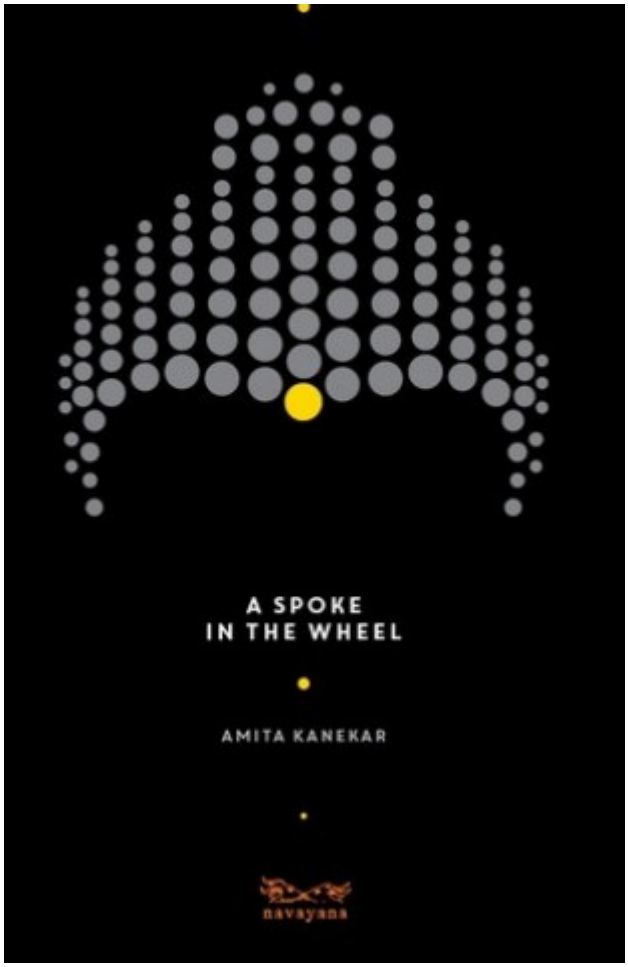
Courtesy: Luis Dias, Navhind Times.

Of all the genres of novel-writing, I have the greatest respect for writers of historical fiction. It is a genre best left untouched before a vast amount of reading and research on the subject and the historical period has been accomplished. In addition, one also has to possess a good imagination to recreate an often-distant past, in some ways very different from ours, but also in terms of the human experience, not that different.

A poorly-researched novel can make the reader cringe, but a well-written one can make even the distant past come to life.

I cannot remember exactly when I became friends with Amita Kanekar; it feels like I've known her forever, but it would have to be sometime post-2008, after we relocated back to Goa. But it is fair to say I got to know her really well through her writing. Her columns are always thought-provoking, and challenge me to re-examine our social situation from a perspective I very often had never done before.

Ever since I learnt that Kanekar had written a novel, I've been scouring the local bookshops in search of it. It took me quite a while to finally go online and order it.



It was the title of the book, 'A Spoke in the Wheel', and the fact that it centred around the

Buddha and his Dhamma (an ancient Pali word with several meanings, from ‘teaching’ to ‘justice’, ‘Truth’, ‘good behaviour’) that intrigued me. I’m aware (although I haven’t read it yet) that Babasaheb Ambedkar had written a treatise called ‘The Buddha and his Dhamma’. Having read Kanekar’s columns for several years, and been to her public lectures, and from private discussions with her, there were no prizes for guessing that Ambedkarite thought would be a major (but one of many others as well) influence in her decision to write this novel.

In fact, there are two editions of ‘A Spoke in the Wheel’; the first, published by Harper Collins (2005), is “based mostly on Marxist interpretations of the subcontinent’s history”, as Kanekar herself acknowledges at the end of her book. I read the second, 2015, edition, published by Navayana, which I am told has essentially the same plotline, but Kanekar has made changes “inspired largely by Ambedkarite interpretations and critiques, along with discussions on caste with, among others, S Anand, Dale Luis Menezes and Jason Keith Fernandes, all part of my own ongoing struggle against the casteism that colours the thinking and practice of every savarna person of South Asian heritage.”

The chapters in the book flit back and forth between two historical periods: the life and time of the Buddha(from his birth at Lumbini in 563 BCE onward); and 313 years later, to 250 BCE in the Ashokan era, a whole decade after the Kalinga War, whose holocaust savagery left such a profound impression upon Emperor Ashoka that he embraced Buddhism soon after.

But is everything as it first appears? Kanekar uses historical fiction to flesh out both, the Buddha and Ashoka, and present them to the reader as human beings, each of whom is influenced by their milieu and whose thoughts, words and actions leave an impact upon their own time and for posterity.

The book begins with the translation of a Brahmi inscription on the wall of a cave at Ramgarh in the Vindhya hills, apparently dating to not long after Ashoka: “The excellent young man, Devadina.loved Sutanuka, the slave-girl of the god.”

Both Devadina and Sutanuka are characters in the book. Although arguably not ‘central’ to the novel, their love for each other does impel some of the action and motives of the main characters. I mean to talk to Kanekar about this the next time we meet, but I wonder whether the inscription was the nucleus around which the idea for the novel gradually developed.

Perhaps it’s the obstetrician in me, but the very first chapter drew me in, with its description of a postpartum haemorrhage (the Buddha’s mother Maya), and the futile ‘remedies’ prescribed to her in a bid to stanch the flow.

Three centuries later, Upali, “scribe and senior bhikku (monk of the Buddha’s sangha) at the small monastery of Mahismati on the river Narmada”, has been ordered by Emperor Ashoka to write a scholarly account of the Buddha’s life and teachings, based upon various sources, from oral tradition to the suttas (compiled teachings of Dhamma).

I don’t want to spoil it for you from here on, but it’s a fantastic, gripping page-turner wherever you are placed, especially if you have an interest in ancient Indian and Buddhist history, but even if you don’t. Through fiction, Kanekar makes history, philosophy and anthropology, those rarefied subjects usually restricted to academia, extremely accessible to everyone.

One or two reviewers of the book found the shifting timeline from one chapter to the next, back and forth, disorienting, but I must say I didn’t. I’ve come across this device in other novels as well, and it actually unifies the storyline, especially when two parallel but interlinked stories need to be told in the same book.

One has to marvel at Kanekar’s vivid imagery in painting detailed (sometimes too detailed, as it can slow down the narrative flow) word-pictures of the location we are taken to, be it an iron mine, a Pataliputta streetscape, or Ashoka or his minister’s palace, or a monastery.

Being an architectural historian herself, Kanekar leads us by the hand through several details, a notable example being the rock-cut viharas hewn from top towards the base rather than the other way round. “Everything inverted, turned on its head”, Upali thinks to himself when it is explained to him.

And Kanekar has certainly done precisely that to so many notions I might have had about our past, about Ashoka, the Buddha and Buddhism: turned them all upon their collective head.

A reviewer in The Hindu newspaper wrote: “The book draws from Indian history to such good effect that one can’t help wondering if things actually happened this way.” My thoughts exactly. Kanekar’s vision is a very elegantly convincing interpretation of how an important chapter in our history unfolded, with a lot of ramifications as well as parallels with our present time.

I did feel the glossary could have been even more elaborate, to help the reader along; and perhaps even a sort of chapter-by-chapter dramatis personae, or would it seem too much like spoon-feeding? But there are so many major and minor characters in the storyline that I had to keep flipping back to remind myself who some of them were.

‘A Spoke in the Wheel’ has been turned into an award-winning Marathi play ‘Avyahat’ by

Kaustubh Naik, who together with Kanekar, Dale Luis Menezes, Jason Keith Fernandes and Albertina Almeida form the think-tank Al-Zulaij collective offering “critical perspectives on and from Goa” that have similarly turned several commonly-accepted tropes on their head in the past. ‘A Spoke in the Wheel’ has all the ingredients for a very stimulating and successful film as well.

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