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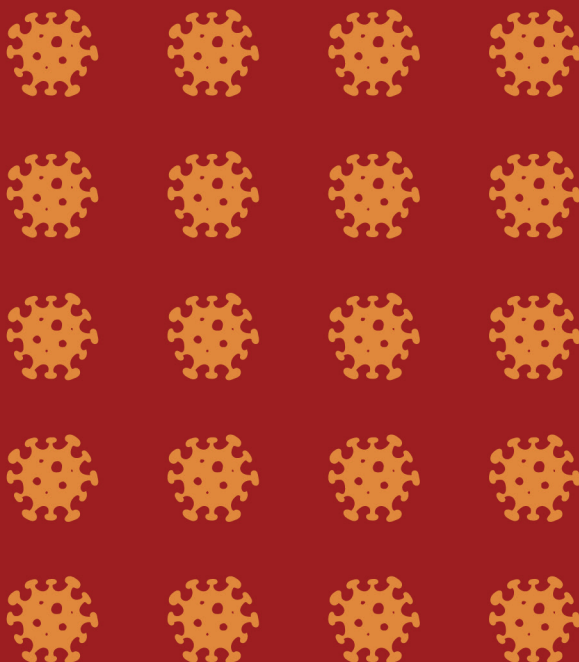
Subir Dey | Editor

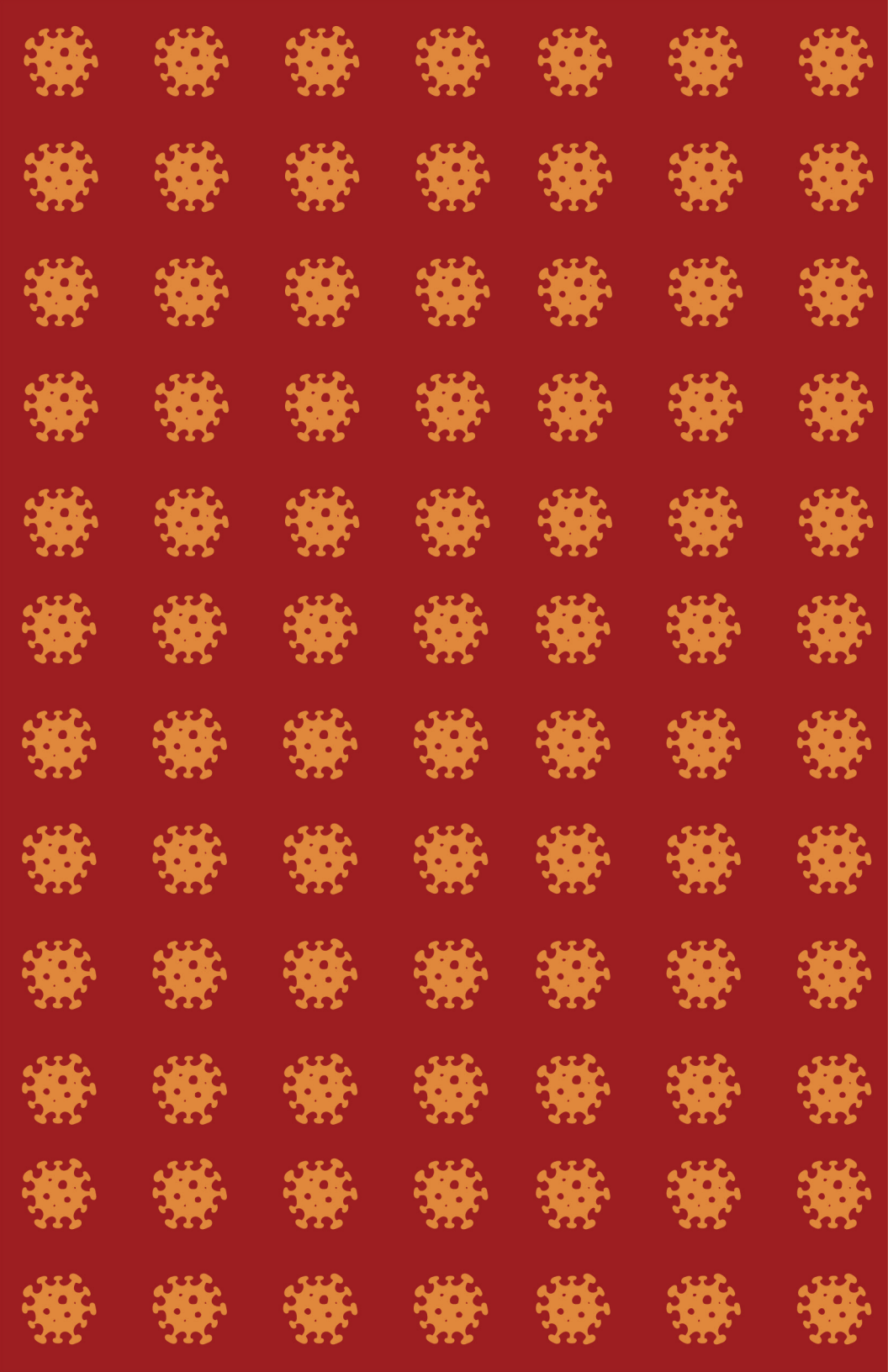


ComIN

International Conference
on Indian Comics

Asian Voices in Pandemic









अभिकल्प विभाग
Department of Design

Conference Proceedings

ComIN21: International Conference on Indian Comics

4-5 December 2021 | Online

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ABOUT DEPARTMENT OF DESIGN, IIT DELHI

The Department of Design was established in the year 2017 and traces its roots to the Instrument Design and Development Centre (IDDC), which has been pioneering design education at IIT Delhi since 1994. Presently the Department has expert faculties in the three main Design domains of Industrial Design, Communication Design, and Interaction Design. The Department offers Doctoral (Ph.D.) and Masters in Design (M.Des.) programmes, and will start a Bachelors in Design (B.Des) programme from the 2022-2023 session. It also offers a Minor in Design for B.Tech students. Being an integrated part of IIT Delhi, the Department of Design offers multi-dimensional learning opportunities to all the students.

PREFACE

It's 2021 and ending soon! We have witnessed and sailed through rough times since the first edition of ComIN20. This year, ComIN is centered around bringing the **Asian Voices in Pandemic**. To address the larger context of Asian voices, we are extremely delighted to get on board some distinguished speakers who have significantly contributed to the growth of comics and pop culture in the context of academia and practice. We are delighted to welcome **Paul Gravett** as one of the keynote speakers. He is the co-founder of Escape magazine and Comica Festival, a London-based writer, curator, critic, and lecturer specializing in international comics. His range and diversity of engagement with international comics scenarios are phenomenal and pioneering. We have on board the prolific author **Pramod Nayar** as a keynote speaker, who is a Professor at the Department of English, the University of Hyderabad, India. He has written extensively on a range of topics in comics and graphic novels. An immensely reputed academician and author, his works have carved a strong mark in the Indian comics scholarship. Moving forward, we have the pleasure of inviting **Suraya Md Nasir**, a practitioner-academician of comic arts and scholarship based in Malaysia. She is a published comic book artist, with interesting creations of characters and stories. She will be speaking on the concerns of how academics navigated the pandemic while making a balance between scholarship and mental health a topic of contemporary discussion. The next keynote speaker is a young gun named **Kushagra Kushwaha**, who is prolific in his own right. He is an animator and concept artist working with several anime studios, such as David Productions, JC Staff, and Seven. His creative journey is surely going to motivate viewers to reflect on themselves.

With the second edition of ComIN, immense gratitude goes to the review committee members for providing excellent feedback. The selection process was rigorous and aligned to achieve quality over quantity. Finally, 18 submissions were selected and presented during the 2-day online conference. A heartfelt thanks goes to the authors, whose rigor is evident through their submissions. Without them, this conference could not have succeeded. A note of thanks and regards is sent to the plenary session chairs, Karthika V. K, Somdatta Bhattacharya, Priyanka Tripathi, Pinaki De, Sudev Pratim Basu, and Varsha Singh for their selfless consent towards contributing to ComIN21. I am immensely thankful to Prof. V. Ramgopal

Rao, Director, IIT Delhi, and Prof. PVM Rao, Head, Department of Design, for their constant support and for providing space for Indian comics' discussions within this eminent technology institute.

Special thanks goes to the coordinators and the faculty from the Department of Design, IIT Delhi, for providing support and motivation. I would especially like to thank Prof. Srinivasan Venkatraman for providing suggestions regarding the conceptualization and organizational aspects of the first edition. Thanks goes to the student team Arnav Kumar Tripathy, Archana Doimari, Manash Gogoi, Pankaj Sarkar, and Sutirtha Gangopadhyay for managing the online conference. A special thanks to Agomoni for making many things possible. Gratitude goes to Prasad Bokil for being an amazing mentor. Also, thanks to the CEP IITD staff for handling the accounts and providing timely administrative support.

It appears that comics scholars are gradually finding their way to embracing remote communication. Probably, that is how we adapt to new challenges and turn them into opportunities. Through the year 2020 and till now, Comics studies have been proving as a field with new possibilities and academic discussions. This edition of ComIN presents a glimpse of the ongoing opportunities amidst the pandemic times. In these turbulent times, comics scholars are also becoming more resilient in their work and commitment to the domain. And all the global discourse on comics is bound and shared by the internet, hence tons of thanks to the people behind it. We hope that the spirit of Comics studies remains as vibrant as it is now till we meet in the next edition of ComIN.

Good vibes!

Subir Dey

Conference Chair

SPEAKERS



PAUL GRAVETT

Covid Comics in Asia: An Exploration

Not surprisingly, the earliest webcomics to deal with Covid-19 came from cartoonists in Wuhan itself in early February 2020 which reached a global audience. Across Asia, comics have played assorted and multi-faceted roles during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The medium has once again proved highly effective to convey vital information, from safety precautions to vaccinations, testing and more, often through official and governmental educational comics. Comics is also a space for highly personal, often autobiographical reflections or slices-of-life under lockdown, generating empathy and connection with readers. Cartoonists in print and online have also been important voices of criticism of authorities' mishandling of the crisis, as well as conveying journalistic investigation and reportage. Other creators have developed dramas, fantasies and symbolic reflections out of the sometimes surreal 'New Normal' of these challenging times. The ongoing creativity of Asian approaches will be discussed by Pinaki De and Paul Gravett, exploring examples from India, China, Japan, The Philippines, South Korea and elsewhere in the region.



PRAMOD NAYAR

Biopower, Biopolitics and Pandemic Comics:
Reading Covid Chronicles

In this talk, I examine one set of Covid Comics, Covid Chronicles: A Comics Anthology (2021, hereafter CC) for its theme of biopower and biopolitics. In section 1, 'Pandemic Epistemes and Biopower', I examine how the comics not only speak of epistemic gaps in Covid-19 knowledge, but also present a new episteme where our sense and knowledge of Covid-19 is segued through a social history of pandemics and their biopolitics. In section 2, I turn to a key component of (Foucauldian) biopower, sovereignty. In 'Questions of (Bungled) Sovereignty', I examine comics that draw (out) the tensions between individual and collective sovereignties (including instances of misplaced state sovereignties and vaccinationisms). Section 3 is by way of a conclusion and addresses the theme of 'biopolitics from below' in comics that speak of solidarities and reinforced communities but also think in terms of collective mourning and memorializations.



SURAYA Md NASIR

Virtual Engagement through Comics and Teachers
as Avatars for online classroom in Malaysia

With the sudden shift away from the classroom in many parts of the world, the adoption of online learning continues to persist post-pandemic. As a result, education has changed dramatically, with continuous innovations for improving e-learning platforms. In the case of Malaysia, universities and the government have provided multiple aid for students to reach their potential. Through this continuous support, noticeable enhancements on the massive open online courses (MOOCs) by universities and the government's effort in bridging the digital gap among the low-income communities are some of the efforts which have been introduced on a large scale. At the same time, educators have also been contributing multiple efforts to engage students and promote class participation through their personal efforts with the use of digital technologies. In this presentation, I will share my personal experience as an educator and a comic artist/character designer in my classroom, and the benefit of utilizing comics and digital avatar as teachers to encourage students in the classroom.



KUSHAGRA KUSHWAHA

Journey of a Gaijin

I have traveled to foreign lands in search of manifesting my creative powers. My search took me to different remote locations within India and finally to Japan, where I realized what a 'Gaijin' means. 'Gaijin' or the 'foreigner' as called in Japanese, is the word that I associated with myself while working through different terrains of work, like teaching guitar in a school in Ladakh or working as a janitor, and finally working in the coolest anime studio in Japan. My journey has taught me a lot about storytelling and its impact, and with comics as a medium of pop culture, storytelling demands a very in-depth understanding, not only through reading comics but through traveling and embracing cultures.

CONTENT

01	THE PANDEMIC AND COMICS PRODUCTION IN INDIA Sharmistha Chatterjee	1
02	EXPLORING GRAPHIC NARRATIVE AS A METHOD OF DOCUMENTING PANDEMIC EXPERIENCES Ved Waliokar and Delwyn Remedios	18
03	AN EXPERIMENT REPRESENTING PANDEMIC EXPERIENCES WITH WORDS, IMAGES, AND A FUSION OF BOTH Delwyn Remedios and Ankita Royi	29
04	RISE IN COMIC BOOKS READING TENDENCY DURING LOCKDOWN IMPOSED DUE TO PANDEMIC COVID-19 IN INDIA Siddhartha Bose and Pritpal Singh	46
05	(UN)SANITARY AND UNWARRANTED CRITICISM: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL READING OF SANITARY PANELS COMICS DURING COVID-19 Jaya Yadav	64
06	MEMOIRS OF LIFE DURING COVID TIMES, STORIES OF ABSOLUTE RESILIENCE IN THE WAKE OF A PANDEMIC IN COVID CHRONICLES OF INDIA BY FALGUNI MEHTA Smita Dabi	77
07	A CRITICAL ESSAY ON PRIYA'S MASK Dwaipayan Roy and Shuchi Kaparwan	90
08	ALTERED SELVES AND BIASED FRAMES: TRACING FEMINIST RESPONSES TO COVID-19 IN LAURA GAO'S THE WUHAN I KNOW (2020) AND SHUBHRA PRAKASH'S PRIYA'S MASK (2020) Mohit Abrol	109
09	DIGITIZATION AND THE CYBERSPACE: A STUDY OF INDIAN COMICS CULTURE DURING THE PANDEMIC Madhurima Nargis	120

10	JOURNEY OF STEM (SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING, MATHEMATICS) TO STEAM (SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING, ARTS, MATHEMATICS) VIA COMIX PERSPECTIVE TO ENHANCE LEARNING	
	Chhavi Arora	134
11	ANIMATIONS, COMICS, AND INFOGRAPHICS: UNDERSTANDING THE TRANSDISCIPLINARITY AT WORK IN THE ASIAN REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PANDEMIC	
	Gurleen Kaur Cheema	150
12	THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF 255 MOST-INTERACTED PANDEMIC-RELATED COMICS ON REDDIT	
	Chaitanya Solanki and Deepak John Mathew	163
13	RESILIENT COMICS FOR TROUBLED TIMES: READING THE INDIAN COMICS ANTHOLOGY "HOPE ON"	
	Deblina Rout	181
14	LIFE, LOVE AND MATERIAL IN THE ERA OF COVID 19OWL'S WONDROUS CAPERS	
	Jaya Wathare	195
15	UTTERLY BUTTERLY INDIAN: A STUDY OF AMUL PANELS DURING THE PANDEMIC	
	Karan Tekwani	207
16	COMICS AND COVID-19: INDIAN CARTOONISTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA	
	Anu Sugathan	219
17	AUTHOR INDEX	227

Keywords:

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and the Pandemic

The Pandemic and Comics Production in India

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine the effects of the Pandemic on the publishing industry and comics production in India. It goes without saying that the Pandemic has posed challenges for publishing houses worldwide, and perhaps the full extent of the repercussions may only be understood in the long term. However, stranded in the transition period, as a scholar interested in examining comics publishing in India, it puts me in a peculiar position. Are we to consider this period as a "blip" in publishing history, and only look at how production used to take place, as opposed to how it's doing now? If we do consider it a "blip", then we are assuming that publishing practices and production processes will go back to the way they used to be, but the crucial question here is, is that assumption valid? To address these questions, this paper will first consider what the impact of the Pandemic may have been on the publishing Industry, how and why that has affected/alterd comics production (given that comics production differs from the production of other literary works), whether those alterations are only here temporarily or in place for the long term. Based on these

evaluations, I will look at how that alters my position, and why, and whether there will be "prior to", and "post" pandemic considerations in my work. The paper will conclude by considering whether the latter question pertains only to me and my study because I am stranded in the transition stage, or, will it trouble more scholars interested in studying the Indian comics publishing industry, in the times to come.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how the Pandemic (2020-21) has affected comics production in India, and the consequences of that on my doctoral research which is anchored in a study of the history and process of graphic narratives publication in India. In order to address this, I will first contextualise how comics are being published in recent times, and how that differs from the publication of comics in what was once considered to be the Golden Age of comics in India.

Before delving into the contexts and issues, a clarification is needed on the use of the term comics. The current age of comics publication in India is identified by the phenomenon of the rise of graphic novels and anthologies. Critics and scholars have weighed in on the terms graphic novels, and comics, with several averring that the two refer to different kinds of texts. At the fundamental level, graphic novels are intended to cater to a mature audience, while comics appeal more to children, and young adults. This distinction, which is based on the subject matter of the works, constitutes a determining factor in classifying a work as either graphic novel, or comics. Critics on the other end of the spectrum, see this attempt at distinction as an anxious grasping after status. I would argue that the problem is a little different in the Indian context, because even though our association with comics goes back a long way,

superheroes, a subject of levity, according to Western scholars, is not ubiquitous in Indian comics narratives. Prior to the emergence of graphic novels/narratives in India, such graphic works as the ACK comics were created, with children primarily as the target audience. In recent years, however, graphic narratives with mythological content have been written and produced, but it does not specifically cater to such an exclusive audience. On the other hand, serious works have also been written and published around such specific themes as history, violence, trauma, identity issues, which place these works under the category of graphic novels. Since this paper is not concerned with examining the format, or the subject matter of these verbal-visual texts, therefore I have used the terms graphic narratives, and comics interchangeably.

Another consideration that needs to be underlined is the nature of comics work. In the introduction to the book *Cultures of Comics Work*, Casey Brienza and Paddy Johnston define comics work "as any labour within the field of the cultural production of comics that contributes to or informs a comic's production" [7]. Since a single text is often the result of the combined efforts of writers, illustrators, inkers, colourists, and other agents involved in the process of production, comics work is recognised as collaborative labour, not an individualised practise or the work of a sole creator. Therefore comics production and dissemination is a very different process as compared to ordinary textual production. It is with this distinction in mind that I will move onto elaborate on the processes that have informed the production, distribution and circulation of comics during the Pandemic.

In order to understand the present, it is necessary to revisit the past, and see how Comics were being published, prior to the publication of the first graphic novel, *Corridor* [3] in 2004, by Penguin. This period of comics publication, from the late 1950s to the early 1990s, has been documented by writers such

as Jeremy Stoll [28], John A. Lent [16], and Karlene McLaine [17], to name a notable few. According to their research, the beginnings of what we call Indian comics/graphic narratives can be traced back to the time when newspapers and magazines, featured cartoons and caricatures, as well as, translations of international comics. The popularity of these comics among the masses soon led to the form being used to tell distinctly 'Indian' stories. It started with Anant Pai, who citing the lack of awareness among children regarding their own cultural heritage, decided to disseminate this knowledge using comic books as a medium. He would be instrumental in setting up one of the first comic book syndicates in the country, Rang Rekha Features. He also worked with the Times of India Group on Indrajal Comics, and later with the Indian Book House, which published the iconic Amar Chitra Katha Series. In 1978, Diamond Comics entered the foray of publishing comics, and along with their own content and characters, such as Motu Patlu, Pinki, Billoo, to name a few, they came to be well regarded for "Pran's Features". The company also went on to publish foreign titles such as Phantom, Mandrake among others. Along with Diamond Comics, the other two publishers of note during this period were Raj Comics, and Manoj Comics [28].

The introduction of television however, put a dampener on the consumption of these graphic tales. Needless to say, the advent of new media captured the attention of the younger populace, who in essence, had constituted the bulk of the readers of comic books. The consequence of this was the initiation of a bleak period, when comic sales dropped, and some of the comic book syndicates were dissolved. DC, Raj Comics and ACK, which survived the period, were acquired by ACK Media in 2007. The other players during this time included Virgin Comics, which, rebranded in 2006 with Richard Branson's funding, was initially known as the Gotham Entertainment group in 1997, and as Gotham Studios Asia in 2004. It was later renamed

Liquid Comics, after the withdrawal of Branson's funds in 2008. In 2018, Graphic India was launched as a subsidiary of Liquid Comics.

Apart from the few comic book houses mentioned above, the publishing of comics is markedly different today from what it used to be. The shift has also been accompanied by a change in format, as outlined in the introduction –a lot of notable works, are longform comics, otherwise known as graphic novels. This form was first used by Orijit Sen in his *River of Stories* [23]. Ten years later, in 2004, Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor*, [3] written in the same form, was published by Penguin, and widely marketed as the first graphic novel in India. In contextualising the Indian comics publishing scene, E. Dawson Varughese in her book *Visuality and Identity in Post-Millennial Indian Graphic Narratives* [33] talks about the significance of the post-millennial moment, a period that has been characterised by opening of the fiscal markets, establishment of bookstore chains, online shopping platforms, and other such developments. She argues that the liberalisation of the Indian economy allowed global publishing houses to grow in India, thereby effectively expanding the market for publishing books. Interestingly, this also led to an increased focus on the domestic scenario, with publishers attuning themselves to the requirements of the Indian market. Varughese here comments that "From this desire to look inward towards an Indian reading public, it quickly became apparent that domestic genre fiction in English was becoming an area of activity in which publishers would need to invest" [33]. It is important to mention here, most of the graphic narratives produced during this period have been published by global literary houses such as Penguin, and HarperCollins. There has also been an attempt on the part of independent publishers to produce works of this kind. The renewed interest on subjects "Indian" can be found in these texts; however the optimism, and even naivety that attended previous representations, has been supplanted by

"Indianness" being presented in less palatable ways [33]. The complacency that marked the delineations in ACK comics, for instance, has been replaced by unsavoury depictions of violence, trauma, divisiveness, and identity issues, to name a few. The verbal-visual format of graphic narratives has provided a potent register for such representations. The independent presses on the other hand have brought out several anthologies of note, apart from longform comics. Talking about small scale publishers involved in this undertaking, Stoll argues that in India, given the lack of a mainstream comics culture, there is an attempt to establish an alternative Comics culture that is "focused on creators, their crafts, and the communities that form around them"[27]. Through his interviews with Orijit Sen, Pratheek Thomas, and Vidyun Sabhaney, he concludes that small scale publishers consciously tend to build communities over events, meetings, workshops, and social interactions [27].

Apart from the global publishers, the existing comic book houses, and independent presses, there is the self-publishing industry, which incidentally is popular among a lot of creators, especially those who are new, and unable to secure a deal with either of the publishing houses mentioned above. In the absence of an established and functioning comics industry, it is difficult for creators given the publishers' pay rates, to sustain themselves on the basis of comics work alone. CG Salamander points out that, the global mainstream publishers pay for comics, as they would for other books, which is not enough to sustain all the workers involved in the production process [24]. The independent presses manage to proffer better offers, but even that is not lucrative enough. Given this, creators routinely opt for other jobs, using their skills as writers, illustrators, letterers for mainstream comics industries abroad, working with publishers like DC, Dark Horse, Image and Archies. Salamander gives the example of illustrator Devaki Neogi "who has broken into the international market, and like her peers, she

completely relies on it for her livelihood" [24]. From the above it can be understood how the onset of the pandemic would affect the already patchy production process, and put the creators in jeopardy. For creators like Neogi, the Covid-19 situation was "more than a setback. Her troubles began on 23 March, after Diamond Comics, the largest distributor of comics in the western world, declared that they were going to hit the pause button on distribution" [24].

Diamond Comics which has virtually established a monopoly on the distribution of comics in North America shut down temporarily after facing supply chain issues, and the failure of comic retailers to service customers in the face of lockdowns. It is imperative to understand how Diamond Comics came to hold this monopoly status, so the implications of its shutdown may be understood better. In North America, the comics format came to acquire a cultural status, after the success of the Superman comic books, as a result of which these graphic texts became a common fixture in newsstands. The format survived the Second World War, and as interest grew, so did circulation, with publishers introducing new genres such as crime, horror, romance, to mention a few. However, like in India, the rise of television, and also critiques of the format, led to dwindling interest, and consequently therefore a significant drop in sales. In 1972, a convention organizer named Phil Seuling managed to persuade the publishers to wholesale new issues to him, on a non-returnable basis, the outcome of which would mean transferring the risk from the publishers to the retailers. The consequence of this was the development of comic book shops throughout North America, which were supplied by regional distributors, till Marvel Comics decided to buy Heroes World in 1994, and make them the exclusive supplier of their products. Anticipating the fall in income, the other distributors entered the exclusivity race, with Diamond Comics securing the rights to DC and Image Comics –the result of which was the

inevitable bankruptcy and demise of the regional distributors. In 1996, it became obvious that Heroes World would not be able to sustain and cater to Marvel's needs, hence causing the inevitable –Marvel opted for Diamond Comics and since then, Diamond Comics has been supplying comic book stores across North America, until recently, when they ordered a halt when the pandemic hit. The consequences of this action were of course massive. Bart Beaty underlines some of this when he says –"In closing their warehouses to new product, publishers have alerted printers to stop. Communication to comic book retailers, creative personnel and fans has been haphazard as the large publishers scramble to plan for an uncertain future. Many are concerned about the growing digital footprint of comic book publishers. With a protracted closure of the distribution system, publishers like Marvel and DC could continue to move forward with electronic sales, which would inevitably bolster that end of their business at the expense of their retail partners" [4].

Bart Beaty remarks that the growing "digital footprint" [4] is a concern because increasing reliance on that mode of dissemination would signal the death of print, and with it, the comic book shop. The latter could lead to the loss of a valuable cultural space, where fans, readers and creators used to assemble and discuss new works. It is also interesting to note here that while the comics retail channel suffered a major setback during the pandemic, it was not exactly the same in the case of the bookstore channel, which accounted for more sale of comic books (mostly graphic novels), than comics stores. This may not be much of a surprise given that bookstores have a more robust distribution system, a more efficient and well managed online distribution network, and therefore have been able to navigate the difficulties created by the pandemic relatively well. Where Comics publishing in North America is concerned, the pandemic has exposed the weaknesses that already inhered in their

system. Moving forward, they would have to rethink the overreliance on a single distribution system, and create new strategies that would include diverse distributions networks and channels, both online, and retail stores based, in order to preserve the existing Comics culture.

This entire exposition on the effect of the Pandemic on the North American Comics publishing scene reveals several very interesting aspects about our very own publishing and distribution system. It is important to reiterate here that there is no so-called Comics industry in our country. Hence the problems that inhere in our publication and distribution system are different, as well as, more acute. Where Indian comics are concerned, we are still debating ways to ensure the survival of the form, unlike in North America, where they are seeking to upgrade an already existing system. The Comics retail channel that exists in our country is not connected to comic retail shops, because that is virtually non-existent. It is mostly bookstores that carry select few graphic narratives, and the rest is online. Therefore, unlike in the West, the concern that attended the pandemic in India wasn't the loss of a Comics bookstore culture. The problem was how to deal with the disruptions in production and distribution that the pandemic caused, as well as how to best address the issue of erratic demands. A conversation with Professor Pinaki De [10], one of the editors of the Longform Anthology of Comics, revealed the kind of difficulties that came up during the production process—he talked about how the work which was slated to be published by Penguin in late 2020-early 2021, got postponed by a year, because of difficulties such as getting in touch with contributors, getting them all together for workshops, and the inevitable delay on account of the lockdown. The text also underwent several changes, he averred, with a revised editorial being included to better reflect the current situation.

Coming to the issue of uneven demands, it was seen that although bookstores reported a drop in sales, interestingly, the online sales of graphic narratives remained steady, sometimes even in rare cases, reporting a rise. This demand, albeit modest, sustained the market for graphic books, and the reason behind this can be attributed to nostalgia. Comics are frequently associated with the sentiment of nostalgia for the bygone days, and during the pandemic many turned to comics, such as the Amar Chitra Katha comics, to relive their childhood. What also contributed to this revisitation was the rerun of television programmes based on Indian mythology such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, which in turn also prompted the audience, especially the younger section of the audience to familiarise themselves with other renditions of these mythological tales, narrated using different formats such as the graphic text. While this was good news for the market, the key question here is whether publishers and distributors were able to keep up with these demands. The answer is a mixed response – covid restrictions implied that bookstores were off limits for customers, and the demand had to be met through online sales. Not all distributors have a robust digital footprint, so they did not benefit from this situation, while those who had fledging or even established digital networks, tried to quickly acclimatise to the situation, and release digital copies. Tinkle, for instance, effected this transition, and Savio Mascarenhas, the art director at Tinkle, believes digitisation is the way forward – in an interview with Salamander, he remarks that “We were quick to embrace the digital shift, and offered our catalogue for free during the lockdown. The best part about going digital is that you don’t need to wait for a 200-page book to be fully ready. You can upload and release it in phases.” [24] Tinkle is therefore considering digital publication as a viable option even after the pandemic. “We’re still commissioning projects, and we will go back to print after the Covid crisis comes to an end, but we’re going to be very selective of what we

choose to print. The way I see it, the digital shift is here to stay." [24]

Notwithstanding the circumstances, present and future, there is a general reluctance among Indian publishers, much like in the West, to jump ship and wholeheartedly embrace the digital mode. While there is a tacit agreement on the benefits of the digital, it would take considerable reshuffling to shift to digital, even if it's halfway. The Indian publishing industry is largely print based, and the digital mode is not a viable option for many. Therefore even publishers are encouraging the purchase of physical books. Diamond Comics director Aanshul Verma avers in an interview that, "I want children to give themselves a break from this digital world as they are forced to live with this during the pandemic. The constant exposure to electronic devices may have a bad effect on their cognitive development. So it is important for parents to give their children a break from all these digital worlds. Encourage children to read physical books and parents should read stories or books to their little children. Make the children adapt to traditional learning systems. Start buying books and support us and bring the old reading culture as a habit among this generation" [14].

It is interesting to note here that the concomitant digital fatigue that has gripped the readers (given that the pandemic has forced an overreliance on doing everything online), may work in the publishers' favour, as printed material is being recommended to offset this fatigue. For certain publishers, this shift to the digital mode has been particularly difficult, given that their publishing ethos has a basis in materiality. Tara Books for instance felt the adverse effects of the pandemic. Tara Books has a team of around twelve people, and the company has a joint ownership. Their method of production is collaborative, and as Gita Wolf says, in a newspaper article, they "operate more like a creative studio than a conventional publisher.

We enjoy playing with the form of the book, and also run a book-making workshop which employs twenty-two skilled artisans who produce our signature handmade titles" [34]. For Tara Books, the creative process is intuitive, contiguous and collaborative, which is the result of a dynamic workspace where discussions among creators determine the form and content of the book. This along with the trenchant materiality of their handmade books, made it difficult for them to continue their production online during the pandemic. This of course affected sales, and as Gita Wold attests, the pandemic forced them to reconsider some of their publishing policies. She gives insights on some of these problems – "One of the areas definitely in need of an overhaul was marketing and distribution. It was a standing joke in the office from the earliest days: we would focus on creating a great book, and once it was done, we'd rejoice, forgetting that we needed to sell it, and just move on to the next project. Another office truism was the fact that foreign publishers who bought rights to our titles seemed to be able to sell far more copies than we ever did. In truth, we have got better over time; but there is no escaping the fact that our books have far more potential than we have managed to tap... With new systems in place, we were ready to streamline our online activities – workshops, events, readings, social media posts – more strategically, spending more time and thought on each one. Directing readers to our website took on more urgency, given that sources of revenue had shrunk to a worrying dependence only on web sales" [34].

Tara Books director talks about regrouping themselves, and opting for a balance between adopting new strategies and newer modes of production and dissemination, while honouring the old. Therefore while they have sought to keep the handmade workshop running, as the families depended on this work for their income, they have also endeavoured to "include a book at the other end of the spectrum: something inexpensive, for a very different audience" [34]. Between these, and their hunt for co-publishers for specific titles, using existing resources, they have managed to come up with two new titles, a handmade book called *The Deep*, and another titled *art sparks*. As covid restrictions have eased, publishers have resumed their work. The question now is –what happens

next? Salamander thinks that, "The Indian mainstream will probably look out for a bestseller, and even if they're looking to publish comics, chances are that the rates will remain the same. As for independent publishers, they're hanging by a thread. Kokaachi, a small comic publisher based in Kochi, hasn't sold a single copy since the pandemic. It's the same story with Syenagiri, an independent publishing house known for their city-based graphic novels. And yet, both Kokaachi and Syenagiri are busy putting their next book together. Syenagiri is commissioning their next anthology, *Necrobaba*, while Kokaachi is working on an ambitious eight-part Malayalam comic series, *Idivettu*, and have just wrapped up their first issue" [24]. Salamander's opinion about the Indian mainstream is interesting – Prof. De [10] in the conversation pointed out that mainstream publishers do not regularly publish comics, and by undertaking the publication of works that are non-mainstream for them, Penguin and HarperCollins are taking significant risks. The risk is higher when the book in question is an anthology, where the reputes of the editors involved, is the major selling point. In order for them to continue taking risks, Prof. De avers that experimentation with the form is necessary to capture the attention of the readers, and to give the Indian comic book scene the impetus it needs. The comic book scene is not exactly thriving at this moment, and the pandemic has been a jolt to both creators and publishers. However, the death of the comic book culture is not imminent –sufficient resistance have been given by the creators who continue to write/illustrate graphic texts, and the recent interest in this medium both in India as well as worldwide will continue to abet its survival. In addition, the surge of comics online (such as Instagram), and the popularity of digital comics such as Priya's *Shakti* [22], Priya's *Mask* [21], will ensure the survival of this medium, and hopefully even resuscitate it. However, for this to happen, as Aniruddho Chakraborty, the founder of Chariot Comics avers, a unifying publishing and distribution platform is necessary. "Someone

needs to come in and try to push the volumes for individual publishers. Like the US has Diamond distributors, the distributors of Marvel and DC comics, we also require that distribution network." [2] In addition, more conventions, festivals, and other spaces need to be created, so that a distinct comics culture, uniquely Indian, is created. This will ensure that the potency afforded by the medium, along with the creativity shown by writers/artists/illustrators find a fertile ground for expression.

It would be naive, where my research is concerned to dismiss the pandemic, and the stir which it created, as a blip. A blip would mean that things would go back to the way they used to be, but the awareness of the massive loopholes in the publishing and production model, has indicated that changes need to be made if the format is to thrive in the near future. I have already stated that extinction is not likely, however the potential of the medium, as well as the creators working with this medium need to be given a solid base in terms of bringing this work to the readers. The digital publication of works has already started a shift, and it would be interesting to see how publishers adapt in the near future. Where my work is concerned, I do not expect the documentation of this process to reflect a huge shift on account of the pandemic. A transition however is imminent, and it is expected to take place gradually. Perhaps that would be better understood in the space of a few years, and might prove to be valuable study for the scholars to come.

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Exploring Graphic Narrative as a Method of Documenting Pandemic Experiences

Keywords:

*Comics Studies,
Comics, Comics
against Corona,
Indian Comics
Publishers,
Lockdown*

02

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This is a pictorial paper. Please continue reading for
the visual abstract followed by the paper.


ABSTRACT

<p>The medium of graphic narrative captures the visual-verbal literacy that responds to the needs of the present moment.</p> <p>-Marianna Hirsch, 2004</p>	<p>This medium embodies a seriousness of purpose through an amalgamation of words and art to represent the world.</p> <p>- Basu, 2017</p>	<p>For instance, Maus (Art Spiegelman, 1991) represents the complexity of the experiences faced during the Holocaust.</p> 
<p>No Ordinary Flu (CIDRAP, University of Minnesota)</p>  <p>Narrates the experiences during the 1918 influenza pandemic,</p>	<p>Mickey au Camp de Gurs (Mickey Mouse in the Gurs Internment Camp, Horst Rosenthal,1942) which has been termed as "one of the earliest surviving examples of a comic from the Holocaust" and "perhaps the earliest sequential art narrative dealing with the Holocaust (Weiner & Fallwell, 2010.).</p> 	<p>Similarly, the Common Man character by R. K. Laxman, depicts the everyday struggles of an Indian (Poduri, 2016).</p> 
<p>This paper explores the potential of visual-verbal literacy to document and validate personal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in an Indian context, as this combination of text and picture presents complicated information in a simple, straightforward way.</p> 	<p>Their experiences are recorded through personal interviews which are transcribed into a text format.</p> 	<p>The results indicate the effectiveness of graphic narrative as a medium to document pandemic experiences. These findings suggest the scope of graphic narrative as a method to document personal and collective experiences of humankind across historic occurrences such as the pandemic of COVID-19.</p> 
<p>Through the process of convenient sampling, this graphic research paper represents pandemic experiences of 5 individuals.</p>	<p>The authors translate these scripts into graphic representations. The participants review their respective graphic narrative through Likert scale feedback. The participants confirm the level of visual communication clarity to their personal stories.</p>	

1.INTRODUCTION


Comics is mainly derived from the Latin word "comic" which means funny, but over the years various new genres have emerged which talks about the society and also tries to teach moral values.

Few examples like Joe Sacco's Palestine [1].



It talks about the problems of Palestinian people.

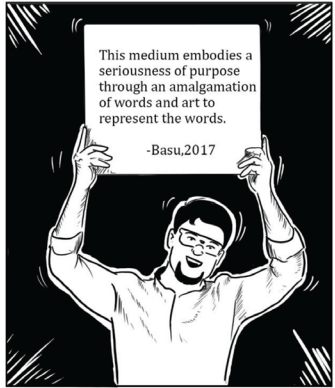
Or Art Spiegelman's Maus which deals with the horrors of the Holocaust[2].




These examples highlight the potentiality of comics and its ability, about which we are still unaware of.

This medium embodies a seriousness of purpose through an amalgamation of words and art to represent the words.

-Basu,2017




The language of comics has many similarities to the language we use every day. The words used can be divided as Functional words and content words. For example when we say....




"Saurabh went to a concert with Twinkle and Dev."


The words "to, a, with and and are functional words as they have the function of linking the sentence together. The other words (saurabh, went, concert, Twinkle and Dev) are content words.




There are also onomatopoeic words...




...whose sounds are similar to the noises that the words refer to these are the sounds strictly in visual medium[3].

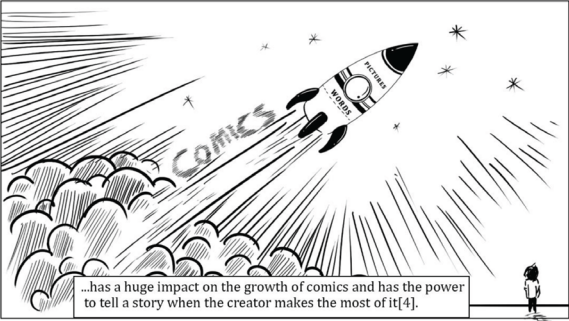
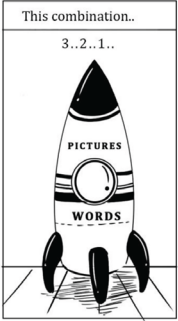


In comics, words have the power to fully explain the invisible areas of sensation and emotion. It can bring rich emotions and experiences to neutral images.



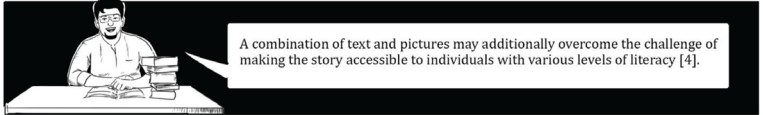
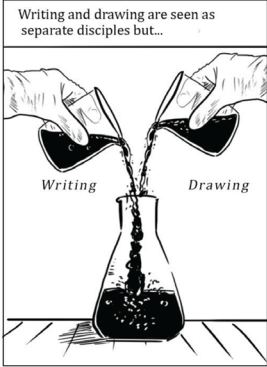
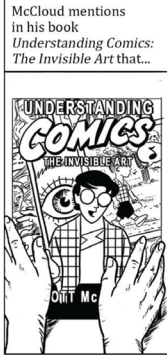
At the same time Pictures can induce strong feelings in the reader.





A huge range of human experiences can be portrayed in comics such as Words, pictures and other icons are considered the vocabulary of comics.

-(Scott McCloud)



For example, in "No, Ordinary Flu" [5].

The words and pictures narrate the experiences during the 1918 influenza pandemic.

Do not shake hands that have flu germs on them.

Don't spit the germs. Spatter other objects.

Washing your hands frequently is the best protection.

The flu germs can live on the walls for days.

Use hand sanitizer if you don't have soap and water.

Stop the germs by covering your coughs and sneezes.

Learn to recognize pandemic pain: headache or dizziness.

Use a cloth to cover your mouth and nose.

Stay home.

This cartoon provides information about the influenza pandemic in a widely accessible and understandable format. This demonstrates the variety of ways in which people can be prepared for a situation such as a pandemic.

Another example is Mickey au Camp de Gurs which depicts Mickey Mouse in Gurs internment camps [6].

It has become one of the earliest sequential art narratives which talk about the tragic situations and sufferings in the Gurs camp dealing with Holocaust [7].

I use the man who received the largest number of letters. His name was Mr. Center. He receives letters that are addressed to him, but he read them up way. What check? And if he doesn't like a passage, he cuts it out before delivering the letter. Consider that!

I also saw the famous man in camp. He's called the Yellow Man. He makes all the time. They say that his belly isn't a real belly but a portable safe where he stores his important letters. But those are terrible lies, circulated by subversive minds.

And, R.K. Laxman's Common man cartoons from the early 1950s

Although it is a political satire, these graphic stories document and explain the circumstances of the time and conveys the daily struggle of Indians [8].

No trains, just a station to make the place look a little progressive. The new minister is from here, you see!

Not that, my dream man. This one. We haven't got orders to repair that.

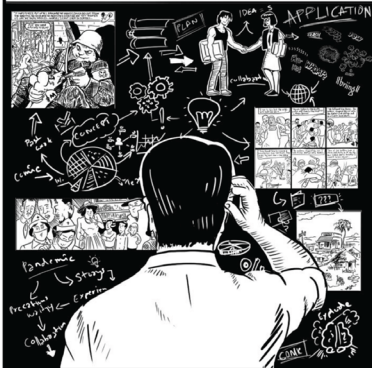
He says, since no one in the corporation has the information, he has come to help the passengers!

These early existing examples underscore the comic's ability to effectively communicate real-world experiences.

But, these reviews leads to the question, can writers and artists effectively collaborate to represent pandemic experiences through comics?

2. METHODOLOGY

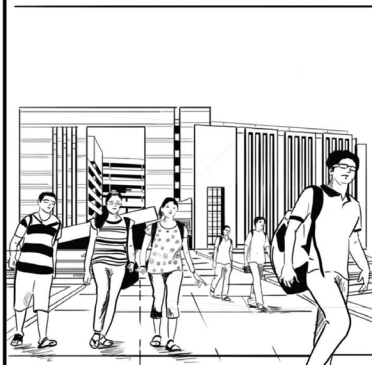
The question is addressed by a practice-led research method aimed at discovering the potential of the Comics in recording real life events.



The Author tried to explore whether comics, used as a medium for entertainment and storytelling, have the ability to document facts and effectively convey them to others without losing its essence.



Data on pandemic events were collected from students at IIT Hyderabad in a convenient sampling process.



These experiences were recorded through informal face-to-face interviews, creating a comfortable environment for respondents to share their personal experiences.



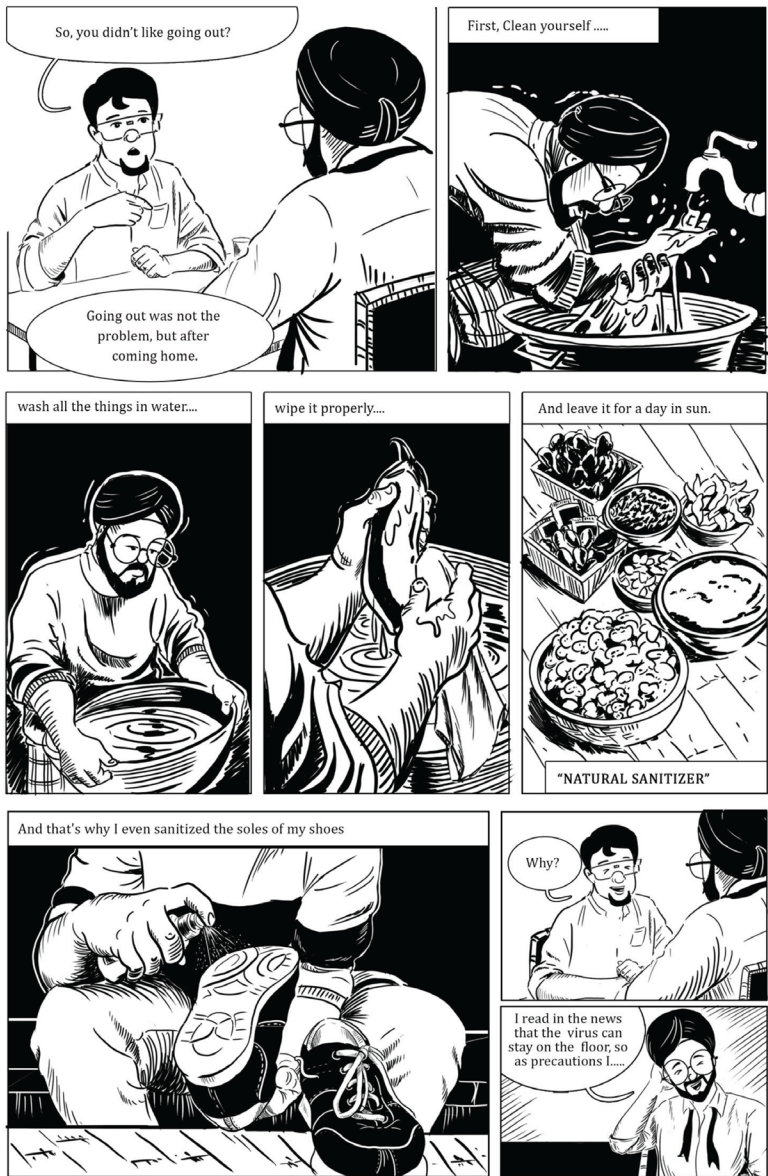
The author then translated these experiences into graphical storytelling.



Here are some insights from the translated graphical story.

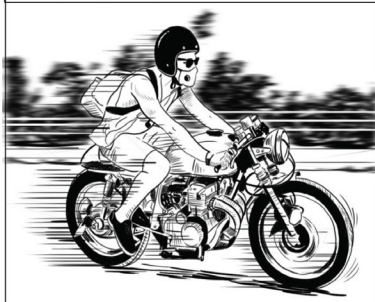


Chapter 1: Precation



Chapter 2: Homecoming

During the first lockdown, I was in Hyderabad, but seeing the seriousness of the situation, I decided to go home.



My family was really surprised and happy. After all I was meeting them after three years.



I don't know about others, but after nine years everyone was under one roof so it was like a family reunion.

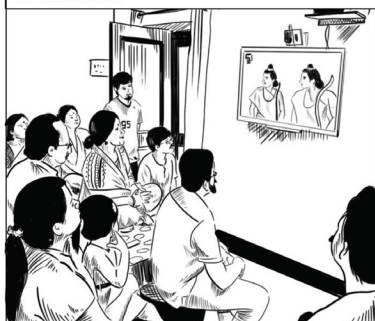
We played cards



Played Cricket on terrace.



And not to forget watching serials on doordarshan



In short, I was enjoying spending time with my family after long time.



Chapter 3: Hum saath saath hain

Life during pandemic wasn't that easy for me, but I realized that without this pandemic, there were some things I couldn't understand

During the first wave of Covid, My parents were tested positive



In other's situation, Covid patients were kept in Quarantine, but In my case I was the one who was quarantined.



When I looked at the condition of my home, I felt helpless ...

What should I do? We are all alone.



But to my surprise in these critical times, we were not alone.

Beta, don't worry ok. We are with you.



Bhabhi, don't worry everything will be ok soon, and we will send you tiffin every day, you will get well soon. We all here for you



And then the day came when mom and dad were tested Negative. It really was the best day for me...



Congratulations

Oh! Bhaiya is also here..

Actually for all of us...



I never thought I would have a wonderful family who would always be with me and my family in such a crisis. This pandemic brought my family closer



3.OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

Using the Likert scale, we obtained feedbacks and ratings from participants and group of 60 people from different groups to understand whether graphical explanations could be a good medium for documenting facts.



Participants confirmed that

The experience was summarized in a visually appealing and creative way, justifying the experience.



Questions like

Do you think Comics can be a more effective way to understand the facts rather than only text?

NO NO NO NO NO NO

Over 89% of people in the group denied it by saying it's not possible. Whereas after showing samples majority agreed that yes, its possible.



Also majority of the participants agreed, when asked.

Were you able to relate with these comics?

Yes, we had similar situation at our place.

Yes

Same



Visual language and Biographical treatment accurately captured the situation during the pandemic period


The feeling I had during the lockdown days has came out really well in the panels.



4.CONCLUSION


From this study it is apparent that visual-verbal literacy can present complicated information in a simple straightforward way.

OTHER




It's really COMPLICATED.

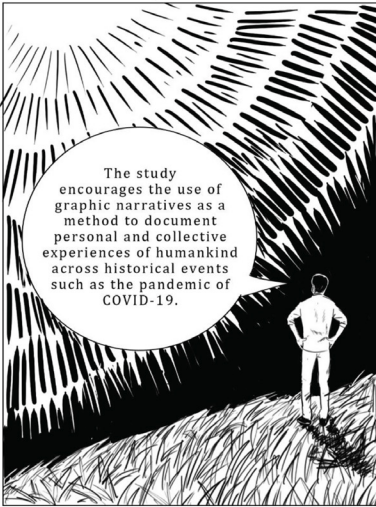
VISUAL- VERBAL



Now it's SIMPLE.

It confirmed that graphic narrative is an effective medium to document and convey knowledge.





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Keywords:

Indian graphic
narrative,
Words and
images narrative,
Pandemic
experiences,
Comics,
Images with words

An experiment representing pandemic experiences with Words, Images, and a fusion of both

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ABSTRACT

Graphic Narratives offer an intricately layered language that comprises words, images and the method in which these two modes interact [1]. This research paper investigates the contribution of these very elements that go into the making of any engaging graphic narrative. It investigates if effective narratives can be constructed merely with words? Can images alone suffice? Or can a blend of both 'words and images' communicate the complexity of experiences? It is evident that words and images have their individual histories, advantages, and influence on graphic narratives. This study aims to understand the effectiveness of texts, images and a combination of both in conveying graphic narratives. With reference to the COVID-19 pandemic experiences, a classroom experiment explores interdependence of images on textual elements and vice-versa. For the experiment, the participants were provided with an identical set of scenarios and asked to express their feelings about the same, initially, only with words.

Subsequently, they were instructed to translated the narratives into images without any textual elements. Finally, the textual and graphic elements were blended together and the effectiveness of all three versions was measured through a survey. The findings discuss Scott McCloud's argument that a seamless combination of the words and images is when graphic narratives are most effective [2]. The discussions further reveal the advantages of the fusion of words and images in graphic narratives and highlights its potential as an effective data collection method. The future scope of this research is to apply the combination of words and images in graphic narratives to collect inferences of data beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

1 INTRODUCTION

Textual elements used in appropriate proportion at right places have known to be highly effective in graphic narratives. This has been a tried and tested strategy across civilizations and cultures around the world since the time immemorial [3]. However, during the development of graphic narratives, several experiments have taken place for placing the text in the most appropriate way; from plain text labels to speech bubbles, and stylized typographical blow-ups, innumerable possibilities have been explored. Other than enhanced comprehension, textual labels have also seen to ward off unwanted ambiguity. But can we dispense off the text altogether, as Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525–1569) did so effortlessly? The debate has been long; Should the use of text be minimal or is there no harm in using textual elements generously? We argue that the engagement with images and words are isolated and generally create an interlude, interruption in the whole experience. In recent times however a unanimous incline towards an economical use of text with graphics elements have generally

been endorsed for designing effective graphic narratives [2]. To arrive at an evolved understanding, as how much any graphic narrative borrows from words and images, this study was devised during the module on "Graphic Narratives" for Under Graduate and Post Graduate students (B. Des 2020-24 Batch and M.Des 2020-21) within the field of Design. This module took place at the Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad, where each student was encouraged to represent 4 phases of their pandemic experiences; first with written text, then with illustrated images alone, and later with the combination of words and images. Their exercises were further tested by a random sample through a survey. These results aim to address the effectiveness of communication using words, images, and the combination of both with reference to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. GRAPHIC NARRATIVES, A WINDOW TO HISTORICAL EVENTS

Basu, A. (2017) in her study on Representation of History in the Indian Graphic Novel: An Analytical Study of History through the Frame of Graphic Narratives, suggests the use of graphic narratives in providing counter-narratives to historical facts [4]. Nayar, P. K. (2016) further asserts that history in the graphic narrative is a persistent theme as "the visual dimension of the graphic novel contributes substantially not only to our understanding of history but also to a larger question of how history can be represented" [5]. Basu additionally mentions examples of Indian historical representations in graphic novels such as *This Side That Side: Restorying Partition* [6], *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* [7], *Delhi Calm* [8], *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* [9]; along with popular international representations of history in *Maus* [10] and *Persepolis* [11]. From these examples, it is understood that graphic novels have effectively

provided new insights to history. It is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that has shaken the entire globe. Therefore, it becomes equally important to recognize and represent the present pandemic experiences. This study further investigates the potential of graphic narratives to document and depict students' experiences during the pandemic.

2.2. EXPERIENCING COVID-19

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, so are the risks we face. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected people regardless of nationality, level of education, income or gender [12]. In education, this emergency has led to the massive closure of face-to-face activities of educational institutions around the globe in order to prevent the spread of the virus and mitigate its impact. In India, educational institutions (schools, colleges, and universities) primarily follow face-to-face traditional methods of learning. While many academic units have also adopted blended learning, majority are dependent on old procedures. This situation challenged the education system by the shift from an off-line mode to an online mode of teaching. While, many academic institutions were reluctant to change their traditional pedagogical approach, the pandemic emphasized that change is inevitable [13].

This literature leads to the following question. Can the amalgamation of words and images in graphic narratives document and communicate the complexity of the pandemic experiences among the students?

3 METHODOLOGY

The pandemic had run havoc on the campus life; there was a general aura of fear and frustration among the students. In between the sorrow and disillusion,

there were incidents that injected bouts of lighter moments as well. The whole process of returning to their homes, followed by the comforts of home-cooked food and pressure of online classes led to new challenges for the students as well as the teachers. The whole scenario experienced by each student, had customized visions depending on their observational and artistic abilities. The students were asked to reflect upon four pre-defined phases of the pandemic:

- (1) The announcement to vacate the hostels during the first lockdown
- (2) Their reaction to distant learning
- (3) The announcement to return to campus
- (4) Their decision whether to return to campus.

To gauge the impact of new lifestyle imposed by the pandemic, and arrive at a better understanding between the words and image elements in visual narratives, an exercise was devised. During the synchronous online teaching modules, the students were asked to narrate the whole experience in comical way making independent use of the words, images, and later the combination of both. The students were accorded full-freedom to craft their experiences and visualize them with an objective of optimizing the story-telling. After the submission each assignment were reviewed for

- (1) Effectiveness of communication with words, images and a combination of both
- (2) Interdependence of words/ images in conveying the narrative.

For doing the same, a detailed feedback was collected through a survey. In order to get a broad opinion, the creative outputs were forwarded to an

audience having diverse age, educational background, and understanding. These included students from all levels. The following section demonstrates the students' work.

4 GRAPHIC NARRATIVE ASSIGNMENT

A set a selected students' work are represented below.

4.1 STUDENT 1

Section A: Words

(1) The announcement to vacate the hostels during the first lockdown

We were in campus when we got the mail. Just like a normal day, I woke up and went outside. My friend told me that a mail came about vacating the hostels immediately. We panicked by seeing the chaos happening around; everyone started booking the tickets and began packing to leave as soon as possible.

(2) The reaction to distant learning

After the morning class, I used to chill the whole daytime and worked on assignments only after nightfall. So, my sleep schedule was messed up and sometimes I was too tired to stay awake during classes. Mom used to bring snacks and drinks during classes and she silently stood there many times looking at what's happening.

(3) The announcement to return to campus

Like everyone else, I was also bored and tired of the online mode of classes. So, when the mail came, I was overwhelmed with joy and I started dancing and shouting around. It was a total celebration mood in the

class group. Everyone was getting excited to see each other again.

(4) The decision whether to return to campus or stay at home.

I didn't have any second thoughts on the decision to go back to campus. I went through the google photos folder of our batch, remembered the good moments and looked forward for the next ones.

Section B: Images



Fig. 1. Student 1 represents four phases of the pandemic through images.

Section C: Words and Images



Fig. 2. Student 1 represents four phases of the pandemic through words and images.

4.2 STUDENT 2

Section A: Words

(1) The announcement to vacate the hostels during the first lockdown

My friends and I were really surprised, although I should have seen it coming with the number of cases. I did not want to leave the campus as I had returned 5 days prior to that announcement and brought all my personal stuff like speakers, mug, a lot of food, etc. and had to leave all of this.

(2) The reaction to distant learning

I was really sad and disappointed as to how things were turning out, the best year of my college was being wasted sitting at home and staring at one screen or the other throughout the day for any and every kind of purpose. I felt trapped in my room and things seemed unfair.

(3) The announcement to return to campus

I was elated but was asking myself constantly if this was only a dream, as we had already been made fake promises to be called to campus. I was happy and a bit nervous to go back and meet all my friends again.

(4) The decision whether to return to campus or stay at home.

We have both online and offline classes now. I like being here to meet the professors for advice and doubts. I am able to do more exciting work which wouldn't be possible sitting at home. Studying together with friends also takes off the academic stress.

Section B: Images

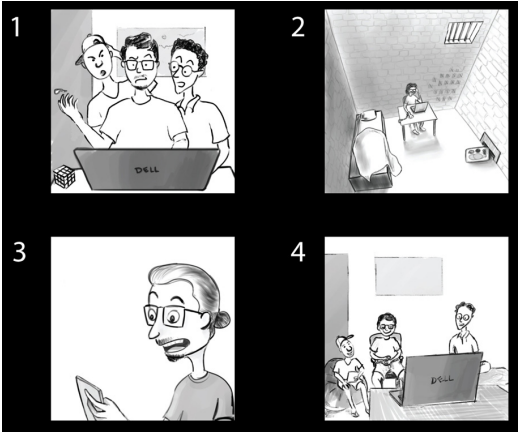


Fig. 3. Student 2 represents four phases of the pandemic through images

Section C: Words and Images

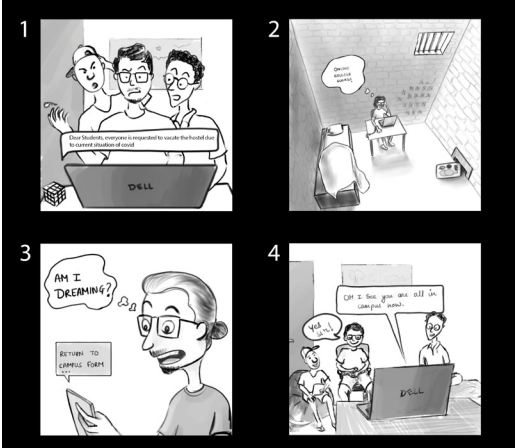


Fig. 4. Student 2 represents four phases of the pandemic through words and images

4.3 STUDENT 3

Section A: Words

(1) The announcement to vacate the hostels during the first lockdown

I'm shocked as I re-read the email. Vacation extended due to COVID-19!!? Are the movies finally coming true?

Are we going to be locked in our homes? Work from home? No, college from home??

(2) The reaction to distant learning

I'm trying so hard to keep my eyes open. Wake up, WAKE UP!! I can't take online classes anymore. When are they calling us back...zzz.

(3) The announcement to return to campus

Oh my God! It's happening, it's finally happening. About time. I'm going back to campus after 500 days. I feel like a freshman again. I can't wait to meet my friends again!!

(4) The decision whether to return to campus or stay at home.

Hello airport, long time no see. How are you? Me? I'm going back to college after more than a year and the only thing I can think of right now is how I'm gonna be spending my next week cleaning and doing laundry.

Section B: Images

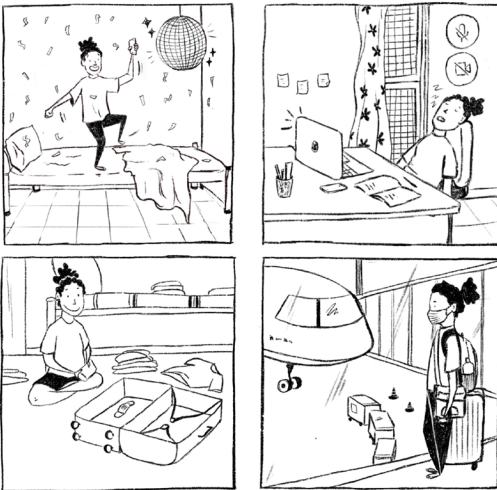


Fig. 5. Student 3 represents four phases of the pandemic through images.

Section C: Words and Images

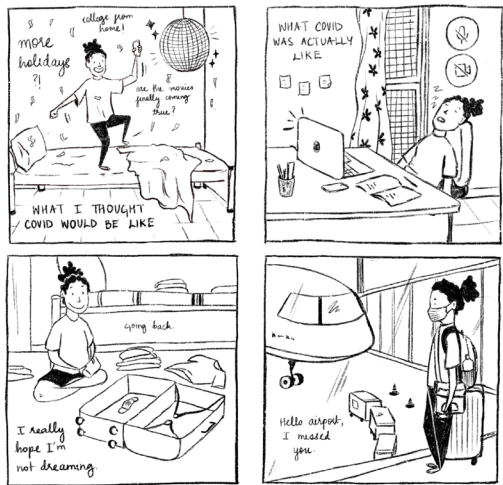


Fig. 6. Student 3 represents four phases of the pandemic through words and images.

4.4 STUDENT 4

Section A: Words

(1) The announcement to vacate the hostels during the first lockdown

I was still working at my Information Technology job when the pandemic broke out and after days of requests, my manager finally let me go for work from home. On my last day at office she sent me a text that read " report back in 2 weeks. It will be over by then."

(2) The reaction to distant learning

I got an admission into IITH in the middle of the pandemic. I was naturally upset about how I got to be an IITian and I had never even seen the college in person.

(3) The announcement to return to campus

I was too comfortable at home by this time, attending

lectures from the comfort of my bed while keeping the video turned off. I was not very impressed by the thought of going to the college when they called us to the campus.

(4) The decision whether to return to campus or stay at home.

Once I reached college I realized that I no longer had the social battery required to actually interact with so many people every day.

Section B: Images



Fig. 7. Student 4 represents four phases of the pandemic through images.

Section C: Words and Images



Fig. 8. Student 4 represents four phases of the pandemic through words and images

5 FINDINGS

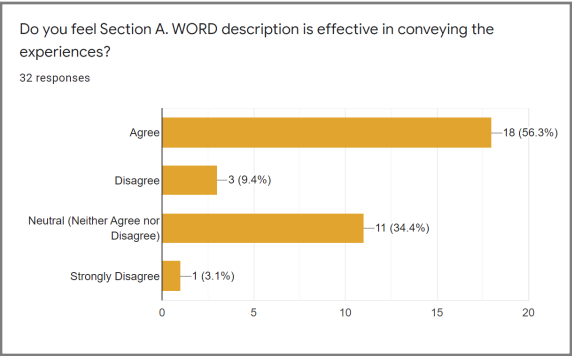


Fig. 9. Effectiveness of word descriptions

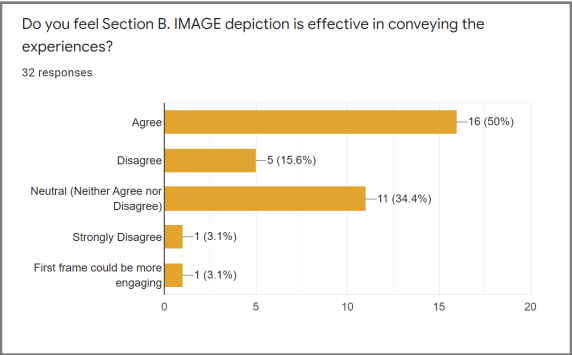


Fig. 10. Effectiveness of Images alone

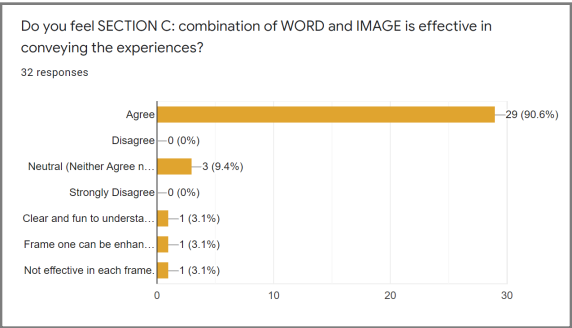


Fig. 11. Effectiveness of the combination of Words and Images

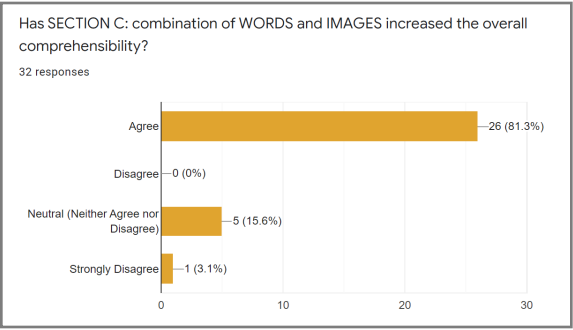


Fig. 12. Overall comprehension of Words and Images

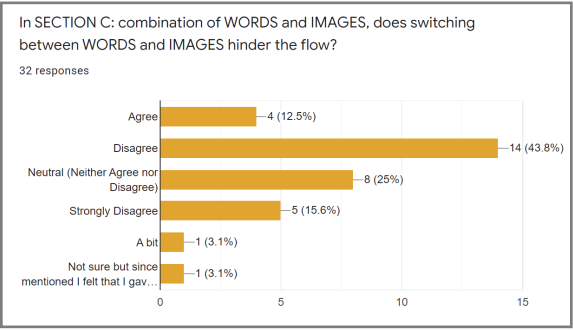


Fig. 13. The effect of switching between Words and Images

6 DISCUSSION

A total of 32 respondents ranging from ages of 18-54 years (87% between 18-34 years) including students, designers, and others participated in an online survey. The survey used the creative outputs as the context and measured the effectiveness of the narratives with (A) only words (B) only images and (C) a combination of both. In fig. 9, half of the respondents (precisely 56%) felt that words or verbal expressions could successfully represent the intended narratives. However, when the same narratives are depicted only with images, the effectiveness has waned out slightly as observed in fig. 10 (50% felt the representation could convey the meaning with only images). Others felt that lack of textual elements impacted the efficiency of the narrative. One of them responded,

"Without captions, it was difficult to connect with the comic panels." Commenting about the contribution of each element for taking forward any narrative, another user rightly pointed out, "Images are a good tool to form mental visuals, however without words one is completely lost off the context and cannot understand what to make out of those images."

The fusion of words and images turned out to be the most effective way of carrying forward the graphic narratives. Fig. 11 reveals an overwhelming majority (90.6%) concluded that use of image and words in right proportion can enhance narratives, making it interesting and easy-to-remember. In fig. 12, (81.3%) majority of the participants felt that the balanced usage of words increased the overall comprehensibility of the graphic narratives. Fig. 13 shows that nearly half of them (43.8%) experienced no hindrance in switching between images and words while reviewing the narratives. Therefore, it can be summarized that the coming together of words and images have enhanced the effectiveness of the narratives, roughly by two times. As one of the user writes, "The combination of the word and images makes it more connected to the emotions that the student was trying to depict. As a reader, just words paint a picture which combines the authors words and the reader's imagination which could be slightly different than what the author may intend." Another respondent remarks, "The image makes the story interesting and the words make it more comprehensible. Having both is like having the best of both worlds. A combination helps in understanding the story well and also to remember it."

7 CONCLUSION

The survey validates the proposition regarding effective combination of words and images but also pointed out the pros and cons of each element. While the textual descriptions look flat and at times, tiresome

to read and memorize, the chances of ambiguity are very less. The expressions are direct and it is for the reader to visualize the scenario. Although the same narratives can be depicted with only images the main problem lies in properly anchoring the context. This is vital as the whole narrative can go haywire if the contextual positioning is misplaced. For the very same reason, comics have relied on balanced textual linkages before passing on the baton to images. These graphic elements engage, enthrall, entertain, and aid the readers to visualize the narrative. The study, through its survey research has found that the fusion of words and images is most effective in comparison to only words or images. The classroom experiment contributed towards documenting students' pandemic experiences, as they were provided with the platform to express their thoughts and feelings. The future scope lies in investigating the potential of graphic narratives and the fusion of 'words and images' beyond the scope of the pandemic.

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Rise in Comic Books Reading Tendency during Lockdown imposed due to Pandemic Covid-19 in India

Keywords:

Comics Studies,
Comics, Comics
against Corona,
Indian Comics
Publishers,
Lockdown

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ABSTRACT

This look aimed to study how Indian readers historically fashioned studying attitudes and tactics in lockdown. Within a combined dating of various variables, the purpose becomes to decide the perceived effect(s) of comics book utilization and study them. Over the wintry weather of 2021, a quantitative evaluation method became used, with diverse records series contraptions used over four weeks. Focused Questionnaires, Field Notes attributable to Participant Findings, and Literature Circle Discussion Groups similar to Focus Groups have been used several techniques. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences SPSS device used for quantitative records and content material evaluation have been used to interpret the documents descriptively (qualitative papers). Participants often had good, however utilitarian perspectives of comics studying and in line with the findings. A giant dating among comedian studying and different factors all through lockdown become determined via the cease of the look at, demonstrating that it's far a green manner to contain readers in studying

and studying-associated sports. Additional consequences display that because the studies progressed, maximum contributors have become extra active, enthusiastic, eager, and dynamic of their participation, giving longer, different specific responses. Following the realisation of the report, respondents recommended the method to Indian comics, claiming that it had a practical effect on readers' growing studying attitudes and tactics all through the lockdown. The proof suggests that in-depth comedian is learning and comedian-associated studying sports can assist enhance practical investigating attitudes and tactics, in addition to numerous different abilities which might be affected and stepped forward in a roundabout way and explicitly due to the procedures. During the lockdown, this look stresses the significance of comics' studying attitudes and interests withinside the hopes of a higher destiny for Indian comics. The wave of comics studying, especially within the Indian context, all through the PANDEMIC COVID-19 lockdown, promotes delight learning and makes a speciality of the significance of studying attitudes and following studying behaviour in fashionable a number of the gift era adults.[1]

INTRODUCTION

In the '90s, there was a downfall in comic book reading culture due to the rise of technological development proceeding multiple choices of entertainment. However, recently the comics craze has returned due to the reason of successful movies based on comics' books and intellectual development of the people who prioritise happiness from reading mode. While conducting the survey, it was observed by the respondents about their general perception of comics reading mostly gets connected with kids. However, it was found that of all age's comics reading is popular whether it is hardbound comics book or reading soft books over Kindle or such platforms. In the Indian

context, this development is still in the cradle. However, there is an enhancement in the reading of comic books due to the lockdown imposed during Pandemic COVID-19.[15] Due to Pandemic COVID-19, the entire fast-paced lifestyle has turned a standstill suddenly. Almost all the industries were temporarily shut down, including media and entertainment, due to the imposed lockdown as a precautionary measure for the COVID-19 virus spread. This created a vacuum in the life of a commoner. So far, the common man was in the rat race of this fast-moving world for money minting opportunities. Sudden pause in life has left society to rethink keeping oneself looking for the known source of entertainment. An average individual in their mid-'30s must have read a comic book in his childhood.[3] This was the turning point for the Indian comics industry to bring back the lost comic book lovers home. Characters like Chacha Chowdhry (whose brain runs faster than the computer), Billo (Next door Kid), Pinki (Sweet, bubbly girl in the neighbourhood), Raman (Common man struggling with the social problems of daily life), Amar Chitra Katha (Saga of Indian History and Mythology, Tales of Unsung heroes, Folklores), Nagraj (One of the most popular superheroes of India who has the abilities of a Snakeman), Super Commando Dhruv (Another iconic Superhero of India who tackles the issues with his super intellectual powers) and other superheroes of Raj Comics, are well known and used to be ideal for kids of the 90s–2000s. Thus, the soft copy of comic books has started getting exchanged over various apps. Most of us are unaware of the availability of comics in today's era. People among us have left reading comics because they never knew that it is still getting published and sold. In today's digital era, social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc., have played an integral role in spreading comics' awareness. Publishers like Hello Book Mine, Comics Adda, Umacart, Ram Comics Ghaziabad, Sanjiv Traders etc., have utilised this source to connect with comics lovers by organising contests,

flash sales, discounts, gifts to boost the sale. High BP Tv, Raj Comics Rises etc. have started their YouTube channels to promote the same. Comicsbyte.com have successfully started publishing reviews of comic books over the internet. Publishers need to consider above all the points and should support as much as possible. Lockdown has given a second chance to bring back the charm of the golden era of comic books.[14] To make it effective, it is of utmost importance for Publishers, Sellers and Comics lovers to work together. Raj Comics has released the digital comics during Pandemic COVID-19 as a marketing strategy to attract comic book lovers.[17] Although more than 3500 digitised comic books are already available over the Raj Comics Android app. However, the growing interest of adults in reading back comic books has worked as a source of wholesome entertainment and reliving childhood nostalgia. While Nagraj talks about the measures to fight Corona, Super Commando Dhruv is struggling with the depression induced during a sudden lockdown. This sends a social message as not only the commoner but also Superheroes too face depression.[5] The motto of such initiatives was perceived as spreading awareness to be healthy and lead a good life during such unavoidable circumstances. New publishers like Comics India, HolyCow Entertainment, Bullseye Press, Graphic India etc. came up with such innovative ideas to promote the comics reading culture. The popularity of comics will increase with time and a combination of storyline, artwork, binding and availability. Lockdown was perceived as an opportunity to the black market of comic books too. Due to the sudden boom in comics reading culture, few have tapped the opportunity by using unethical means of selling out of stock or rare comic books (which are either unavailable or publication has stopped). The 90s comics witnessed a re-emergence in India as the novel coronavirus has pushed people to stay indoors to avoid social contact. The relics have been widely circulated and can be accessed for free to make the

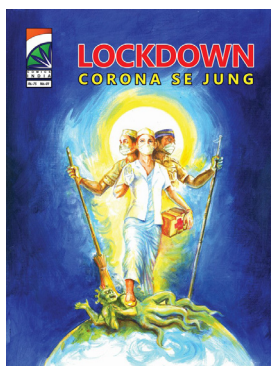
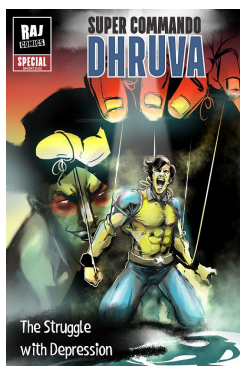
social distancing days more engaging. Numerous fans who attend comic cons, book fairs etc., shows unique characteristics. Some of the people under the influence of their Childhood Nostalgia visit the comic cons due to the memories and time they have spent during their childhood. Often, they are identified with such statements. Look, Nagraj, Super Commando Dhruv, Chacha Chaudhary. What a wonderful time we have spent in our childhood. The ones with the inner desire to buy comic books are usually categorised as Undercover Fans. However, they are afraid of being caught by others. They pretend to be surprised and makes fun of others buying comic books. Pass remarks as Are you still kid to buy such things? Next Generation fans are broadly two categories. These are fans since childhood and desire to teach the same in their next generation. They were beaten black and blues in their childhood due to reading comic books by their parents. Still, they have not left the passion and desire to develop the habit of reading comic books to their next generation. Comic Collectors often look for the missing comics of a series published an era ago, and may the reprints have also become rare. These are easily identified in all possible book fairs, Comic-cons, Raj Comics Nagraj Janmotsav etc. looking to plug the missing links of their collection. Few fans are chaotic. They are looking for such comics which they have read in their childhood (Total Recall). However, they can't recollect the name of the comics. They were marked often by checking all possible comics available at the stall. Fans with craziness towards novelties available with the comics like paper stickers, magnet stickers, apparel, bags, caps etc. Mostly they look for such items free with the comic books are considered as Gift Gummies. Indian Comics have shrunk from an industry of 20-something publishers producing hundreds of comics a year to one that relies on three mainstream publishers and a handful of indie publishers who produce fewer than a dozen comics a year combined. Comics booksellers were often found complaining that fewer people are

interested in reading comic books. If there is such interest, publishers fail to make the content available in the stipulated time due to the increasing cost of printing comic books. There is a need to work on the supply chain between publishers and booksellers. Although there is demand in the market, however, available or existing stock is being sold mostly. Thus, it was realised that Reprints of comic books with high demand should be considered. Publishers, wholesalers and retailers to be promoted with a good margin in profit to revive the passion of comic book lovers, said Ram Comics Ghaziabad while asking for the study. The Indian Comic Book industry's economics is vital because a profitable comic may make a blockbuster movie, make a popular video game, and start a famous toy line. In this whole process, the revenue generated is in Billion Dollars which can generate employment. The USA segment held up surprisingly well and even experienced significant growth in areas like manga and graphic novels for younger readers. Graphic novels outperformed other book categories across trade book retail channels, seeing weekly gains of as much as 30% over 2019 during Pandemic COVID-19. Examples: Comics released during Pandemic to motivate for sanitation and overcome depression. This "idealised reader,"[18] is "one who feels competent and perceives reading as having personal meaning and practical significance"[4]. In reality, students who

Fig. 1. (left)
The Attack of
Coronaman (Image
courtesy: Raj Comics)
[16]

Fig. 2. (center)
The Struggle with
Depression (Image
courtesy: Raj Comics)
[13]

Fig. 3. (right)
Lockdown Corona
Se Jung (Image
courtesy: Comics
India) [2]



consider reading to be a worthwhile and necessary task and those who read for personal reasons have been shown to read in a more disciplined, deliberate, and effortful manner (Ames and others).

Thus, the question arises whether lockdown has induced the reading habits among the readers? Comics reading has taken as a source of negative inspiration by the parents of 80s and 90s as understood. Instead, parents forced their kids to focus on other available content like literature, outdoor games, etc. Today's adults often expressed that they have read and enjoyed comics in their childhood. However, the habit has been left lost due to their movement in life along with parental influence in some cases. It was commonly found that comic reading was connected with the immaturity of one's traits in India. Indian Comics Industry is roughly estimated between \$100 million to \$150 [12]. The actual size of the same could not be obtained due to the industry being scattered and unorganised and a poor distribution system. The majority of the Indian comic book publishers today face tough competition from foreign publishers like Marvel and DC. There is no ISBN barcode for any comics under Rs. 60 in India. Thus, the size and true potential of the Indian Comics Industry are unexplored to date. The Indian Hindi comic books, which created the habit of reading in children and helped them learn ethics, traditions and social courtesy, also helped improve concentration in children are now dying due to the advent of animated cartoons, video games and mobile applications as ever, on an average middle class, the kid has got access to them. The popularity of Raj Comics has been referred to and showcased in most of the popular OTT web series and movies.



Fig. 4. Netflix: YE MERI FAMILY [6]



Fig. 5. Amazon Prime: PATAL LOK [7]



Fig. 6. SonyLiv: Sandwich [8]

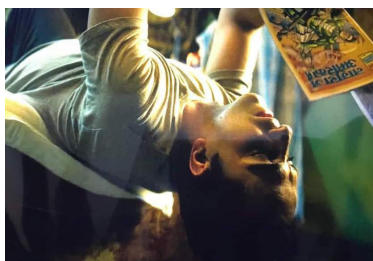


Fig. 7. Bala Movie: Lead Actor Ayushman Khurana is reading Raj Comics 'Nagraj America Me / नागराज अमेरिका में [9]

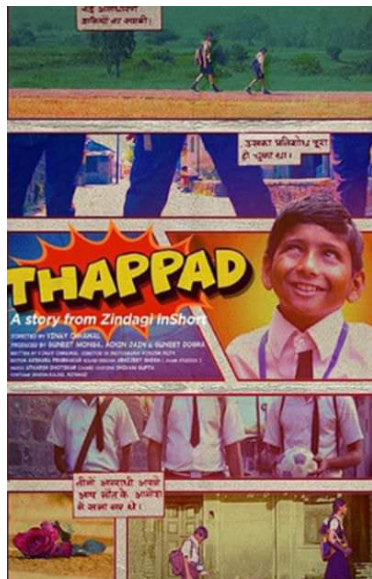


Fig. 8. "Thappad / Zindagi in Short" on Flipkart Video showing the scenes of "Patishodh ki Jwala / प्रतिशोध की ज्वाला" Raj Comics [10]



Fig. 9. "DOGA" name was used in Pati Patni Aur Woh Movie [11]

In reality, those who consider reading to be a meaningful and necessary task and those who read for personal reasons have been shown to read in a more disciplined, deliberate, and effortful manner. [4]

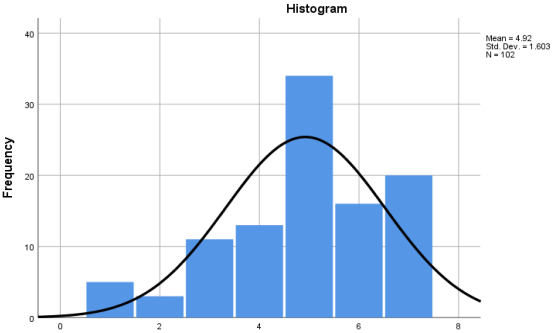
MATERIALS AND METHODS

It was of utmost importance to formulate the plan to conduct the study to kick start the work. Thus, the exploration of comics lovers has started over various channels of communication. For example, word of mouth, asking peers, friends, dear and near ones etc. In this quest, one primary tool was identified to channel the source of information via social media power. In India, almost everyone is on social media of late. Hence, applications like Facebook, WhatsApp have started getting explored. To the surprise of the Research Scholar, where it was assumed to identify comics lovers like a needle in a haystack, there were numerous comics lover groups for Indian Comics Industry that have been found.

TARGET POPULATION

Respondents were chosen from Indian Comics Industry, Online and Offline Book Sellers, Comic Book Readers and Publishers group targeted to fill the survey. The groups found over Facebook in interest with Indian Comics Industry were targeted to reach for the responses to get the comics fans across the country. Although, the reactions for the studies are voluntary to participate. Yet, 102 responses were received in a very stipulated period. Social Media platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram, Google Talk was also utilised to spread the awareness of the study and encouraged whom so ever possible to participate in the survey. Comics Publications Like Raj Comics by Sanjay Gupta, Dark Magic Comics, Comics India has also supported the study by approving the post into

their official Facebook wall. Comics Byte, popularly known as the Indian Comics News Bulletin, has also supported the venture by posting the questionnaire on their Facebook wall. Since the exact population of the Indian Comics Industry is unknown, the study was conducted with the first 100+ responses. The overall population of Indian Comics book readers is relatively unmeasurable. Therefore, the Non-Probability Sampling method was utilised for the study, out of which Snowball sampling technique to be used to identify and fetch responses. Google Docs, Computer-based Statistical Package for Statistical Analysis (SPSS), Microsoft Excel were utilized to collect and analyse the data.



Graph 1.
Histogram of the Age
distribution of comic
book readers

The Histogram shows the age distribution of the readers. The highest number of readers were found like 34 in (31-35 Years) category followed by 20 (Older than 40), 16 (Between 36-40 Years), 13 (26-30 Years), 11 (21-25 Years), 3 (16-20 Years), 5 (Younger than 16 Years).

Table 1.
Distribution of
comic book readers
occupation

Case Processing Summary							
		Valid		Cases Missing		Total	
	Profession	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Educational Background (Select the Highest one)	Student	14	100.0%	0	0.0%	14	100.0%
	Govt. Service	14	100.0%	0	0.0%	14	100.0%
	Private Service	58	100.0%	0	0.0%	58	100.0%
	Business	6	100.0%	0	0.0%	6	100.0%
	Others	10	100.0%	0	0.0%	10	100.0%

The above table shows the distribution of the respondents by their profession. The highest one was observed as 58 from Private Service followed by 14 each from Govt. Service and Students. The least one was identified as 6 from Business.

The study was primarily focused on any relationship between lockdown imposed due to PANDEMIC COVID-19 and Comics reading tendency of the readers. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient, a measure of linear interaction between two variables, is one way to calculate the relationship. Pearson Correlation Coefficient was utilised for jointly customarily distributed data; the Pearson correlation coefficient is commonly used (data that follow a bivariate normal distribution). A Spearman rank correlation may be used to measure a monotonic relationship for nonnormally distributed continuous data, ordinal data, or data with related outliers. The formula for calculating the Pearson correlation coefficient, abbreviated as r , for a collection of data is as follows:

$$r_{xy} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x})^2} \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \bar{y})^2}}$$

It is a metric for evaluating the linear relationship between two variables, X and Y. Its value varies from -1 to 1. The inter-item correlation matrix for the two scales of interest (with a determinant of covariance close to zero) indicates correlations .001 and .261, respectively, between .000 and .597 (positive and negative values).

HYPOTHESIS

Null Hypothesis (H₀): There is no relation between comic book reading on readers during the lockdown.

Alternate Hypothesis (H₁): There is a significant relationship between comic book reading on readers

during the lockdown. From Cross tabulation, inter-correlation between four variables were analysed. Age with Gender, Age with Comics reading starting during the lockdown, Age with any comics reading in the past year, Gender with Age, Gender with Comics reading starting during the lockdown, Gender with any comics reading in the past year, Starting of Comics reading during lockdown with Age, Starting of Comics reading during lockdown with Gender, Starting of Comics reading during lockdown with Any comics read in the past one year, Any comics read in the past one year with Age, Any comics read in the past one year with Gender; Any comics read in the past one year with Starting of Comics reading during the lockdown.

Table 2.
Cross table of
Comics read in the
past one year, and
comics reading
started during
lockdown

Have you read comics in the past year (2020)			
Have you started reading comics during lockdown	Yes	No	Grand Total
Yes	37	0	37
No	33	32	65
Grand Total	70	32	102

Readers who have started reading comics during the lockdown and have read comics in the past year. These are "Home Coming" comic readers. A total of 37 respondents agreed in this category. Readers who have started reading comics during the lockdown have not read any comics in the past year. "Hypothetical Situation" with contradiction in statements. If readers have started reading comics during the lockdown, which began in 2020, in 2021, it is impossible to say that they have not read any comics during lockdown due to PANDEMIC COVID-19. Nil respondents agreed in this category. Readers who have not started reading comics during the lockdown have read comics in the past year. These readers are perceived as the "Continuous Comics Readers". A total of 33 respondents agreed in this category. Readers who have not started reading comics during the lockdown have not read comics in the past year. These readers are perceived as "Not Interested in comics"

categorically. A total of 32 respondents agreed in this category.

Inter-Item Correlation Matrix				
	Age	Gender	Have you started reading comic books during the lockdown	Have you read any comic books in the past year
Age	1.000	0.030	0.283	0.325
Gender	0.030	1.000	0.144	0.247
Have you started reading comic books during the lockdown	0.283	0.144	1.000	0.510
Have you read any comic books in the past year	0.320	0.247	0.510	1.000

Table 3.
Cross table of Age, Gender with Comics read in the past one year, and comics reading started during lockdown

INTERPRETATION

Age with Gender has 0.30, hence a low level of correlation observed. Generation with starting of comics during lockdown has 0.283. Thus a low level of correlation was kept. Age with cartoons reading in the past year has 0.325, hence a low level of correlation observed. Gender with Age has 0.30. Thus a low level of correlation was observed. Gender with starting of comics during lockdown has 0.144, hence a low level of correlation kept. Gender with comics reading in the past year has been 0.247. Thus a low level of correlation was observed. Starting of comics during lockdown with Age has 0.283. Thus a low level of correlation was observed. Starting of comics during lockdown with Gender has 0.144, hence a low level of correlation observed. Creating comics during lockdown with comics reading in the past year has 0.510, hence the high level of correlation. Comics read in the past year with Age has 0.325. Thus a low level of correlation observed. Comics read in the past year with Gender has 0.247, hence a low level of correlation observed. Comics read in the past year with Starting

of comics during lockdown has 0.510, hence the high level of correlation observed.

QUESTIONNAIRE

For the analysis, a quantitative approach was used to collect responses from comic readers. It included their name, gender, educational background, profession, attitude toward comics reading during the lockdown, and the comics they had read in the previous year. The survey was conducted with the help of Google Docs to collect the responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present readers of comics belong to 35 years and above, as observed. The shocking fact is that the younger generation was less in counts 3 (16-20 Years), 5 (Younger than 16 Years). Readers are primarily interested in private jobs occupationally, a total of 58 than any other sector observed. Thus comes the Influence of Age and Gender on comic-book reading habits.

There is a low correlation between Age, Gender with comics reading during lockdown and comics read in the past year. In other words, we can infer that there is no or less relation between Age and Gender on comics-reading, whether during lockdown or comics reading in the past year. However, comics reading during lockdown and comics read in the past year (2020 – Corona outbreak) are correlated with each other. In simple terms, the younger generation was less interested in reading comics while 35+ years old are reliving their nostalgia during the lockdown. Readers apart from private service are less in count in comics reading habit during the lockdown. Reading tendency is not dependent on factors like age and gender. However, comics reading habit was influenced by readers in 2020 during lockdown due to COVID-19.

FURTHER SCOPE OF STUDY

This research is the first attempt to empirically investigate the reading attitudes and approach of comics readers established during the lockdown, the comics-reading trend of the previous year, and the impact comic book reading was considered to have had on them. More research is required to better understand these issues and validate the results, particularly given the possibility that dependent factors might and would inevitably introduce and display different interpersonal factors and effects based on learning styles, interests, and individual preferences, strengths and limitations. As a result, it is suggested that this study be repeated or updated by changing some of its parameters, depending on the situation. A researcher is interested in learning and exploring new things. Different and/or a wider variety and the number of comics from various publishing houses may be used in interpretations.

CONCLUSION

Reading comic books has almost lost its allure in recent decades. For a long time, there was a readership deficit in the Indian comics industry. The research was motivated by the need to learn why people began to reminisce about their childhood loves as life came to a halt. Reading comic books was a big deal for kids in the 1990s. As a result, it becomes necessary to estimate. Thus, it is uncertain if the sudden rise in comic book reading has been affected by the lockdown. According to the analysis, people began reading comics during the lockdown, and comics read in the previous year have a clear connection with each other, giving hope to the Indian comics industry to recover and regain its golden years. This not only provides hope but also presents an opportunity.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Comics publishers tap the same and start bringing back the lost readers. Along with this, there should be strategic planning in place to engage the young generation in comics. The adults who were the 90's kids have already enjoyed comics, and thus the homecoming is taking place. However, kids of today's era need to be targeted. The study found that the present generation (under 20 years) don't read much. Their participation in the study was found lesser than the adults, which can be tough to attract in this digital era of multimodal ways to entertain oneself.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

There is no Competing of Interests.

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7. Image Courtesy, Fig 05: Amazon Prime: PATAL LOK

8. Image Courtesy, Fig 06: SonyLiv: Sandwich

9. Image Courtesy, Fig 07: Bala Movie: Lead Actor Ayushman Khurana is reading Raj Comics

10. Image Courtesy, Fig 08: "Thappad / Zindagi in Short" on Flipkart Video showing the scenes of "Patishodh ki Jwala / " Raj Comics

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(Un)Sanitary and Unwarranted Criticism: A Historiographical Reading of Sanitary Panels Comics During COVID-19

Keywords:
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05

ABSTRACT

The year(s) of the pandemic in contemporary history has been an unprecedented one. In the Global South there has been a rupture in daily life, economy, as well as a tragic breakdown of the healthcare system. While nations battled the disease, its newer mutations, followed by prolonged lockdowns, analysing themes of this arguably 'dystopian' lived reality find room in readings of contemporary comics, namely Sanitary Panels by Rachita Taneja. In this paper I argue that the intersection of social media and the onset of COVID-19 marked a new thematic shift in the genre of comics, especially in the context of South Asia. As some argued it was the end of globalisation, social media instead transcended borders and language barriers, namely through artistic representation of common issues through memes and comics.

Sanitary Panels offers a critical reading of events that unfolded around the country, evoking dark humour to shed light on the 'absurdity' of lockdowns, as well as other newly formed institutions, for which the comics were

named as 'contemptuous' by the Supreme Court of India. The Sanitary Panels comics, which began on Instagram have found a huge following, with over one lakh followers. Comics in this context, therefore, do not ascribe to a genre of comics filled with fantastical lands, or future parallel galaxies, but offer a vivid reimagining of contemporary history through simplistic drawings and little use of colour, which evidently have a widespread appeal. In my paper I delineate the cartography of the growth and popularity of Sanitary Panels, which accelerated through the pandemic and argue that comics here become a form of historiography, inscribing a counter hegemonic chronicling of contemporary history. One may argue that online platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Amazon Prime and Netflix, all witnessed a surge in the number of people accessing their content, not only due to an insular mode of life, where movement was restricted, but also due to an immediate connection with 'things fall(ing) apart' across the globe.

1 INTRODUCTION

Issues of inequality, inequity, and inaccessibility have affected the world at large through various methods throughout history. However, in contemporary history, the onset of COVID-19, which soon evolved from an epidemic to a pandemic across the globe, creating havoc, and destroying lives and livelihood, a starker world filled with the chasm of inequality emerged. As multiple vaccines were developed in the 'developed' world, the Global South found itself relying on donations for western created medicines and vaccines. As India and other Asian nations created their own vaccines, their 'authenticity' or 'validity' were contested by the West, who refused to accept them as equal vaccines, after refusing to lift patents on the ones created by Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson and Johnson, amongst others. Recently in March 2022, The World Health Organisation halted Covaxin

supplies through UN bodies, raising questions on the disproportionate power of the West to target non Western healthcare facilities and disrupt affordable medical supplies, such as vaccines. Within the Global South, especially during the Second Wave that impacted India and other parts of Asia, the healthcare system was met with systematic failure. As it spread across the world, questions of dissent, power and representation also came to light. On one hand the media was consumed by reports on Bollywood actors being embroiled in drug cases, as well as allegations of murder. On the other hand, the tragic death toll of people dying from COVID-19, or its related ailments rose drastically with time, which found more room on social media to be recorded and discussed as people brought the personal into the public arena through various social media applications. The overshadowing of an alternative 'absurd' way of life took over, as lockdowns occurred ensuring people to remain home to control the spread of the virus, whilst migrants had to return home, often on foot, due to lack of resources in major Indian cities. Amidst these contrasting images of India that came to light, it is important to ask questions on who has the access to represent and record 'real' life facts and events during global catastrophes? Moreover, why did many people across South Asia turn to social media to express their concerns regarding the pandemic, and how did their methodologies of articulating their dissatisfaction or rather, 'dissent' provoke governments to issue notices through courts to artists, comedians, and even comic writers. In light of these issues, I examine themes of humour, criticality, and trauma within the genre of comics published during COVID-19.

2 PAPER PREPARATION

Analysing social media and the intersection of artistic expression highlighting dissent and questions of the 'banality of evil'¹ through comics is an interesting site to further explore the connections between the appeal

of comics and their potential to (re)shape existing frameworks of hegemonic models of history, as well as historiography. When much of written history is found in the form of non-fiction texts, it is interesting to note that Sanitary Panels, a series of comics by Rachita Taneja delineates a depiction of current events in idea, shedding light on the irony of several current policies, as well as people's reactions to other 'absurd' and even 'dystopian' occurrences across the nation, which are linked to larger, global issues of the pandemic, climate change and environmental degradation. The question remains whether studying these 'comics' can be considered as traditional comics, or should they be understood as a network of single panels? The comics initially appeared as a profile on Instagram, before featuring on Twitter as a parallel Twitter handle and have found a huge following across the world. Their popularity is linked to both their accessibility through the open-endedness of social media, but also through their appeal as appearing through simple illustrations, without much colour or text. Comics in this context, therefore do not ascribe to a genre of comics filled with fantastical lands, or future parallel galaxies such as the Marvel or other Superhero(ine) universe, but offer a reflection of current affairs, where the stick figures become the image of an everywoman and everyman, as ordinary citizens. The style of simplistic illustrations is a moment of connection between the audiences on social media, who scroll through various apps at great speed. Taneja's popularity and relatability are based upon the seemingly minimalist mode of articulating ideas, incorporating signs, symbols, and popular culture references in her work to garner greater appeal.

Taneja oeuvre arguably falls in the domain of comics and not stands alone panels as her work operates through intertextuality, social and political references to public issues, framing panels that weave a larger narrative and commentary on pertinent questions faced by society today. Moreover, the literal and

metaphorical inscription of current events that may not have been highlighted much by mainstream media marks Taneja's comics as a historiographical project. In the age of post truth and increasing concerns of fake news, the recording and chronicling of everyday affairs, centred on Indian experiences, being affected by global politics, Taneja's comics use the digital space of social media as a critical and historiographical lens. From focusing on social taboos, such as visibility discussing menstruation, to the ongoing pandemic, Taneja ensures that her texts remain relevant and engage with current themes, such as the current war in Ukraine.

(Re)locating Taneja as a comic creator, illustrator and writer in a broader framework of South Asian art proves to be a difficult task. The genre of graphic novels and comics occupies a distinctly different space in the literary canon as opposed to Indian Writing in English. Yet, social, cultural and gender identity markers arguably point Taneja's work into the domain of South Asian Women's Writing, where she continually blurs the boundaries of print culture, illustrations and text, superimposing these various modes of expression in a digital realm. Reading, understanding, and deconstructing her work cannot be done in a vacuum. Across South Asia, various voices have emerged, where one can map a cartography of women's comics, materialising through social media. One may argue that the popular graphic novel, Priya's Shakti, was an important moment in terms of women's representation, but it was designed by men, its authors being, Ram Devineni, Vikas K. Menon, and Dan Goldman. Furthermore, the dissonance between men speaking for women's experiences through a graphic novel does not wholly do justice to its concerns of claiming justice for the protagonist, who is a sexual assault survivor.



Fig. 1 An Illustration of Sultana's Dream by Shehzilm Malik

In contrast to such examples, Taneja's work can be compared to Shehzil Malik, an artist based across the border in Lahore, who has famously illustrated Begum Rokeya Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* for a wider audience. (Fig 1)

Connecting women's contemporary art forms that refuse to ascribe to hierarchical labels of 'high' versus 'low' art, one finds Afghan-German artist, Moshtari Hilal's work equally fascinating and insightful. Woven around themes of identity, self reflection and cultural history, Hilal's art is the opposite of Taneja's work in terms of form, as it is intricate and detailed. But, its message echoes Taneja's concerns of representing women in comics, through a feminist lens, acting as a counter hegemonic space to (re)imagine women through a non Western, and female gaze. As one connects the development of comics, and webcomics, it is evident that women's voices are moving towards the centre, stepping away from the margins, which are located or have roots in South Asia.

Fig. 2 (left)
A Group of Women
on a Carpet by
Moshtari Hilal

Fig. 3 (right)
A Sardonic
Comment on
Pollution Levels by
Rachita Taneja

The next question when attempting to analyse Taneja's webcomics is also that of, how does one define what constitutes a webcomic? Marianne Hicks writes in *Drawing the Line*, "comics produced primarily for the web rather than for print" and are "made by an independent creator or creators, without an original 'print version' or corporate sponsorship." [Hicks, 11.3]



This yardstick to measure the definition of Sanitary Panels holds true as the creation, production and distribution of them continue to be on the internet.

Taneja's content falls in the purview of what one may state as an online experiment in methodologies of historiography. Taneja's central focus has very often been everyday issues of inflation, conflict and even pollution. Forbes India published a tongue-in-cheek panel by Sanitary Panels. (Fig 3)

(Re)writing history, or chronicling history as it unfolds on a daily basis, through a focus on the everyday lives of common citizens in today's world is vital to record voices of people who often are overlooked by both society and popular media. Therefore it is the unending space and almost infinite nature of social media, which allows for alternative voices to be heard, and at least in a virtual screen, appear as print. Debjana Nayek argues that today webcomics produce a subcultural noise, that acts subvert the dominant narrative of graphic novels.^[1] According to Scott McCloud too, what we now know as webcomics, are a way of reinventing comics digitally to ensure their continuity. [5]

For webcomics in South Asia, especially when the connectedness of people across societies, cultures, and languages has been ruptured in an abrupt manner due to COVID-19, they have refigured a digital presence to not only 'reinvent comics', but also to create newer forms of dialogue vis-a-vis art. Webcomics as an art form represents an arena for and from the masses that does not see interventions by large publications or other such factors. This is not to say that webcomic creators are not affected by other obstacles to share their art. The internet to an extent may be an equalising space, but surveillance and lack of freedom of expression continue to haunt both the creators and viewers. One must also note that though webcomics appear to be more democratic

in dissemination, their language is often limited to English, a marker of elitist culture in India. Moreover, accessibility to webcomics is a pertinent question where many people are affected by digital poverty.

Therefore, how do we then (re)imagine the process of history writing or Taneja in a recent comic on India's Independence Day, 15th August posted a two-panel illustration with some colour. (Fig 4)

Do these webcomics again, like Priya's Shakti speak for the subaltern or rather, over the subaltern? Taneja's specific choices of colours allude to India's national level party system, which use such symbols of flowers and certain colours to symbolise their political affiliation. This seemingly muted commentary on the approach to politics and the 'idea of India' which is today becoming more and more monolithic and even monochrome. Sanitary Panels critical reading and (re)drawing of such things recently altering the idea of the country, evoke dark humour to shed light on the 'absurdity' of lockdowns, as well as other newly formed institutions, for which the comics were named as 'contemptuous' by the Supreme Court of India. The reaction of the authorities to Taneja's work is a testament to the power that comics hold to posit an alternative mode of seeing, reading, and questioning everyday things around us. In another panel, she offers a 'translation' on the words used by national agencies to perpetuate their propaganda, and veil their attacks on common citizens through seemingly 'harmless' language.

Fig. 4 (left)
A Rare Coloured
Panel by Sanitary
Panels (Twitter)

Fig. 5 (right)
A Panel
Commenting on
Human Rights



as political satire, or commentary, created through the hands of a citizen, who lives in a matrix of both privileges and marginalisation(s). Her work reflects this through her use of English as the medium of the panels, and the simplicity of her illustrations which aim to garner a larger response to the topics discussed through them. Through Twitter and Instagram, Taneja not only uses historiography to provide an alternative lens to capture the voices of many, but also creates a sense of belonging through her form of questioning everyday issues around us. The digital realm in this context, becomes not only a virtual 'reality', but an intervention to the 'absurdity' of the pandemic which has rendered society at large grappling with its overnight effects on human life and the environment. It is also important to analyse the processes in which comics are evolving through social media platforms, where they do not become simple repositories of art and aesthetics, as well as experimentation with styles, but also as a site for collective memory, through the interaction of millions of people connected virtually. During the pandemic, virtual interactions have increased multifold. Classrooms converted to online modes of learning, cinemas, gyms, theaters, and museums shut down, and become inaccessible to the public. This prompted an accelerated growth in the audience watching OTT platforms, also altering the manner in which Bollywood distributed its films.

When one analyses spaces of creative expression, it becomes pertinent to understand the parallels and differences between them. Even in an online mode, comics continue to be popular, based on their content and style, appealing to people on various levels. As social media develops forms of Tik Tok, an App banned in India, which seeks to capture short videos as 'reels', re-reading comics also captures the brevity of its ability to communicate ideas quickly, through short, neat panels. Taneja's work is posted with frequency on her social media, yet one would not label her as an 'influencer'. More than 'influencing'

her work has become associated with being a voice that is being pushed to the margins literally and metaphorically through more dominant modes of writing or inscribing a contemporary history for people to revisit and rediscover without the intervention of authority.

Around the festivities of Diwali, Taneja presents the harsh reality of increasing pollution levels in New Delhi. In spite of the government's attempts to curb and ban firecracker sales and their use, the resounding air pollution in the city does not go unnoticed. Taneja's images through such examples become a site of self-reflection for its consumers, who are consumers of both firecrackers and pollution.

The choice of the title of her comics is also a telling one. Calling her work as 'Sanitary Panels', Taneja firstly touches upon a word and topic that does not find much room in the space of the public. Alluding to products used by menstruating people, Taneja's literal panels highlight a taboo topic in our society, where women's bodies are shunned and their needs dismissed. Secondly, the idea of sanitary, or at times, desensitized news, as well as historiographical projects which seek to reconstruct narrow modes of history and make them more sanitised, and arguably 'clean' is challenged in these comics. Taneja's comics discuss not only Indian issues, but also questions of ownership, capitalism, and the problems of social media too.

Fig. 6 (left)
Using Other
Metaphors and
Symbols.

Fig. 7 (right)
A 'Meta' Narrative
on Social Media



The signature beneath each panel evokes a taboo issue that has been pushed to the margins. By inspiring it below the margins of the panel, Taneja reinforces the relevance of menstruation, normalising its usage and reference in the public eye, functioning as an intersection of gender, body politics and social issues.

Taneja, in an interview, Taneja stated that her naming was an intentional choice, one 'that immediately breaks the taboo' and simultaneously, 'it gives the impression that the comic is going to be about the things people generally hesitate to talk about'. The patriarchal framework of India and South Asia continues to influence social media as well. Many women comics receive extensive trolling and harassment. By gaining a form of visibility, women on social media become targets of such attacks online. Sanitary Panels and many other webcomics therefore becomes a site of resistance, refusing to accede to gender norms.

Nayek writes more on the shift in women's representation in comics, moving away from 'epic women' to 'un-epic' women in her essay, 'From Shakuntala to Sanitary Panels: Women in Indian Graphic Narratives.'^[6] She states, "The webcomics, doodles and cartoons of feminist illustrators are in a constant struggle to transform social media sites and the larger digital sphere, generally a Foucauldian 'space of surveillance' with a power to control and discipline, into an Arendtian 'space of appearance'. It is an ongoing resistance against the patriarchal, Brahminical society and an effort to establish an 'identity and sense of self' (Marquez, 2012: 19) for womanhood. This courage of going out in the public (Arendt, 1958: 36), beyond the limitations of the household as well as of the paradigm and taboo system of the society, empowers Indian women to a great extent." ^[9]

The use of an 'everywoman' face for Taneja grants her a certain amount of anonymity behind her work, and also raises the question of the figure of the everywoman, who often has been overshadowed by images of the every man, or the 'aam aadmi', leaving no room for the 'aam aurat' in the public eye. When one reads other comics which have been seen as critical junctures in both the field of graphic novels, historiography and politics, one notes that there are towering figures from both genders such as Joe Sacco and Marjane Satrapi, who have been termed as pioneers of this form. Yet, within South Asian societies, it is imperative to underline questions of historiography with the intersection of gender, caste, class and region. Investigating Taneja's work amidst these interlinked lenses of theory require more scholarship on intersecting spaces of comics and historiography, that can be delved deeper into with greater insight, using other comics from the contemporary era to build upon a larger study of the genre and its sub genrification. Studying a literary historiography watermarked by graphic novelists such as Sarnath Banerjee, whose seminal texts. All Quiet in Vikaspuri and Corridor, created spaces for issues of climate change and 'aam aadmi' struggles, webcomics by women bring forth a parallel reading of gender, identity and historiography. Post pandemic, more platforms find avenues of analyzing women's presence in both the offline and online world. There is still a long way to go for equity and equality across gender, caste, and class binaries in South Asia. With the popularity of a variety of satirical webcomics, one may say that counter hegemonic discourses are finding their way into the virtual and real lives of ordinary citizens, highlighting the 'ordinariness' of their lives, which is contrasted to the absurdity of global policies and the ongoing pandemic.

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Elucidation of the
narrative style*

Memoirs of Life During Covid Times, Stories of Absolute Resilience in the Wake of a Pandemic in Covid Chronicles of India by Falguni Mehta

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ABSTRACT

Covid Chronicles of India by Falguni Mehta is a compilation of poignant stories of life during the pandemic portrayed through the medium of vivid visuals and short narratives. The stories are heart wrenching. They are short, yet poignant, elucidating the pathos of life of the migrant workers, their struggles and their perplexity at the dramatic and sudden course of events, transforming the very essence of the lives that was so far known to them. The book also elaborates on certain aspects of the regular and conventional pattern of life which was completely disrupted during the pandemic. The book is divided into three sections, with each section narrating stories of myriad emotions and perspectives on life. The stories illustrated by the paintings are a mirror of life during the pandemic. The aim of the paper on this heart rendering depiction of life through the medium of visuals and short narratives, is to emphasize on the significance of these sketches. The medium itself is the subject matter

of exploration. The fundamental question of the necessity of these visuals in the depiction of the poignancy of the memoirs of life during the pandemic is what features as the axis of research. The analysis of these visuals, their significance and their essentiality in the depiction of the resilience, optimism and emotional quotient of life during the pandemic will be the sole aim of the paper and the endeavour will be to elucidate the narrative style of the author through them. The study will also focus on the delineation of the subtleties of life as illustrated through the visuals. Thus, the aim is also to explore the hidden nuances in the representation of life via the visuals, and to unearth the unsaid.

INTRODUCTION

The Graphic Novel according to Alan Moore as quoted by [1] in their book *The Graphic Novel An Introduction* is termed as yet another expensive comic book..

Undeterred by the comment made by Alan Moore, the authors go on to mention in the same book, the significant impact of these novels on Literature, Art and also The Visual Media, with many such novels being adapted into motion pictures. In the realm of Academia, the Modern Language Association Of America (MLA) has published *Teaching The Graphic*

Novel, a teacher's guide to facilitate better teaching of the English Language and Literature in classrooms [1]. As stated in the book [2] *Getting To Know Graphic Novels* by Penguin Random House Australia, graphic novel is a viable tool for significant cognitive development, and can be employed for enhanced visual literacy. A graphic novel or narrative narrates a complete story with the help of visuals or illustrations and the narrative would be incomplete without the aid of these visuals. Thus, the objective

of the paper is to elucidate the importance of these visuals as a significant and irreplaceable aspect of the narrative taken into account for the proposed paper. According to Mr. Shanower in his address at the 2004 ALAN Workshop, the graphic novel can even be an assemble of short stories, or anything and everything that consists of drawings and conveys a story. He terms them as a 'drawn book' or 'sequential art'. In his address he mentions the importance of both the written text and the visual as a form of art. He reiterates the emergence of this art form in the form of cartoon strips in newspapers as early as 1895. According to Roland Barthes as quoted by [3] in the book *Stories*, stories are ubiquitous and can be narrated via any media.

There are countless forms of narrative in the world. First of all, there is a prodigious variety of genres, each of which branches out into a variety of media, as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man's stories. [...] Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies [...] there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative. (1975, 237)

Jan Baetens contends in the book *Stories*, that the visual form of narrative has often been associated with political propaganda, and the subjugation of the text or narration to a mere toolbox. He goes on to emphasize the fact that graphic narratives are no longer confined to only stories being told in the form of graphics and text. The term now in actuality incorporates sequentially arranged photographs or drawings, often accompanied by bubbles for dialogues or simple text. The article on *Graphic Narratives An Inspiration For Multimodal Compositions*, reveals the importance of graphic narratives as seeking beyond reality, and how things appear to be [4]. They are a means of looking and seeking in all dimensions. Thus, graphics in these narratives play a remarkable role in helping to achieve

this very important aspect of these narratives to look beyond the stated, and the sole objective of this paper is to delve into this aspect of the graphic narrative, Covid Chronicles Of India [5], and comprehensively analyse them for the stories that the artist wishes to convey via them. The objective of the proposed paper is to discover and elucidate the unwritten and unexplored aspects of the narrative through the medium of the visuals and to establish the significance of the same.

DESIGN METHODOLOGY

The paper has been written after an in- depth study and analysis of the narrative itself. Further to this, secondary sources such as articles, books, newspaper accounts and also blogs on the significance of graphics in narratives, and graphic narratives in general have also been studied and analysed extensively. In this endeavour various forms of print and digital media have proved extremely useful.

IMPORTANCE OF THE VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF IDEAS

The images are the representation of the author's or artist's ideas, and thus, can convey much more than the associated text. Thus, visual rhetoric as well as visual literacy are important aspects of understanding a graphic narrative, and are crucial to unearthing the unsaid. There are even various art styles, aimed at engaging the reader to look and analyse the visuals in a certain light that the artist wishes. It might pertain to the colour, background, style of depiction i.e. whether it is in the form of cartoon characters, or rather abstract amongst other vital aspects. Similarly, the connection between the text and the visual is significant to create a sense of awareness of the same amongst the readers [6] . The Covid Chronicles

Of India by Falguni Mehta is a poignant compilation of paintings depicting the journey of the individuals belonging to different segments of the society. It speaks of the hardships of the Migrant workers in the first section, yet the courage and perseverance of these workers in the face of such hardships is commendable. The second section is about the Noble



Warriors and their stories of endless grit, determination and toiling in the wake of the pandemic. The final section is titled Home, which is a depiction of the journey of the artist herself. The paintings are vivid, exquisitely painted with the sole purpose of conveying the idea of the artist.

The Narrative by Falguni Mehta has all the components of a good graphic narrative. A proper beginning, middle and ending in the form of the three sections of the book, a proper balance between

the visuals and text, a systematic flow of ideas, and most importantly a clear presentation of the thematic message especially via the visuals. The order of the images, panels and texts help and aid the reader to systematically follow the storyline. A graphic novel thus, makes use of both text and illustrations to narrate a story. The article titled Graphic Novels: Preparing For A Multimodal And Multiliterate World, speaks about the presentation of poignant issues of race religion, global conflicts and aggression being presented via intelligence and humour through these novels [7]. The article talks about how these novels can aid the ever changing and evolving face of academia and the students likewise in forming their own interpretations and perspectives through the medium of these novels. As the images are diverse and not confined to only the text, the interpretations can be many and varied, hence engaging the students and readers in intelligent and meaningful critical observations and conclusions. According to Milton Caniff, an

early twentieth century cartoonist, comic strips and in turn graphic narratives in general are a form of communication rather than a form of art [7]. The narrative by Falguni Mehta also speaks silently about the poignant issues which were an integral part of the pandemic, issues some of which were addressed, and some which were the unspoken stigmas of a supposedly civilised society. These issues have been addressed by the author through the medium of her paintings. The text does not always convey the entire truth. It is actually left to the reader's inference through the unsaid. Hence, the need for the critical and meaningful observations of the paintings. The article titled *Imagination And Representation In Graphic Novels* illustrates the fact that visual representations can be a significant means of enhancing the visual aspect i.e. the power of imagination and perception, and in turn its pedagogical implications [8]. Since graphic novel may imply more of fiction, Reid goes on to say, how the term graphic narratives would be more suitable, since it would incorporate all genres of narration via graphics. The article further states that graphic narratives require the reader's imagination and visualisation capacity, together with his/her perception, conceptualisation and understanding to fully comprehend the author's own point of view, and come to a consensus of his/her own comprehension of the same. The conceptualisation of the next action via the gutters is an important aspect of these narratives. Thus, the text is incomplete without the visuals. The visuals form an integral part of these narratives, without which the narratives would be incomplete. According to Herrera, graphic narratives or rather 'information designing', is the art of systematically, precisely and compactly and effectively transforming complicated data [7]. According to Horn, any graphic narrative is a compact combination of words and image, and the slightest of removal of either the text, the image, or the visual can lead to a delineation from the actual meaning the narrative was supposed to convey [7]. Though this is

correct, yet sometimes the visuals are so complete, expressive and communicable that the text appears to be just an accompaniment, as is evident in the first section of the narrative titled Migrants, which is a compilation of vivid images and short text. The first image itself of a girl going piggyback on her father's shoulder has the typical innocence and trust that the text speaks of. The entire first section on Migrant Labours, is a collection of short narratives which depict the pathos, helplessness, poverty and selfishness and apathy of the society at large. None of this would have been complete without the aid of the associated drawings. The drawings are all in singular panels, a single image symbolic of many untold stories. The helplessness in the eyes of the father is apparent when he is carrying his small daughter on his shoulder with no other means of transport to make her reach her home safely. The inadequacy of the whole pitiful situation is further brought out by the manner in which the three children are shown indirectly consoling their mother about reaching their home, and not making unjust demands, though the demands may not appear so to many of us. Here the text alone would be insufficient to convey what the gesture of the small hand on the mother's shoulder with her upturned face conveys. There is a perfect symmetry in all the drawings and the stories though varied seem to be unfolding into each other via the medium of the visuals. The face of the beloved with the rotis strewn on the railway track speak a thousand words. The text here again is insufficient to convey the pathos of the situation. The untold can easily be envisaged. The sight of the migrant kissing the train speaks for itself, and no text can define the emotions of hope and relief that one can envisage after seeing the drawing. The pitiable state of the migrants is further illustrated by the drawing of the people throwing bananas at the people behind the bars. The lines of the bars define the lines of not only the social distancing, but also the social discriminations of our civilised society. The outstretched hands are symbolic

of a society which treats animals better than how they treat their fellow humans. The concentration in the child's eye, while trying to catch the banana thrown at him is heart wrenching. One is made to realise the importance of things that one takes for granted so easily. The noticeable usage of shapes to convey the pathetic state of the migrating workers is observed in the image of the pile of bodies, one on top of the other. It is indicative of the emergency of reaching the safety of their homes as havens of security and comfort. The drawing is a jumble, wherein everything is indistinct. One has to see very closely to actually observe and comprehend the shapes of bodies and various body parts just loosely assembled giving the impression of a junk box, with a variety of things thrown in. This is actually to depict the inhuman conditions of commuting for the Migrant workers during the times of Covid. The words themselves would not have been appropriate enough to convey the pitiable situation of these Migrant Workers. The intricate expressions that one can decipher from the faces drawn is praiseworthy and add to the subtleties of the unwritten and unexpressed. The use of the background at times to lay emphasis on what the text is trying to convey is also significant. The form of the paintings drawn is exemplary. The form of these drawings makes them appear realistic, in terms of colour, shading, the shapes used amongst other aspects. The visuals have been drawn keeping in mind the relevance of the text written alongside, emphasizing on the aspect that needs to be conveyed. Thus, at times the faces are prominent with their ensuing expressions, and at others they are blank. But the background gains prominence. Thus, there is a complete harmony between the text and the images, the main consideration of a good Graphic Novel. The back ground of all the visuals is intricately designed with the smallest of details taken care of. For instance, when talking about the last lavish meal of dal chawal by the family of the maid, the background typifies the homes of such people. Here the action and

background is given more prominence.

One has to get used to thinking in terms of pictures or visuals in order to comprehend the entire message that the author wishes to convey, which is what the second section of the narrative titled Noble Warriors intends to achieve. Painting is a two- dimensional language in terms of visuals, and is comprised of



essentialities like shapes, lines, colours, tones and textures. The section begins with a visual wherein everything is stark white except for the masks and a hue of colours in the background, emphasizing the figures. The apt depiction of the fatigue of these

Corona Warriors through their body language is sublime. The contours of the slumped images of the medical professionals, and the tone of the colours used to highlight the slumped shapes of their tired bodies say it all. The images are placed midground, and the combination of beautiful, sublime, yet realistic shades of colours to depict the emotions of these warriors is commendable. Each and every crevice and fold on the dresses is also intricately depicted. Herein lies the importance of lines as used in a drawing or painting. The expressive lines in these crevices go a long way in depicting the detailing of the author in the depiction of the characters, and make them appear more relatable. The implied lines connecting the figures in these drawings are realistically imperceivable, yet when perceived mindfully tend to impart a different dimension to them. The gestures used say it all. The faith, the trust, yet the helplessness even of these warriors is apparent in the way the medical professional is shown praying. The joy on the child's face when her mother who is also a nurse returns home is palpable when one gets a glimpse of it through the drawing. One is left speechless with

grief and pride at the show of the casket of one of these warriors being carried by them. The motion of the body, the hands holding the casket, and even the heave in order to raise it can be visualised through the drawing. The intensity of the situation, as well as the jubilation after a success can be envisaged via the beautifully explicit drawings. The upsurge of the bodies celebrating can only make the reader rejoice with them. The gestures have been paid much attention to in the second section as opposed to the first. In the first it was all about the expressions detailed on the faces, whereas in the second it is more of the body language conveying the message. At times, it appears as if even the text is not required, as the images say it all. The author has made use of all the various types of lines in the depiction of the characters of her narrative. The hatch lines as well as the cross-hatch lines also significantly add on to the shading and visual texture of the images, and convey deeper meanings that might not be conveyed directly via the text.

The third section of the narrative deals with the journey of the artist at home. Herein one can observe more of the symbolic interpretation of the ideas that the author wishes to convey. The first drawing itself has a beautiful hue of colours in the background, and the pouring of the water in the utensil is surreal. The narrative here is more through the display of hand gestures and symbolic representation of the idea to be conveyed. The representation of ideas through things which stir our memory and make us think is more vivid here. The usage of tones in the images is also more prominent, as the author via the usage of the values or tones has tried to impart more prominence of one thing over another. The tones used are more subtle using lower contrasts. It is all gestures in this particular section, more so hand movements. The manner in which the artist has drawn the hands holding each other goes on to symbolically depict what she desires to portray. Even the beauty

of the opened lipstick is remarkable, which goes on to symbolise the undeterred spirit and optimism that is the underlying theme especially of the third section of this narrative. In this section again things gain symbolic significance, as one gains an insight into it via the narrative. The narrative comes to an end with the final portrait of presumably the artist herself, complete with a mask. One can say that with regard to the visuals, the depiction of the intricate emotions in



the first section, and the combination of both body language and emotions in the second seems far superior to the symbolic display of the narrative in the third. The entire narrative is a juxtaposition of stories of pathos and helplessness, yet the courage and resilience in the face of the same, divided into the three sections of Migrants, Noble Warriors and Home. The monochromatic usage of colours gives the entire text a fluidity, and assists in the systematic representation of ideas.

There is a wide range of the colours that have been used, but one finds the usage of cool colours in the form of more blues and greens from the second section of the novel. The colours in general are not very loud, but have a gentle hue, gently and intricately dissolving into the space provided, imparting an added dimension to the personal space of the characters envisaged and drawn by the author.

CONCLUSION

The graphic narrative has been described as an autographic art form, where the visuals provide an extra layer of meaning other than the text. The graphic narrative through its frames and gutters is able to pace the rhythmic movement of the readers spatial reading and comprehension [9]. Graphic representation has also been referred to as a visual language, an apt and befitting description of an intelligent and beautiful art form [10]. Thus, a graphic narrative is a vivid,

descriptive mode of communication which enables the reader to see beyond the text. The visual aid in deciphering and imagining the untold. The reader is left to visualise, and gain a better insight into the perception of the artist. This is especially true in the case of this particular memoir, which is a chronicle of the resilience, courage, undeterred optimism and positivity displayed during the Covid times. The use of the background, the mid grounding of the images, the use of the graphic weight in terms of certain colours, shades used, and finally the display of emotions on the faces and the gestures each symbolically representing something untold and semantically described is profound. The usage of lines, tones or values and contrast of colours, and the overall form of the drawings impart a deeper meaning to what the author wishes to convey, but which can only be inferred from the visuals. Thus, this narrative has layers and layers of interpretations via the visuals which speak eloquently even when left to their own devices, and very rarely need the assistance of the text, thus, representing the power of the visual and spatial representation of ideas. Hence, one can safely state that the visuals are an integral and significant if not more important aspect of all narratives, especially the one in question, and the Memoirs would have been incomplete and insignificant without them.

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A Critical Essay on Priya's Mask

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ABSTRACT

Ram Devineni's creation, Priya, the salwar kameez-clad female superhero, returns to instill the power of courage and compassion into society during this difficult time of pandemic. Priya's quest is not only about battling the deadly virus but also about clearing up the fake news, superstition, and fear surrounding the coronavirus. In the early stages of the pandemic, a lot of misinformation was circulated online in India, blaming various ethnic and religious groups for the virus. The narrative used in this comic beautifully dispels the virus's misinformation and fear, which could lead to something even more harmful than the infection. Priya's mask as a comic book (also now an animated movie) reflects young people's problems and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives and those of their families, particularly health workers. This edition of Priya is mainly targeted at Indian children and beautifully reflects the sacrifices and appreciation of the frontline health workers and answers the question of why it's crucial to be brave and sympathetic in the face of the epidemic. Priya's Mask meticulously points out the trauma faced by the children in isolation from their nearest and dearest ones and the importance of counseling. This piece, through the character Priya, critically discusses the necessity of wearing a mask and educates people about working

together to end the pandemic around the world. Jiya, commonly known as the Burqa Avenger, is a Pakistani superhero who appears in Priya's Mask. The two superheroes team up to stop Baba Kaboom from using the virus to take control of the city. This comic, by bringing the two superheroes together, demonstrates that the virus has no boundaries. It can only be defeated via cross-cultural cooperation and understanding. Priya is not a victim of gender-based violence; she is rather a survivor. On a first reading of Priya's Mask, it may appear to be like any other comic and meant for children. But a serious reader will find that the comic is equally educative not only to children but also to mature people. It beautifully presents the observations of animals like tigers in the forest and birds in the sky, as tigers noticed something was wrong as they did not observe the footprints of people in the forest. Similarly, birds flew in the sky in joy, welcoming the pollution-free atmosphere. These tell us the animals have strong sensory impulses to observe changes in nature. It highlights the need for a pollution-free environment for the safeguard of human beings as well as the animal kingdom. The comic also scores high in reflecting the compassionate attitude to be shown towards patients infected with the virus. The virus would spread beyond borders or barriers, and that's where this comic steps in with an appeal to fight the pandemic together, putting aside all differences.. This analytical piece highlights the question of whether we control the virus or if it controls us. In short, this essay mirrors elements like the importance of wearing a mask, maintaining social distance, and combining efforts to beat the virus as depicted in the graphic narrative.

1. INTRODUCTION

Priya's Mask is the latest installment in the series of India's first female superhero, Priya, created by Mr. Ram Devineni and based on the story by Shubra

Prakash. In the series, Mr. Devineni started with Priya Shakti (2014), followed by Priya's Mirror and Priya and the Lost Girls (2019). Before going through this research paper, it is necessary for a reader to have a glimpse of the background that prompted Ram Devineni to create the Priya Series. Priya's character was created after the brutal gang rape in Delhi. In real life Nirbhaya (real name withheld) died in 2012 but in the comic Priya's Shakti (2014), the character Priya is a survivor not a victim. She was in a mission to instill the courage and confidence among women and girls to fight for their rights and protest against violence on them, sending a positive message in the society towards the image of women shattering patriarchal stereotypes. Priya's Mirror and Priya and the Lost Girls were a clear message to the victims in search of their own identity and talents rather than physical or outward appearance and at the same time rising to the occasion individually and collectively to thwart the vicious circles of all kinds of exploitation. Priya's mask is a marked departure from her earlier missions of Priya Shakti (2014), Priya's Mirror and Priya and Lost Girls (both in 2019). In her earlier mission Priya was a messiah/savior for the victimized women. In the first three series Priya's arena of operation was in the context of India. In that sense though the issues concerned her was universal phenomenon, yet it was to some extent limited within her motherland.

1.1 IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATION.

As the creators of Priya's Mask were scattered in various parts of the world, they tried to create a safe space through this comic that would provide hope and ways to remain safe during this threat. As comics are a widely accepted form of popular culture, it's easier to communicate awareness through this medium. The images and narrative used in Priya's Mask powerfully influence social change, avoiding the stereotypical didactic views. The comic ends with a humanistic lesson: if a person is affected by the virus, he/she should not be abandoned in the

streets, but rather be hospitalized for treatment. Apart from that, it brings out not only the traumas of children but also the pain of migrant workers and street vendors affected by the pandemic. The Priya series always tries to defeat fear and discover the hidden strength of individuals. The narratives used in this comic do the same, shunning the misinformation surrounding the virus and educating mainly younger audiences. The comic highlights the need to remain strong in this uncertain time in order to support loved ones and the community, as well as to hold on to the hope that things will change and improve. The universal brotherhood and oneness, which are deeply rooted in the Indian Sanatan culture, are promoted beautifully in the comic. Priya's Mask is a masterpiece in interweaving fantasy, hard realities, sacrifice and environmental concerns in a magnificent manner, which has earned it a distinguished mark in the world of comic literature at this critical juncture of the second biggest catastrophic event after World War II in terms of casualties of human beings and economic sufferings

2. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

In Mr. Ram Devineni's Priya's Mask, Priya was entrusted with the mission to fight against the invisible Corona Virus looming large across the world, irrespective of developed, underdeveloped, or poor countries, which cost millions of lives. At the very beginning of Priya's Mask, "Sahas", the celestial tiger gifted by Goddess Parvati to Priya with a fellow tiger in the forest, the other tigers are happy to get "Sahas" back among them and request him to stay with them. It shows love and affection in the animal world, which human civilization is sometimes devoid of. The tiger observed the complete absence of footfall in the forest and the clean air leading to the mountain visible from a distance. Perhaps the closing down of factories and passing vehicles on the road reduced the pollution

level in the atmosphere, which the animals in the forest observed meticulously, but sometimes goes unnoticed by human beings. [1]"Sahas" said to his fellow tigers, "Priya needs me; I am her courage, her friend. We look after one another. (P-1). It demonstrates the priority of duty and co-operation by Sahas an animal and his politeness in refusing to stay with his fellow tiger friends in the forest. Priya wearing her traditional salwar-kamiz attire was loitering in front of a water body. Suddenly the water whispered that she has been fighting bravely against two legs monsters/ villains perpetuated in heinous crimes against women and the process successfully instilling confidence among the victims bringing them back to mainstream life. The divine water went on to whisper, [2] "Now the world is faced with an invisible force- A Virus, unlike any other you have met..." (P-2). In essence the water told the very existence of human life was at stake due to the breathing problem which kept the people away from one another. It went on to say that the fear of Virus had gripped the minds of the people and they had lost all kinds of hope for their very existence and survival on the earth. It was utmost necessary for Priya to instill confidence and hope among the people and defeat the Virus by working together in the spirit of harmony and co-operation. The water gave Priya a piece of cloth to protect her and the other people from the Virus. The water body continued, [3]"You are giver. This is the reason you will always have your strength..." (P-3). It is the irony of the nature of the human being, with a few exception, to grab or accumulate as far as possible without minding the necessity of the same instead of giving at least a portion to the under privileged and deprived section of the society. Earlier in the three series Priya had ventured out to fight her enemies face to face and always come out victorious. Perhaps Priya had harbored doubts about her ability to fight the invisible Virus as she lacked experience to combat such an unforeseen deadly Virus. The water body realizing the suspicion in the mind of Priya about her ability assured

and instilled confidence in her stating that all the strength Priya possessed had derived from her quality of always being a giver. This selfless act was the strength of Priya. Our ancient scriptures had preached for sacrifice and self-less act for the society since time immemorial. This gives in her strength an invisible power to accomplish acts which are beyond imagination of an ordinary people in the society. The water-body simply reminded Priya to stand on her own feet bravely with her weapon in the form of inner strength, a piece of cloth (to be used as a mask), her celestial tiger.co-operation and harmony of different cultures across geographical boundaries to face an irradiate the invisible Virus from the society. Priya without wasting any time flew on her celestial tiger to Jodhpur city in Rajasthan. Priya drew the attention of "Sahas" to the exodus of the people from the city with their belongings covering their faces. Priya instantly utilized the piece of cloth as a mask to keep the Virus away for her own safety and at the same time stopping the Virus spreading and contaminating other people who come in contact with her. The city presented a deserted look and seemed a fear had engulfed the city. Each and every dweller kept them confined in their home. The vibration of life nowhere could be seen and it appeared that time had stopped in this part of the earth. A little girl was flying kite in her balcony to pass time with a heavy heart failing to meet her friends. Priya landed there seated on the back of her tiger and the little girl being frightened threw away kite apparatus. Priya requested the little girl not to be frightened at all and introduced herself and her celestial tiger. Being confident and amazed the little girl took Priya to be a princess. At the very moment the little girl remembered her mother instructed her to listen to her father. It appeared that her mother was a health worker (a nurse) and as many people got affected by the Virus, she was busy in the hospital taking care of them. The little girl's mother advised her to stay at home and look after every domestic activity on her behalf. Meena wanted to know from her mother

whether she would come back late again as usual. Her mother explained politely that she needed to be in the hospital to care for the sick people, so no timetable for her return could be given. Meera yearned for happy days spent in the park with her friends, and she missed her favourite foods, Kheer (pudding), and stories read by her mother. Meera was sad as she could not share her feelings with anyone. At this point, Priya counselled Meera that in certain situations, a person needs to be strong to make their loved ones strong. Priya took Meera to taste a journey over the city on her flying tiger. Meera was amazed to see a large number of flocks of birds flying across the city sky. Sahas, the flying tiger, said that the birds had told him that the clear sky (indicating pollution-free) had prompted them to come in large numbers. In the course of the journey, Meera pointed out a house that belonged to his friend Lina. Lina sat in her reading chamber, longing to have a warm hug from her grandmother, whom she missed. Meera found her favorite ice-cream and the sweet parlor looked deserted and closed. The further they went down into Jodhpur city, the more they heard some voices from a house stating there was no virus at all. Priya told Meera that the voices were coming from people who were more fearful than aware of the hard reality. Another voice from an apartment stated that wearing a mask was a personal choice and it should not be forced upon anyone. The third and fourth voices went on saying that the virus caught the poor and poverty-stricken people at a fast pace and the older people, respectively. Further down the city, they arrived at the hospital where Meera's mother was a nurse. Meera noticed through the glass standing outside the hospital room that her nurse mother was advising a patient to take rest, shredding anxiety as he was running a high fever. Another patient stated that once her friend came to visit her, neither she nor her friend was serious about wearing a mask. Priya's mother emphasized that her friend needed to be tested for the virus without the slightest delay and counseled

her not to be worried as her brother regularly visits the hospital to inquire about her well-being. The patient appreciated the medical professional's duty in putting their lives in danger. But the nurse politely told the patient that they were only performing their duty and trying their best to cure them at the earliest. Meena, like a matured girl, told Priya that her mother, as a nurse, had to toil hard to take care of so many patients all day long and lamented that she was unable to enjoy the physical presence of her mother. Priya, now working as a counselor, explained that her mother had sacrificed her time for the greater cause of taking care of the people affected by the virus. Priya further went on to elucidate that, like Meera; her mother also missed her little daughter very much. But at this critical juncture, when the virus gripped the city, extending its death claws, her mother, as a nurse, was the only hope and shelter for the patients affected by the virus. Meera then understood and realized the invaluable service her mother (a nurse) had to perform for the patients fighting for life and going through trauma. Meena vowed to be strong for the sake of her beloved mother. On that very night, Meena was instrumental, along with her neighbors, in organizing a grand celebration in a befitting manner, such as blowing conch-shells, ringing bells, clapping hands, and some enthusiasts by bursting crackers with a banner acknowledging and expressing solidarity with her mother for the courage and sacrifices she had made for the sake of performing her duty as a dedicated nurse to take care of the patients affected by the invisible virus. After her successful mission in Jodhpur, Priya was now on a difficult mission to fight the virus menace crossing the geo-political boundary dividing India and Pakistan. Priya asked "Sahas", the flying tiger, to fly towards her friend Jiya (also known as the Burka Avenger) in Pakistan. Chutneyville is a teacher, custodian, and protector of the city of Chutneyville, located in the north of Pakistan. It was past midnight. Baba Kaboom, a villain, was conspiring with his gang on the outskirts of the city to spread the

deadly virus to take control of the city. While Baba was without a mask, it appeared at least good sense prevailed over his accomplishments, as they were all wearing masks concerning their own safety. Baba Kaboom rebuked his henchmen for wearing masks, stating, [4] "Only cowards wear masks." (P-11). Baba boasted that he needed no one from his gang and he himself would take on the task of spreading the virus without wearing a mask to capture the city to reign and rule over. By way of her conversation with her friend, Jiya suggested that Baba Kaboom himself failed to realize the gravity of the situation looming large over the city by undermining the most powerful invisible virus the world has ever seen. It was evident from their discussion (Priya and Jiya) that the best way to tackle this unprecedented situation arising from the pandemic, coupled with the vested interest of the evil Baba Kaboom, was knowledge, compassion, and co-operation from all sections of society. Jiya, the teacher, decided to enlist the services of the children of her school for the task. Priya endorsed Jiya, stating the invisible killer virus could be defeated only with the active co-operation from all sections of society. While children from Jiya's school participated in the task of painting and writing on walls to build awareness of wearing masks, the unmasked Baba Kaboom was about to spread the deadly virus to capture the city and rule the city as an emperor of the underworld. Baba found the city deserted and wore the look of a hunted town with no one in sight. He boasted of taking over the city and roared if there was anyone to challenge him. Suddenly, Baba Kaboom felt sick and started sweating. It seemed like he had been poisoned by the same thing with which he intended to poison everybody. At that very moment, a voice, apparent Jiya (Burka Avenger), announced from the rooftop of a high rise, [5] "You are sick with a virus, Baba Kaboom... you need to see a doctor" (P-13). Baba Kaboom, had made the citizens alienated by his tyrant and underworld activities, as such the citizens asked Burka Avenger the rationality to help their arch enemy.

For the time being, Jiya, as a good Samaritan and as a counselor, prevailed upon the citizens to forget the sins of Baba Kaboom for the time being and rather concentrate on helping him get medical treatment. Priya entrusted "Sahas", the flying tiger, to take Baba Kaboom to the hospital, but Baba Kaboom got frightened and misunderstood that he was placed before a ferocious tiger as a prey. Jiya consoled Baba Kaboom and cleared his doubts with the introduction of her friend Priya and her tiger. "Sahas" carried Baba Kaboom to the hospital. Priya reminded Jiya that there was no other option but to mask in order to prevent the virus. At the same time, Priya and Jiya came to the conclusion that there was no alternative to sympathy, compassion, and societal cooperation, which were the most pressing needs of the hour in order to prevent the spread of the pandemic virus and the survival of humanity across geopolitical boundaries.

3. FINDINGS

Importance of wearing Mask- The mask is the most important weapon to fight the invisible Corona Virus in the course of inevitable interaction within society. Medical experts suggest wearing a mask with three-layer fabric. Due precaution should be taken at the time of wearing a mask. It must cover the nose, mouth, and chin, leaving no gaps on either side. Hand washing before or after use of the mask is highly recommended. Damaged and worn out masks with holes must be avoided. It should be regularly cleaned and preserved when not in use. The joint declaration by Jiya and Priya uses the word [6]"yours, safety and mine." The idea is that the user of the mask should, at the very first, be concerned with the safety of the other people in society. That is, after ensuring the safety of others, we will prioritize our own safety. Priya's mask was originally published on December 9th, 2020. The world's first vaccination against the virus was administered at the end of December 2020, and India's

vaccination started in January 2021. Therefore, since vaccination was not in use when Priya Mask saw the daylight, the creators of Priya's Mask were silent about vaccination, the most vital weapon to fight COVID-19. In the above background, the masks were the only measure and hope to defeat the virus at that point of time, as enumerated in Priya's Mask. Priya used a piece of clean cloth as a mask. For any reason, if a readymade mask cannot be procured, one can be made at home from any clean cloth to be used as a mask. This is a very important lesson. As a result, the comic Priya's mask emphasizes the importance of wearing a mask during a pandemic. It stresses the fact that masks should be worn not only for the protection of the individual but also for society at large.

The Essentiality of Social Distancing- From the start of the Corona Virus attack, medical experts emphasized the importance of maintaining a strict social distance because the virus spread geo-metrically rather than arithmetically in a crowd. As a follow-up measure, countries all over the world have closed schools, universities, workplaces, factories, shopping malls, market places, movie-halls and all kinds of public transport, including air services. Even curfews were imposed to force people to be confined to their homes to enforce social distancing. At the very beginning of the break-out of the Corona Virus, people were not serious about maintaining social distance from each other as a precautionary measure against spreading the Corona Virus. However, with the passage of time, the law-enforcing agencies were active and enforced social distancing with iron hands. Any kind of gathering, such as birthday parties, marriages, religious gatherings, and political campaigns, was banned. Even funeral rites were limited strictly to family members. Lockdown was enforced by the government throughout the world, including India. Now, with the reopening of the world's economies and economic activities, the lockdown has taken a back seat. However, we have to be more careful to avoid

unnecessary social gatherings and, in the case of an inevitable situation, we have to take due precautions. The social distancing advocated at that point in time in Priya's mask is still relevant in the present time.

Lensing the psychological trauma of children from

Isolation- The pandemic has affected the natural process of development of children, such as playing, learning, socializing, and emotional growth, arising out of the lockdown imposed in many parts of the country and the self-lockdown imposed by parents to keep their children and family members safe and healthy. Typically, children thrive in predictable circumstances. They have been impacted both from an emotional and physical point of view. Closure of schools, social isolation, prohibitions on visiting food stalls and sports activities, among other things, have resulted in traumas, fears, and depression in children. The kids of professional health workers have borne the brunt of isolation to a high magnitude as they have been deprived of the affection and tenderness arising out of long working hours. The medical professionals needed to keep their children away from them under compulsion concerning their safety, which the children sometimes failed to understand. The isolation caused behavior problems, anxiety, depression, and emotional breakdown. The children were found to be spending excessive time on web surfing and other social media, which had an adverse effect on their behavioral patterns. Parents needed to be extra vigilant to keep watch on their children and interact with them as a counselor to overcome the psychological trauma. This psychological trauma and longing resulting from isolation have been beautifully reflected through the character Meena (whose mother is a nurse) in Priya's mask.

Odes to the Health-Workers- The medical professionals, being the forerunner warriors against the pandemic, have performed a tremendous and noble service all over the world to fight the deadly

crisis, risking their lives. A World Health Organization bulletin states that up to May 25, 2021, a total of 1,15,000 health workers died the entire world over. In the case of India, she lost 776 and 748 doctors in the first and second waves, respectively. The death toll of nurses was 90 (latest update as of November 10th, 2021). The medical professionals showed their strong commitment and high professionalism in discharging their duties and fighting the virus. The death of the health workers is an irreparable loss in the fight against the virus. They worked beyond their normal duty hours. Some succumbed to the contamination of the virus in the course of treating patients, and a few died of anxiety and fatigue. Health workers were given priority in the vaccination programme the world over, but due to the scarcity and uneven distribution of vaccine, all the health workers and support staff in many countries could not be administered a double dose of vaccine, resulting in vulnerability to remaining immune. In spite of all the odds, the courage and professionalism shown by the medical professionals are lauded the world over. The government of India, the state governments and the people of India have acknowledged the sacrifices and high professionalism demonstrated by the health workers in the hour of crisis where the ratio of doctors to population is unproportional. Through the character sketch of Meera's mother (a nurse), Priya's Mask brings out the dedication and struggle of the health workers. Apart from that, it beautifully mirrors the appreciation shown by fellow citizens towards health workers in the form of blowing conch-shells, ringing bells, clapping hands, lighting candles, and switching off the power supply, which were all measures later executed by the citizens as an initiative of the Prime Minister of India.

Dispersing the Fear & Superstition- The comic beautifully strikes at the very root of superstition, fear, and illiteracy among a certain section of people who have little knowledge about the virus. This type of person misleads the general public and tries

to prevent them from following medical experts' recommended safety precautions. We must be aware of this mindset of people who are not less harmful than this invisible virus. The age-old superstition is constantly projected in the comic by different voices. In the first voice, it was stated that there was no virus at all, which demonstrates the ignorance existing in our society. The second voice highlighted that the wearing of a mask could not be thrust upon a person who pointed out the fact that some people were not abiding by the rule of the government to wear masks and foolishly mixed the concept of human rights in a time of emergency. It is now punishable under law in India to venture out without wearing a mask. The third voice advocated that only the poor get affected faster by the virus and the rich are immune. This brings out the misconceptions of people regarding the virus, and in recent times we have seen a lot of celebrities, business tycoons, and sports stars get infected with the virus. It's high time we realize that the virus won't spare anyone, whether rich or poor, and only the preventive measures as prescribed by the medics can counter the virus. The fourth voice believed that only the elderly were vulnerable, but in reality, we have seen that this statement does not work. Old people with other ailments are no doubt vulnerable to the virus, but the hard reality is that many young people have lost their lives during this pandemic. Thus, this treatment of symbolizing fear and superstition is way more deadly than the virus. Covid19 is indeed praiseworthy in Priya's Mask. From the above discussion, it emanates that expert opinion in the respective field is more important than massed remarks by the public.

Focusing on Art Suitable for Children- Priya's Mask indulges in graphic art targeted mainly at young children. Kudos to the illustration and coloring done by Syd Fini and Neda Kazemifar. This comic form is different from the previous Priya series in terms of art. Priya and Sahas have been sketched in an animated

style, shunning the dark treatment of the main protagonist Priya and the fierceness of the tiger, Sahas. Here the tiger, Sahas talks to children and, in turn, proves to be a modern-day fairy tale with a valuable message. This comic provides a joyous reading experience for children while making them aware of the COVID-19 Virus and much needed precautions.

International Co-operation- Priya's Mask is a unique Asian voice amidst the pandemic concerning a global threat. Priya campaigned to prevent pandemics with the traditional measures available, like wearing masks and social distancing, as vaccines were not available at that time. Priya teamed up with Burka Avenger (Jiya), a talented superhero from Pakistan, which points out the importance of mutual co-operation needed between different countries to fight the pandemic. This also brings out the reality that the pandemic does not care about borders or geo-political boundaries. Both Priya and Jiya made it clear that fear makes us weak and in this crisis only kindness, empathy and mutual compassion is essential globally among all citizens and countries to survive this onslaught. This virus is an equal threat for each and every country and we should forget our differences and fight it collectively. The subtext of the comics also tries to cater to global leaders of all countries to co-operate among themselves while battling this threat through the portrayal of Priya teaming up with Jiya (Burka Avenger) from Pakistan. India's past with Pakistan is not unknown. If India and Pakistan can forget the bitter past, then it's possible for all countries to help, collaborate and work together to neutralize the Virus. Thus Priya's Mask also subtly champions the cause of international brotherhood, teamwork and global compassion. In this context it would not be out of place to mention here that India from the very beginning of pandemic extended its co-operation by sending hydroxychloroquine oral tablets which was the only medicine at that point of time to 55 countries including the USA to meet their shortage

as India is a major producer of the drug. With the development of Indian indigenous antidote, "Covaxin" and after getting approval from Indian regulatory authority, the vaccination of Indian people started from the middle of January 2021. India has so far gifted vaccine to 70 countries and commercially exported to 95 countries. India gave the medicines as well as vaccine to the countries of the world in the hour of dire necessity even at the cost of depriving its citizens the same. This shows humanitarian face and concern of India for global co-operation to irradiate pandemic. Recently WHO (World Health Organization) has given Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) to Co-vaxin which will make its accessibility globally. Moreover the vaccine has been approved to be injected in children also. It is expected at the beginning of 2022 India will have surplus vaxin after meeting their citizen's needs resulting India will be major exporter and distributor of vaccine. Moreover India has always given priority for sending Corona medicine and vaccines to its neighbor countries like Bangladesh, Sri-Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan to name a few. The Indian Prime Minister made commitment in the UNO (United Nations Organization) General Assembly on 25th September 2021 that India was ready to send Co-vaxin to the countries all world over in their need or crisis at an affordable cost. Global statesmen and UNO Secretary General appreciated the gestures and efforts by India for showing solidarity with the committee of nations in the blackest hour. In the second wave India was devastated with pandemic and hospitals were over crowded with patients resulting in acute shortage of oxygen in the hospitals. At that point of time the countries namely the USA, the UK, France, Singapore, the UAE and many other countries supplied liquid and concentrated oxygen to India on a war-footing basis. The pandemic will end today or tomorrow but the international co-operation pioneered by India and reciprocated by the other Nations will be a landmark in the international co-operation in the time of crisis. The pandemic has once again proved that the disaster does not

discriminate nations on the basis of rich , poor, caste, creed and religion. Priya and Jiya were like the goodwill ambassadors of the two neighboring nations and their declaration to mutually fight the pandemic was joint communiqué issued at the end of the comics.

Celebrating Women from Comics to Animated Film-

Recently, Priya's Mask was adapted as an animated film, glorifying the bravery of female healthcare workers and will also help educate people about the virus. Vidya Balan, Mrunal Thakur, and Sairah Kabir are among the famous actors and leaders who offered their voices for this essential film. This particular animated film received 628k views on YouTube and is also included in many school curricula to raise student awareness of the virus.

4. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The pandemic has brought back the fact that there is no substitute for global cooperation, especially in a situation like the pandemic arising from the coronavirus. The world will not be safe unless and until the virus is removed from the entire world. This is not possible for a single country, however powerful that country may be. It is expected that the other countries of the world will follow the example of India, sacrificing a bit of their resources by weaving/relaxing the stringent patent act for life-saving medicines for the cause of humanity. The root of the policy of the Indian government to export and donate medicine to the affected countries on humanitarian grounds is to be found in the line from the Hindu text, MahaUpanishad, [7]"Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," meaning the world is a family. The Priya's Mask beautifully reflects the same philosophy of global cooperation. Apart from that, this comic strip serves as a swan song for the health-workers who are the only pillar of hope in this crisis. Priya's Mask celebrates their sacrifice and service in the hour of need. That's not all. It also

teaches us to appreciate the whole health-worker community. Priya's Mask, above all, highlights the traumas experienced by children who are unable to share their feelings with anyone as a result of the social distancing policy. Through the character Meena (whose mother is a nurse), Priya preaches to the children that they should be strong at this hour of crisis so that those who love us can also be strong. She further gives a message to all the children of health-workers, saying that their parents have devoted their time to taking care of those needing help because of the virus. Priya beautifully counsels Meena that every parent loves and misses his/her child, and so does Meena's mom. In short, Priya's Mask is the burning tale of activism and voices the powerful perspective of an Asian comic, manifesting the awareness of wearing a mask, maintaining social distancing and mutual co-operation to counter the COVID-19 crisis.

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Keywords:

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Altered Selves and Biased Frames: Tracing Feminist responses to Covid-19 in Laura Gao's The Wuhan I Know (2020) and Shubhra Prakash's Priya's Mask (2020)

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ABSTRACT

Certain literary fiction rely on the kind of belatedness what Freud called "Nachtraglichkeit" where the narrative enquiry seems entangled with the historical and sociological perspective of the present. The narrative account embodies the impossible scenario of a life experience that did not yet exist but accounts for the emergence of that 'I'. The narrative gestures precede the presence of a character and circulate a set of norms which exist in the world before they touch upon us. These norms then regulate the characters and inform the theory of subject formation. Covid-19 pandemic and the collective anxiety that it has evoked regulate the lives of Laura and Meena in the animated videos, The Wuhan I Know (2020) and video Priya's Mask (2020). The pandemic norms of wearing a mask, maintaining corporeal distance, social isolation and a "new 'normal'..constructed on the ruins of our old lives" condition the narratives and

*continue to act in an iterative logic till the characters' lives are completely immersed in the emergent socio-political context generated by the pandemic. Terming Covid-19 as "the Wuhan virus" by the far-Right groups is the dark side of the pandemic which is repeated and rehearsed in many ways in Gao's narrative and the protagonist's connection to Wuhan stands severed as Laura struggles to cope with such regressive and racist procedures of address. I will argue that this 'I' (Laura) may feel that it is nothing without the 'you' (the city of Wuhan) which forms the visual and tactile connections exhibit a primary dependency between the two. I will further examine the relations of dependency between the young girl, Meena, and her mother who serves as the paramedical staff in a government hospital and their social and psychic isolation in the face of pandemic. By taking a cue from Judith Butler's *Giving and Account of Oneself* (2005) and *Senses of the Subject* (2015), I will argue how human relationships have altered due to the pandemic and examine the implications for the individual for facing the Other (the Covid virus and the right-wing responses to it).*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the world marked by acute uncertainty owing to the Covid-19 pandemic and its biological, social and political implications, giving an account of the life through the comic medium becomes a persuasive act by means of which a set of sequential events, a narrative voice and embodied experience of living with a mask and maintaining social distance can be relayed. In his work, *Pandemic: Covid-19 Shakes the World* (2020), Žižek talks about "the desperate hero-narrator" who discovers human lives being decimated by the unprecedented catastrophe "by an onslaught of earthly pathogens to which they had no immunity" to describe the pandemic as an inverted version of H. G. Well's story, *The War of the Worlds* (1897). What

Žižek's account does is that it links fictionality to the notion of consciousness and, in the process, offers a quintessential understanding of experiential reality [1]. For it is not enough to raise questions about the consequences of the pandemic or the attempts to come to terms with the 'new normal'. The larger issue of the altered state of affairs and our collective responses to it require assessment, insofar as the political stakes and perspective of the inquiry have to pose the question of a more balanced arrangement with our surroundings. Comic books offer a way to engage "the political and cultural landscape from a critical perspective" since they remain "intimately link[ed] to the current social, political, and ethnic circumstances of their production" [2]. The collective anxiety which informs the current pandemic situation emerges from the narrated monologues of the webcomics, *The Wuhan I Know* (2020) and *Priya's Mask* (2020) where the weariness of the narratorial voice suggests exhaustion in the process of becoming subordinated to the pandemic norms. These narrated monologues, in this sense, portray an inner voice (like an interior monologue) which mimetically depicts the character's consciousness. The narrator imitates the character and becomes one with her. In these narrated monologues, the outer and the inner scene fuse with one another and the distance between the narrator and the character becomes implicit or ironic. As a result, the narrated monologue commits the narrator to the attitudes of sympathy and irony. It is the belatedness of these narratives (in the Freudian sense) that allows the readers to become reflective of all the ways in which the pandemic has affected us. Laura and Meena's narratives unlock the realisation which was missed when the pandemic first emerged and drastically altered the ways in which one could give an account of oneself. Freud's concept of "Nachtraglichkeit" which he developed to understand the psychic trauma and traumatic hysteria can be utilised here to narrativise the biological, corporeal and social threats and their symptomatic effects on

psyche. These animated videos (soon to be turned into webcomics) depict the temporal adverbs that locate the narrative perspective within the "psyche of characters" which serves as the vantage point to experience past moments through memory (narrated memories perform expository and mnemonic functions) and assess the unknown future as conjecture or fantasy. The fictional dialogue (between the narrator and the reader) which implies the mimesis of a real language partakes the transparency of fictional minds because the inner voice is generally recognised as the psychological reality. This fictional dialogue in the form of webcomic "capture the intricate stories, agonies of existence, and new terms of social, cultural, and political engagement the way any responsible art would do" [3].

2. RACIAL PREJUDICE AND THE WUHAN I KNOW

Laura Gao's *The Wuhan I Know* begins with the idea of how the social restrictions which began with the Wuhan wet market to restrict the spread of Corona virus has led to Wuhan, the city where Gao was born, being put on the world map. As she walks down the street, the narratorial voice conveys to the reader how she couldn't live without Wuhan "being mentioned... and definitely never in good light."¹ For Gao, the Covid-19 pandemic opened various intersections where "the circulation of microbes materializes the transmission of ideas" (see Fig. 1) [4].

Fig. 1. Laura Gao surrounded by racial slurs (Source: Gao, L. The Wuhan I Know, <https://www.lauragao.com/wuhan>)



¹Gao, L. <https://www.lauragao.com/wuhan>

The systemic and structural violence based on race and gender played out as a corollary to the restrictions put in place due to the pandemic as it is the "[w]hite supremacy [which] relies on a preformulated hierarchy of races in which whiteness sits at the apex" and spread prejudices against the immigrants [5]. For Gao and many other Asians, the Covid-19 pandemic enforced a racial categorisation of the city of Wuhan by equating it with trauma and paranoid responses. These responses do not pertain to the original event in which the virus spread but hinge upon the belated reaction to the event which determines the nature of the traumatic encounter. In this sense, Wuhan transforms into a symbol and the ensuing pandemic restrictions of wearing mask, maintaining social distance, sanitising one's surrounding function as the pathological conditions of the original event. Thus, the origin of corona virus has become a somewhat diminished narrative in the face of long-term psychological distress it has caused to people. Freud categorised this deferred response as *Nachträglichkeit* which follows the logical schema of "(a) two distinct etiological moments in time, (b) separated by a delay or time lag, (c) in which the first scene initially remains without consequence, (d) but is transformed by the subsequent one, and (e) becoming traumatic in a retroactive fashion" [6]. Freud's concept explains the retroactive investment in the word, Wuhan, in Gao's narrative which then arouses reader's sympathy (*Sympathie lenkung*) against the racial categorisations and orients their response towards the narrative framework. Gao's narrative also performs a discursive function in its address to the narratee by expounding on the process of story-telling itself. All these functions get blurred in the performative act of the text which highlights the difficulties in making sense of a traumatic experience. Gao's emotive modulations in the form of questions, exclamations, interjections, repetitions, and so forth which emerge from the speech balloons ("Don't bring

your Wuhan germs near me!"² or "Is it true the virus was created by the Chinese to take over the world?"³ offer an intersectional analysis of the system of racial and gender biases and how, in multiple ways, it impacts the individual with respect to their social identities. This intersectional approach is crucial to analyse the scope of racial prejudice and the divergent vulnerabilities it has produced during the pandemic. As opposed to the emotional responses of disgust and pity with which people began to equate with Wuhan, Gao attempts to fight what Charles Mills calls "an epistemology of ignorance" with factual data about Wuhan which is "home to 11 million people, its

*Fig. 2. and 3.
Wuhan, just another
metropolitan city
similar to New York,
London, and Tokyo.
Gao's narrative
ends by focusing on
the shared values
that the cities of
Wuhan, New York,
London and Tokyo
(depicted through
the coloured figures)
stand for. (Source:
Gao, L. The Wuhan
I Know, <https://www.lauragao.com/wuhan/>)*



much more comparable to New York City, London, Tokyo."⁴ By comparing Wuhan to other metropolitan cities around the world (see Fig. 2), Gao hopes to place care and the communitarian spirit at the centre. Gao's joyous affirmation with which she ends the narrative that "I m proud of my people and city for staying strong and positive through all this. Know that we are rooting for you!" signals a move towards a system based on shared values and respect which the crisis of

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

the pandemic cannot be used as an excuse to divert attention from. Today, in the time of pandemic which is being increasingly characterised by its sheer capacity for disenchantment for almost everything, Gao's *The Wuhan I Know* (see Fig. 3) has emerged as one of the pertinent narrative to blunt the collective disdain based on racial divide and ideological affiliations.

3. SELF-ISOLATION AND PRIYA'S MASK

Shubra Prakash's *Priya's Mask*, similarly, reflects on a caring dimension in the 3-minute long animated video where a young girl reminisces about going to park to play (see Fig. 4) but due to the self-isolation inflicted by the pandemic cannot do so. Meena's limited agency emerges from the act of flying a kite with "miss you mom"⁵ stamped on it.



Fig. 4. Meena wishing to go back in time before the pandemic. (Source: Prakash, S. *Priya's Mask*, <https://www.priyashakti.com/priyas-mask/>)

Her narrative presents an account of gendered politics of lockdown which led to the feeling of isolation within the safe confines of households. It is Priya flying on Sahas, her tiger, who is able to provide an assurance to the anxious girl who misses her mother, a frontline warrior working in hospital to take care of those who suffer from Covid complications. Prakash's animation shows how the pandemic co-opted the female agency as a care-giver and transformed it into the most important priority over everything else, be

⁵Prakash, S. <https://www.priyashakti.com/priyas-mask>

it inside the household premises or in the hospitals. The risk posed by the corona virus made the position of such women more precarious and exacerbated their struggles to provide love and support to their children during quarantine. Priya's presence traverses through the social and psychic being of the young girl which has been severely affected by the pandemic restrictions. Her presence facilitates a critique of the governmental policies as well which in the guise of advocating face-masks, social distancing and other health-related advices have stigmatised bodies and instituted excessive disciplining of people's behaviour. Here, Priya's offer to take Meena on a ride to see her mother working in the hospital (see Fig. 5) inverts this disciplinary code due to which, as Heather Snell argues, people have been "sequestered in places where love and support are lacking or absent altogether. [since] quarantine is likely not a simple matter of cabin fever, boredom, or frustration; in some cases, it may be a living nightmare from which there is little to no escape" [7].

Fig. 5. Priya and Meena reach the hospital, the hotspot to witness the struggles of the healthcare workers. (Source: Prakash, S. Priya's Mask, <https://www.priyashakti.com/priyas-mask>)



When Meena's mother returns from her job and everyone claps for her (see Fig. 6), the narrative becomes an assertion of her agency and an embodied sociality under the broader framework of care. Through Meena's mother, the narrative highlights the reality of these bodies as discursively constituted by the social norms in the wake of the pandemic (care for others has traditionally been "positioned

overwhelmingly as the responsibility of women and people of colour, particularly in informal care settings such as the home") and sensitises the viewers to the relations of care as the only way to defeat the virus [8].



Fig. 6. Meena's mother, the healthcare professional in tears. (Source: Prakash, S. Priya's Mask, <https://www.priyashakti.com/priya-mask/>)

In Priya's Mask, the animated narrative operates on the level of memory and imagination where "the one who is doing the leading and the one who is led" share a harmonious environment [9]. Meena and her mother's story makes it possible to represent the lived experience of women in pandemic restrictions. Priya's Mask successfully interrogates the multiple significations of the pandemic culture by showing the trauma and anxieties of the masked bodies and "acknowledges the more-than-human dimensions of care as it emphasises the co-constitutive entanglements between humans, nonhuman others, objects and environments" [10]. The young girl's trauma can be understood as, what Žižek called, "the violent intrusion of something radically unexpected, something the subject was absolutely not ready for, something the subject cannot integrate in any way" [11]. It lays bare the gendered dimensions of the Covid-19 pandemic and how women are especially affected by it. Meena's flight to see her mother, with Priya's help, offers hope that pandemic-induced isolation would not become a carceral space.

4. CONCLUSION

Both Gao's *The Wuhan I Know* and Prakash's *Priya's Mask* emphasise the structural inequalities in the form of racial and gendered violence which have become more visible due to the Covid-19 pandemic. These narratives present a case of caring for others and the corporeal dimensions which affect and are affected by the social norms instituted by the pandemic. Gao and Prakash's animated video helps to document the ways in which lives have been altered; "they not only illustrate and construct specific views of the social world but also 'reflect deep social and cultural structures' and even reveal 'the hidden or implicit ideologies rooted within' them" [12]. The comic medium employed by Gao and Prakash offers a latitude, a vantage point to reflect on the traumatic encounters which have resulted from the pandemic. It convincingly makes a case to devote more attention to the ethics of care "if we truly want to improve our response for the inevitable next pandemic" [13].

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Digitization and the Cyberspace: A Study of Indian Comics Culture during the Pandemic

Keywords:
Comics,
Comics culture,
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ABSTRACT

The digitization of comics and the power of media platform such as Instagram and Facebook have impacted the growth of comics culture in India. The scopes of comics in India are highly diverse due to its ethnic and linguistic diversity, reflecting a larger audience. As a discursive medium, comics offers a creative space while suggesting a potentially viable business opportunity for Indian publishing houses through VAS (value-added services). As the lockdown continues, Tinkle and Raj Comics publishers embrace digital as the new normal, allowing them to publish their work simultaneously in phases and still sustain their businesses. However, small independent publishers such as Kokaachi, and Syenagiri from Kerala could not sell a single copy during the pandemic. Even so, they remain efficient in their efforts to publish current issues to revive its glory. Despite receiving little attention from a small group of publishing houses to the pressure of becoming a bestseller, Indian comics do not receive the recognition they deserve. This paper aspires to scrutinize how the essence of hand-drawn imprints gets lost at the emergence of digitization as the new future of comics. The paper also wishes to explore

the relevance of the indie comic fests and Rafiq Raja's forum Comicology to trace how they act as a repository to make comics available while globally promoting self-publication in cyberspace and higher earnings. Finally, it would also investigate the number of unheard graphic tales not being published due to the pandemic and the scopes of Indian comics culture in general.

The pandemic has been a significant impact on the field of comics. Since its inception, comic culture in India has faced a new readymade façade almost every day, starting with print media and moving to cyberspace. The digitization of comics and the power of media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook have impacted the growth of comics culture in India. The scopes of comics in India are highly diverse due to their ethnic and linguistic diversity, reflecting a larger audience. Comics offers a creative space as a discursive medium while suggesting a potentially viable business opportunity for Indian publishing houses through VAS (value-added services). As the lockdown continues, Tinkle and Raj Comics publishers embrace digital as the new normal, allowing them to publish their work simultaneously in phases and still sustain their businesses.

Therefore, the comic book culture in India is reshaping itself according to the needs of its millennial readers. E. Dawson Varughese, in her recent book *Visuality and Identity in Post-millennial Indian Graphic Narratives* (2018), discusses that in most cases, the proliferation of Indian graphic narratives we see today is a result of the perfect storm that has been developed during the post-millennial era in India. She further explains, "This has entailed the opening up of fiscal markets, the creation of employment opportunities, increased leisure spending, the construction of malls with large bookstore chains, the advent of online selling platforms such as Infibeam

and Flipkart" [2]. In addition, there is a generation of millennial Indians ready to consume and create Indian-oriented graphic narratives for marketing purposes. Varughese also discusses how the global publishing houses have seen the most expansion during the late 1990s and early 2000s. She believes it was during this early period of post-liberalization that an economically aware India was revealed, an India that emphasized its domestic market, consumption, investment, service industry, and high-tech manufacturing. Varughese thoroughly writes:

From the early post-millennial years, the publishing companies began attuning themselves more closely to the domestic market, its mores and its aspirations. From this desire to look inward towards an Indian reading public, it quickly became apparent that domestic genre fiction in English was becoming an area of activity in which publishers would need to invest. [2]

There is no denying that the post-millennial years have seen increased pressure to reach high standards and push boundaries. India's literary scene has experienced a similar increase in growth since 2000, and as a cultural commodity, the influence of the literary festivals must not be underestimated. The Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF), first held in 2006, has impacted the formation of the South Asian canon of fiction, mainly English-language works. However, literary works in several Indian languages also appear at the festival.

In her article "Malayalam Graphic Novels are Rooted in Kerala and its Culture" (2020), Shilpa Anand Nair thoroughly discusses the plights of Indian publishing houses that are trying to sell indigenous stories using a medium such as comics. There is no shortage of talent or ideas with technology and a vibrant Indie comic scene, but the issue is marketing.

Significantly, many writers and artists are coming forward with new ideas and approaches. However, Tina Thomas, a small-scale entrepreneur from the publishing house of Kokaachi, elaborates on the hurdles of selling such ideas in the form of comics. Emphasizing the issue of marketing, she writes, "People want to tell such stories. But how do we sell it and where?" [2]. The publishing house grapples with this new medium as the readership of comics in India is limited. Consequently, it becomes unavailable for the publishers to take risks attached to such an avant-garde attempt. Tina Thomas also points out how lack of awareness of comics becomes a crucial factor. She further writes, "People are unfamiliar with this genre in Kerala. Also, they don't understand the prices, since these are thought of as comic books which they are not" [2]. For ages, comic books have been expected to cater to the superhero genres. However, with Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, and Keiji Nakazawa, comics shows its potential to be a medium for any subject matter. Therefore, supporting Tina Thomas's statement, Shilpa Anand Nair, in her article, writes, "The unfamiliarity percolates to the publishing industry for which the genre is not viable" [2]. Similarly, C.G. Salamander in his article, "Comics were Facing a Squeeze in India. Has the Pandemic Opened a Door to a Revival?" (2020) writes how the "Publishers struggle to exhaust print runs of 2000 copies; creators are paid abysmally low rates; and our distribution system is non-existent. Comics are hard to find in bookstores, let alone hair salons and tea shops as in the past" [3]. Salamander grieves that the golden age of the Indian comics industry has vanished, and the new generation is coming up with new hurdles every day. He shares, "We've shrunk from an industry of 20-something publishers producing hundreds of comics a year to one that relies on three mainstream publishers and a handful of indie publishers who produce fewer than a dozen comics a year combined" [3]. Therefore, the small-scale publishing houses are hanging by a thread. Due to the lack of awareness and the newness

in choosing subject matters, the comics culture of India suffers the most. Nair also discusses the importance of the "comic fests such as the recently concluded Indie Comix Fest (ICF) offer these creators the elusive platform to gauge interest and meet prospective consumers of their product" [2]. The books do not cost and must keep their marketing policy thriving in most cases. There is no denying that the price of comics plays a crucial role in Indian comics culture.

Unfortunately, new launches remain unavailable and inaccessible, unreasonably expensive for familiar readers or students sharing an interest in comics. The hike in the price of comic books deprives its readers of knowing the new trends that Indian publishers are coming up with. Being completely aware of this situation, the publishing house Kokaachi is putting its best to make its stories reach comics aficionados in India through every means possible. Their graphic series *Idivettu* (2019) is set in Kottayam. Tina Thomas writes, "it is the story of a kallan, a kalli and a perumkallan– all thieves. It has pulp, color and is accessible" [2]. As Tina Thomas mentions, the publishing house's target is to reach an audience between teenagers and middle-aged readers. The team has a detailed marketing plan since accessibility tends to become a problem for graphic novels/ comics. They intend to display it in places frequented by this demographic. Planning it as a series would keep the readers interested and their curiosity alive when the series is complete. They also intend to bring out an English translation. Tina and Pratheek do the book's dialogues, and the art has been illustrated by Mohith O, and the cover by Upamanyu Bhattacharyya.

Shilpa Anand Nair explains, "Graphic novels/ comics are niche; working against the genre is the perception that illustrated stories are only for children. Highly stylised, the stories are essentially for a grown-up/young adult audience" [2]. The stories from

Kerala, according to Nair, are hyper-local, dialect, and relatable characters - mundu clad men in typical Kerala settings and women in set-mundu, beaches, coconut and jackfruit trees" [2]. Some of the stories are original and located in Kerala; for example, Idivettu, the story of three thieves, written by Prateek Thomas, one of the founders of Kokaachi gives its readers a tour of the culture of Kerala. The stories are of regular folk and some familiar tales such as Premalekhanam, based on Vaikom Mohammed Basheer's story by KP Muraleedharan. The book Idivettu is an exciting experiment on the new storytelling method via OTT platforms by being not limited to the prosaic way of sharing one's experiences. Kokaachi, as a regional comic book publishing house, aspires to reach every audience or the reader by setting a reasonably feasible price on their book and choosing regional stories to connect to them.

Alakananda Bandyopadhyay, in her article "A Stunning and Stark" (2017), showcases how Syenagiri's illustration of the city life of Bangalore is perfectly reflected in the book Bangalore: A Graphic Novel (2017). She also writes, "A collaborative work by city-based authors, this book lets one hold Bengaluru in their palms" [4]. Interestingly, the publishing house Syenagiri has started a new project with their "Every City is a Story" initiative. Their first book Hyderabad: A Graphic Novel (2014), is a part of the enthusiasm at the Comic-Con and their request for outstanding work for their city spurred Jai Undurti to release the book. Among the illustrators working for the firm are both embellished artists and younger ones. The illustrator Karn, who has contributed to the book, believes, "Every city is an act of the imagination" [4]. Karn also stresses that stories and cities share a connection and that he must make such contact to reach their readers. He writes, "The stories talk to each other and it is this thread that ties the volume together. The stories in the anthology are based around the themes which strings together the entire city with its essence and culture"

[4]. Similar to Amruta Patil's approach to showing the modern days of Mumbai in her book *Kari* (2008), the publishing house Syenagiri has taken up a brilliant attempt of using the visual medium to showcase the absence of every city life through their books. A desire to challenge the idea that cities are icons or labels drove another writer Ramya Ramakrishnan to write the quirky sci-fi section. She gives her opinion in this manner, "It is difficult to separate the city from its icons while trying to uphold its true feeling. Probably why my story starts at the Indian Coffee House, to induce an essence of time travel, but that's not all. Bengaluru is not just its pubs or IT hubs" while trying to sketch a sense of mystery with her tale [4].

Interestingly, with the rise of animation films, leading comic publishing houses, such as Diamond Comics and ACK media, have turned their attention to their popular comics brands. There is little competition in the industry, making proprietors such as Gulshan Rai of Diamond Comics optimistic about their prospects. Saurabh Turakhia in his article, "Indian Characters Get Ready for Cartoon wars" (2008) reports that Gulshan Rai, the managing director of Diamond Comics, shares his concern over the challenges faced by the Indian comics publishers. As Rai shares, "Till now, we have seen only foreign characters on cartoon channels. There is no Indian character that Indian children can relate to. Our desire is to create an Indian channel, which will show content of Indian relevance and stories of Indian culture through Indian characters" [5]. Turakhia also writes about what Samir Patil, CEO, and Founder of Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) Media, says about specific gaps in India. Patil writes, "There is a clear gap as far as Indian content on animation channels is concerned" [5]. Patil is aware of the challenges of digitalizing the printed form into television through DTH. However, he is also hopeful that specific changes might draw the attention of the readers or audiences. He further writes, "We are evaluating the possibilities for a presence in television either through our own

channel or through partnership. The opportunity is definitely there—as television has become an important medium to reach kids and, in a way, it is necessary to be present on television" [5].

Consequently, a social and capital-based logic is invoked again as the basis for animation films. Some compare graphic narratives to movies for their detailing and narrative style, often more than a regular comic book. Regarding comics' potential, KP Muraleedharan writes, "it is not considered mainstream and has not been acknowledged as a form of literature. There is more to this form than just pictures, it is interpretative and imaginative as it is art" [2]. If only utilized for its content and discursive approaches, the medium is filled with possibilities. Comics can be used in both formats in print or OTT. Also, we must acknowledge the hard work of the artist-writers, illustrators, and writers who put a lot of effort into making its content engage with the readers.

Ritu G. Khanduri, in her essay, "Comicology: Comic Books as Culture in India" (2010), observes that there are several excellent online archives of comic books. Still, Rafiq Raja's Comicology is well-known amongst them. This forum aims to share experiences and knowledge concerning Indian comics and the world of comics more broadly. Comicology can give comics producers a fresh perspective on their creations. By inviting readers to comment on comics where comics proprietors also interact. The producers of comic books should request reviews and be welcoming, engaging, and appreciative of the feedback they receive. Two predominant themes in Indian comic book websites invite readers' active participation: Indian artists for Indian comics and the reader as illustrator and co-narrator. Readers can submit art to various comics to have the possibility of starting a career as a graphic artist. In addition to keeping fans and artists informed about opportunities, comics-related website Comix also keeps track

of prospects. Comicology also introduces various competitions, and the winners get the option to publish their comic books. Authenticity was one of Arora's key themes because he believed comic book genres centered on mythology required it. Comics as mass media encompass a creative space, reveal the pedagogical processes at work, and showcase the incorporation of culture with a profitable business. Indian comics have carved distinct regional histories owing to the country's linguistic diversity. There is a variety of opinions on India's comic book scene: on the one hand, a need to revive indigenous comics; on the other hand, it would be beneficial to encourage emerging artists and comic book proprietors to target regional markets of non-English speakers. Khanduri shares detailed analysis of what Alok Sharma of the comic blog Chitrakatha has to say on the distribution of comics. Sharma summarizes it in this manner,

There are couple of players in Indian market even now, but all of them are busy playing in their niche markets – Raj Comics still has a grip on the northern and central belt, Diamond having a wide distribution across India concentrating on kiddie stuff, Vimanika and others are still confined to big cities, thanks to the language of publication – English. To have a wider reach in India, publishers have to publish these comics in Hindi. [6]

Khanduri in her discussion with the comic collector Tony Davis tries to understand what draws him to these, "It is the familiarity of one's own language, landscape, and culture - this is a huge factor. With these the reader base of graphic work increases drawing more people to it so that it is no longer limited to an urban demographic" [6]. She, however, warns us against sticking to formulae such as mythology of fantasy. She writes, "The story has to be relatable. Content should be contemporary like vigilante-type stories, satire, or adventure. Sticking to the tried and

tested such as mythology or fantasy is safe, but creators should take a risk" [6]. Digital comics and the web have opened up new possibilities for comics, just as animation is gaining significant attention. She further adds,

Business analysts estimate that the comic publishing market in India is worth 300 crore Indian Rupees (3 billion USD). This projection is expected to grow dramatically over the next decade. New business models and vertical formats extend comics as digital media accessible through cell phones, iPods, Kindle and computers. Comics have become a multimedia: their digital files are popular as VAS (value added service) for cell phone subscribers of Airtel, Vodafone and iPhone and can be downloaded or purchased online via Kindle. [6]

Raj Comics, the leading Hindi comic book publisher, has opened new opportunities with collaboration with digital providers. Their comics are downloadable on the internet and cell phones, but the publisher is also digitizing older issues and re-inking them for a fresh look. Digital comics have enormous potential; their future is also being explored in the US. Khanduri mentions that some popular platforms such as Verizon Wireless, Sprint Nextel, and AT&T offer GoComics, owned by Uclick. These providers are offering different subscriptions by also including Hindu mythology and folklore. Khanduri shows us how the "economies of production, distribution and VAS make digital comics a potentially viable business" [6]. There is a possibility that the digital platform would shape itself as one of this country's leading comics selling businesses.

However, digitization has created uneven access to technologies and media formats in Indian scenario. The publishers are eagerly waiting to see the remarkable outcome of such actions. It can be

said that particular gadgets, such as iPhones, and Kindle, as observed by Raj Comics readers, find their audiences mostly in NRIs (Non-Resident Indians). The latter can afford such expensive tools to read comics online. Therefore, it creates problems for familiar readers who cannot afford such gadgets. In a country like India, where most parents suffer from buying expensive books for their kids' higher education, it is uncertain how many would go to buy expensive gadgets to let their kids read comics. Digital comics and the devices that distribute them have a high-class dimension. Reasonably so, the Indian comics industry should develop more affordable means of making comics available for readers who are enthusiastic about them. Also, there is often a disconnect between a passionate fan following at home and the comic book companies wooing a global audience. The comics industry now offers readers forums and attractive websites. Readers can express themselves candidly through forums about specific issues and general trends. Khanduri argues that the comics scenes in India are fast changing by not being limited to the ACK (1976–present) and Indrajal Comics (1964–1990) only. She also shows how,

A surge of new series that marks the change in comic books culture ties to the liberalizing of India's economy in the late 1990s, emergent technologies, transnational production networks, and adults in a growing middle-class market. Transnational business and artistic collaborations, the emerging market in graphic novels and digital formats of print comics – all indicate a growing visual literacy in and market for comic books, which is geared toward adult readers. In this new moment, the more successful brands ACK and Diamond Comics also re-invent themselves by morphing into digital comics and exploring animation films. [6]

There is a struggle due to the pandemic, but

cyberspace is slowly but steadily drawing its attention to readers and comics scholars. Khanduri's three perspectives on India's comic scenes, where at the beginning, "the earliest comics in India – ACK, 'culture' continues to be a central concept providing creative, social and capitalist logic for comic publishers and readers" [6]. Secondly, the reader's "engagement with comics as culture offers a space to think through how dominant frameworks of race, gender, and Hindu culture are re-interpreted" [6]. There is valorizing a positive side to interpreting colonial narrative through comics such as the Phantom series. Finally, Khanduri acutely observes that "though analysts critiqued ACK's overarching Hindu framework as part of a process that marginalizes other cultural experiences, readers remember these comics among their pleasurable childhood moments" [6]. Thereby, undoubtedly there remains persistent anxiety regarding the role of comic books in Indian society, which is in the tension between textual analysis and the reader's perception of Indian comics. Khanduri thoroughly discusses how the increasing interest in the social role of comics in India and its growing relevance as adult reading material for diasporic audiences and transnational producers further demonstrates how culture is a central concept in the discussion of comics. Evidently, as Khanduri observes, "The anti-Semetic tones of the re-issued 1930–1931 comic book, *TinTin in the Congo* led the British Commission for Racial Equality to consider it unsuitable for children" [6]. There is indeed a necessity to thoroughly analyze and study how media works, how the readers react to certain contents, the role of the mediator, and the process of mediation. Undeniably, the rise in the comic book forums adds a positive side to the comic culture of India as it opens a space for the readers to have a direct conversation with the leading publishers. Khanduri shows how "Blogs such as Comicology, the Comic Project, Comic World, Indsight, Phantomhead, ACK-India, World of Devil, Indrajal Comics Club, Chitrakatha, Flickr images of

Indian comics, and Facebook pages of Raj Comics and Bahadur are among the several fan sites that attest to the internet as the medium for networking about all things cultural" [6]. Lastly, comic book readers have interesting roles: they can now review comic books, interact with other fans, and submit their artwork and scripts. Scripts and drawings contributed by the public can create a new generation of Indian comics through brands such as Vimanika. By analyzing comic book scripts and artwork, comic book readers in India are potential comic book creators. Through social media, readers publicly share their insight and keep updated with Indian comic trends and their diverse history, mediated through an Internet fan network. As India's comic scene develops, blogs such as Comicology serve as pedagogical platforms, teaching readers how to read comics and make comics. This makes the internet an ethnographic site for studying India's comic book culture.

This pandemic has molded every aspect of our lifestyles significantly in various ways, to conclude this paper. Comics in India have always been expensive due to the currently practiced print media culture. This pandemic has more or less enhanced the hurdles for the artist-writers. Social Media platforms are undoubtedly a unique platform to make art accessible to readers. But it has to be remembered that a limited audience is aware of such pages or profiles where illustrators are actively engaged in telling their stories to the world. Once an artist becomes a known face like Appupen, it will be easy for the readers to remain updated. However, the path is difficult, but it is not a dream that can never be achieved. Comics culture in India is evolving. Nowadays, the focus should be on involving the readers or audiences with the procedures and struggles of the artist writers' labor to make their stories a success. The process is collaborative both from the reader's and the artist's angles. There should be more forums like Comicology to archive and note

what is in and what is not being heard and the need to make those stories accessible to everyone else.

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Journey of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) to STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics) via COMIX perspective to enhance learning

Keywords:

STEAM Education,
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ABSTRACT

With the Pandemic announced by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, the current state of the art of accommodating life started after rebuilding changes in the world and a new normal came into practice after that. Gaining knowledge by means of rote memorization is not a comprehensive way of learning but now digitalization has given it altogether a new shape. Learning through STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) focuses on teaching skills and subjects by collaborating them from an altogether different perspective which enhances learners' Growth and Development. STEAM Education is a developing educational model of how the traditional academic subjects can be structured and used as a benchmark to Interactive Curriculum to enhance learners' Skills. The addition of Arts to STEM education — gives comics a perfect angle that allows students of all abilities to visualize and analyse subjects in

more interactive ways. Evolution of Steam Education is a game-changer for those who strive for excellence in Education, Creative Thinking & Problem Solving. As a matter of fact, STEAM education is to empower educators to integrate arts into Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics subjects for interactive learning. The pandemic affected the whole world and all areas; however, it certainly played a significant role in the locomotion and acquaintance of education that will direct the generations to come. This paper aims to highlight the role and importance of "Arts" in STEAM Education via Comics during pandemic as it tries to explain the transformation of our traditional classrooms to Problem-solving Interactive Sessions in more creative, non-linear ways. Educators tend to use Digital comics or illustrative art to interest youth in all subject streams as a medium of creative interaction during Virtual classroom sessions and make the subject more broadly appealing to the students.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, a global warp of COVID-19, the development of educational tools compatible with social distancing has become a fundamental strategy as millions of students are confined at homes, just to reduce the outbreak of the epidemic. Thus, almost all teaching tools were quickly altered to distance education just to provide appropriate social distancing during that period. With the amalgamation of text and illustration, comics proved to be powerful assistance for students who excel at visual learning or who have short concentration spans. This not only helps in the development of reading skills for students in the elementary level but allows high school learners to visualize the story and the characters. Comics induce the development of powerful imaginations. Illustrations work as clues as to what is being conveyed in the text. Comics is a powerful tool for

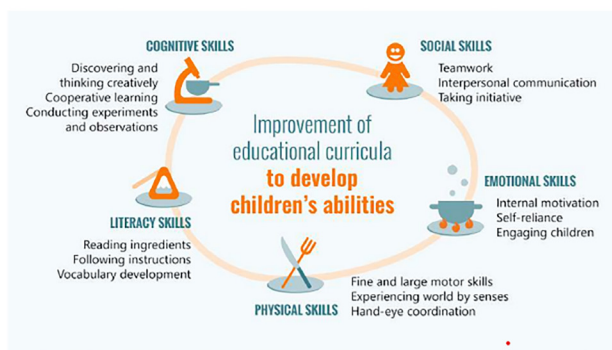
the teaching of reading and literary analysis at all levels. ICT also gives pupils access to information and encourages the creation and sharing of knowledge, at the same time it requires educators to find ways of increasing students' motivation and engagement. Thus, a huge effort has already been deployed to develop new teaching strategies that enhance students' motivation and commitment and magnify their scope of knowledge acquisition. STEAM Education is a developing educational model of how the traditional academic subjects (silos) can be structured into a framework by which to plan integrative curricula.

Most STEAM projects involve teamwork and thoughtful dialogue in which students swap

ideas and debate the ways to problem-solve.

Through these activities, learners learn to divide up responsibilities, compromise, listen to and appreciate one another. Some students might deal with STEAM with excitement, while others might be apprehensive to do so. Comics were used by educators to write teaching guides and lessons to go with graphic novels. It was also used at the elementary teaching level, as they use picture books but not integrated comic books. Integrated Comic Subject Books were used at upper Higher levels in Schools which enhanced our teaching-learning process. Comics altered the digital learning process and made it a fun Teaching and Learning Process by integrating comics into the traditional teaching topics, making it easier to understand for students.

Fig. 1.



LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of comics in education is already considerable, but it is largely unacknowledged. The potential of comics as an educational medium is vast but still only partially realized. It is still a rare exception that comics are specifically dealt with within school or academia. This leaves a space for analysis of the reasoning of this situation, but it also creates a wish to acknowledge the existing role of comics in education, to stress the possibilities inherent in the use of comics in school teaching and learning courses. Comics simply form an excellent tool to reach and interest children and teenagers. It promotes visual learning as it can be read at different speeds by pupils and can be discussed relating to the illustration. The availability of the comics is still somewhat of a problem as they are not always easily available. Comics are great motivators in teaching, especially for those who are not interested in traditional texts and teaching methods. They are ideal for interdisciplinary education in schools, for example, in projects that involve art, music, language arts, computing skills, research etc. Teacher always teaches a child as to how to read a picture along with the words in a comic. How did they go together? How do they contradict each other? These are certain pointers which a teacher teaches students in a fun learning way. Covid-19 has given Digitalization a boom and thus various tech friendly platforms and digital Subject based comics are there to help mentees to enhance their learning and productivity. The integration of emotional content and scientific information makes comics a valuable tool for sparking interest in youth [2]. Some of the applications used in digital game-based learning activities are Kahoot, quizzes, and adobe flash.

1 COMIC DEVELOPMENT DURING COVID_19 IN NEW NORMAL TEACHING STRATEGIES

The ongoing pandemic started as COVID-19 has

enforced a shutdown of educational institutions of all levels, including high school and university students, and has forced educators and institutions to adapt digital teaching strategies. Gamification, and Game based learning are tech-based methodologies that use activities and rewards to accelerate student engagement. How can we use this tech-based methodology to redesign and comprehend the blended learning experience? Hands-on activities are the core of this methodology, engaging students with projects that strongly rely on real-world evidence, ultimately fostering problem-solving, critical thinking and other key 21st Century skills. Here are some ways to gamify your classroom engagements, collaborative and integrated learning, hybrid, and in person learning environment. [3] These are some of the ways: considerable, but it is largely unacknowledged. The potential of comics as an educational medium is vast

1.1 Gamification is amalgamation of certain game elements like point systems, leader boards, badges, or other elements related to games into "conventional" learning activities in order to increase commitment and motivation. In ideal gamified learning environments, students can see the online badges that their peers have earned to create a sense of competition. During the time of Pandemic, students reported that gamification was innovative, engaging, and an efficient medium of inherit knowledge despite the absence of Educators; moreover, it was perceived as a fun learning Process. Some students reported that gamified video conferences aided to connect with their classmates during isolation time providing effective social support.[1]. Gamification implemented together with traditional lectures during post-COVID times proved to be a valuable instrument in the process of Digital Learning. Educators used the illustrated narratives to not only engage students creatively but to also make Science and Mathematics extremely exciting to a more diverse group of students.

1.2 Game based Learning: In a Game based learning, game characteristics and principles are submerged within learning activities. Game based learning is an activity-based learning technique where games are used to enhance student learning. Research goes hand in hand with playing the game and it stimulates

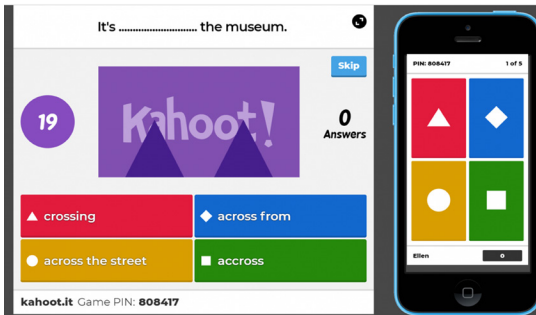


Fig. 2. Quiz display on Kahoot

critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Gamification and game-based learning both nurture engagement and continuous motivation while earning, but they do not surely commit

improved learning outcomes. Acer for Education, an education-oriented software company, is currently working hard to develop and combine innovative methods with technology in education. They claim that GBL is: "an effective method for making students work toward a goal, allowing them to learn through experimentation, practicing behaviours and thought processes that can be easily transferred from a simulated environment to real life." [4] GBL usually

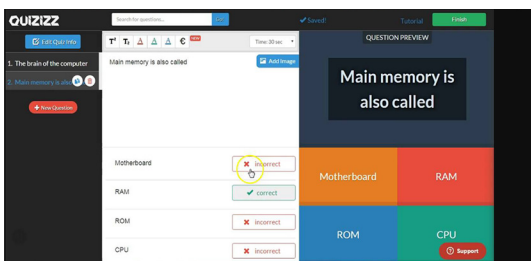


Fig. 3. Quiz display on Quizizz

includes a game-like environment and practice of the learning content through activities like theatre and role play. Some types of digital educational games that are widely used in learning are

Kahoot, Quizizz, and Adobe flash. Kahoot is a free and fun game-based learning platform for learning and the development of learning materials that can be customized by users (figure1) Kahoot is an online non-paid question-based learning media used in teaching

and learning activities to evaluate the results of the student learning process.

1.3 Interactive Classrooms: The motive behind the traditional classrooms and web-based classroom is the same i.e., to acquire new knowledge and skills. But the assessment and evaluation, learning techniques, and student engagement are different in both aspects. Digitalization has given our 21st century learners an online Google classroom for active learning. Google classrooms help the teachers to generate and evaluate assignments and always keep the learners engaged. This activity is conducted to encourage the teachers to familiarize more and more students in interactive google classrooms to monitor their engagements actively.

Inferences from Case Studies:

To justify this, some survey questions based on RASE (Resource, Activity, Support and Evaluation) are designed. The feedback is taken from 15 students and concluded as an interactive learning platform for our learners. Learning through Visuals/comics and text is a blessing for the new Generation, especially in Covid times where everything is digitalized. Learners and their guardians monitored that learning through Visuals(comics) helped them in storing information for a longer period. It has not only improvised the process of learning but also increased retention among learners. Comic Educational Books helped them in sight reading and speech clarity. The questionnaire helped in the analysis of comparison between the two (Google and Edmodo) learning tools based on the features and usage by students. The online Questionnaire on comparative study between the google and use of Edmodo was distributed to the students

Certain features of each of the platforms helped Educators as well as learners in Flipped Classrooms.

Comparison based on the features		
Features	Edmodo	Google Classroom
Parent Interaction	Direct contact of teacher and parent available	No exclusive link available
Grade book	Summary report of all the activities is generated automatically	Excel report of all activities is available but needs to be collated
Badges	To encourage and motivate you can give badges	No such feature is available
Polls	Poll feature is available to take immediate feedback	No such feature is available

Table 1.
Comparison
based on the
features

1.4 Flipped Learning: Visualized lectures during interactive classrooms are of great help in developing abstract thinking across all subjects. The flipped classroom is a pedagogical model that grasps technology-enhanced instruction outside of class time in order to maximize student engagement and learning during class time. Findings suggest that flipped classroom models that emphasize collaborative learning, group work and accessibility can enable and support inquiry-based learning. Flipped classrooms aim on student-centred learning, rather than using classroom time to deliver lectures. Individuals learn through participating in these practices and through interacting with mediating tools available in these practices. The agenda of designing a lecture through flipped learning is to vitalize students' participation and engagement in the preparatory course and to make them put more effort and energy into their work with the course curriculum during the class. Online lectures and writing skills as preparations for group discussions were introduced, to stimulate learners' individual learning processes. Analysis shows that this flipped classroom model, to an extent, seems to have revitalized students' participation and engagement. Learners find the flipped classroom model interesting and give a high score when asked how they rate the different sections integrated or connected to each other. Alteration in modalities is focussed, and learners also foresee this way of

organising teaching and participation as relevant in their future teaching practices.

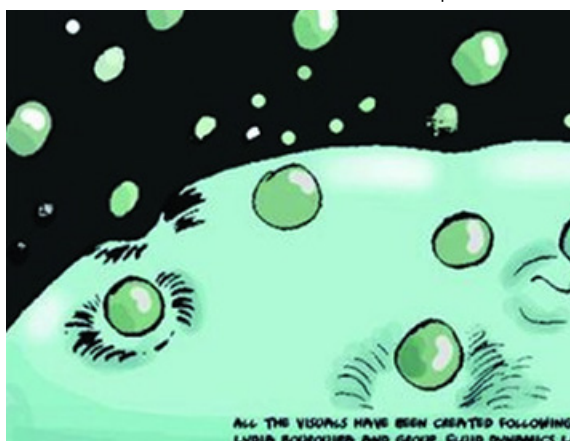
2 IMPORTANCE OF VISUOSPATIAL SKILLS

Visuospatial construction is a central cognitive skill. The Intricacies between visuals and content/ text helps pupils in connecting with the content. Comics is a great form that integrates visuals and text together and helps students in building up their content in their own way. It is a kind of sequential learning, wherein pupils get to know the procedure of relating a comic design through text. Visuospatial information processing is present in a wide range of everyday activities, from gardening or sewing to building self-representations on a social website. Thousands of people around the globe organize cross learning communities to acquire its technology and aesthetics as it is rarely taught in schools. Design and construction are associated with inherent forms of knowledge building. Creative tasks persuade learners at university of technology, to bring about high-quality work that demonstrates the development of creativity and their spatial skills. Different types of learning environments have unique effects on the development of spatial skills. With a wide array of construction activities, educators aim at the development of visuospatial information processing and through that, cognitive development: "From objects to pictures, from pictures to symbols, from symbols to ideas, leads the ladder of knowledge. "Quoted by Maren Holtz-Buelow.[6] Importance of digital technologies in education is on the rise, and the role of digital tools in the development of spatial skills is likely to rise as well. Authentic and research based educational methods/tools are employed to accelerate student's motivation, provide individualized learning, and contribute to the development of 21st Century skills. The group of cognitive functions acknowledge and analyse space in two and three

dimensions which includes mental imagery and navigation, distance and depth perception, and visuo-spatial construction. Visuo-spatial functions act as the brain's highest level of visual processing, and requires the proper functioning of your parietal cortex, in the upper part of the brain. The use of mental imagery and navigation to process and rotate 2-D and 3-D objects in mind, or to virtually move throughout an image from surroundings which have been reconstructed in mind [5] visual-spatial learner is the one who learns artistically rather than in a step-by-step fashion. Visual imagery plays a meaningful role in the learner's learning process. Because the individual is processing primarily in pictures rather than words, ideas are interconnected.[5] These skills have been more linked with manual trades, but over the last few years profound research has indicated its roleplay in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and maths) Education.

3 COMIC PLAYED A ROLE OF 'COVID-19 HELPLINE

Details and information presented in the comics medium have not only reinforced our understanding of the transmission of the COVID-19 virus but also cultivated scientific disposition. Not only print media



and online platforms but cartoons, comic strips and hand-drawn posters have played an important role during this pandemic. Universal language of lines, co-existence of images and words, the

visual economy and sequentially of comic books and strips not only give an appealing look to the children, illiterate, and adults but is also well-suited to propagate epidemic-related information and for conveying complex scientific information. Comics is a citizen-friendly medium: Comics clarify the intent behind, visualise and translate critical public health messages and the findings of medical science into citizen-friendly information, thus connecting Art and Science.[7] The visually appealing and colourful comics explain the otherwise hard-to-understand mutations of the COVID-19 virus in citizen-friendly ways.

3.1 Comics as a pedagogical tool: Given such strengths, it is not surprising that many Governments across the world and international agencies such as the UN have harnessed the power of comics to educate all about wearing masks, social distancing, and washing hands frequently. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of the Government of India, published a mini comic titled 'Kids, Vaayu & Corona.' Scripted and conceptualized by Ravindra Khaiwal and Suman Mor, Vaayu, an Indian superhero, enlighten the kids about simple measures to reduce the chances of contracting COVID-19.[8] Exceptional comics are those illustrating a range of personal stories, describing the fear of contagion, restrictions, touch deprivation, isolation, hope, mental health conditions, among each other. Drawn by frontline workers, caregivers, patients, and other stakeholders themselves, these heart-breaking comics, in styles ranging from fantasy to noir, capture the uncanny that one experiences in the era of COVID-19.[7] The recently published 'COVID Chronicles: A Comics Anthology' by 'Graphic Mundi' for the first time, collects such comics and covers a broad range of topics such as racism, health inequities and personal realizations of COVID-19.

3.2 Teachers/Mentors as unsung heroes: Teachers care for their students, and they know that their work



Fig. 4. Comic series designed for COVID-19 Awareness for children below 12yrs

is one of the few things that can really help improve the lives of these kids. All the teachers can't do it all the time or even most of the time — but this potent force is in there and incorporate all teachers — leaving aside very few. From Adults to children, most of the discussion was only on one topic- Covid-19, but for children below 12 years it was difficult for them to understand and accept the change that COVID brought into our lives. Dr Ravindra Khaiwal and Dr Suman mor, Punjab, Chandigarh university took the initiative to design a comic for

children below 12 years of age, to make them familiarize about the threat of Coronavirus and how to stay safe through simple precautionary steps. KIDS, VAAYU & CORONA: who wins the fight?

3.3 Medium to affect Behavioural change in

Individuals and communities: COVID-19 has imposed a myriad of consequences for health and well-being globally. The negative emotional impact of COVID-19 has been observed across the world. In a U.S. study examining people's experiences from January 2020 (N = 1,010) to June 2020 (N = 3,020), reports of happiness and life satisfaction saw one of the largest declines during the pandemic, along with mental and physical health, together with more modest declines in meaning in life and overall flourishing.[11] Although the negative emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is readily apparent, some people are doing surprisingly well. In France, researchers surveyed participants thrice in between April 1 and May 6, 2020, and found

that these respondents reported an increase in health and well-being during the quarantine, regardless of income level especially those who had low exposure to the disease. Comic Art can have a transformative effect on a space and can bring happiness and hope into many lives. Sayan Mukherjee (whose Instagram handle is @sayanart) is a Kolkata-based illustrator whose comics on people dealing with the Covid-19 stand out for its simplicity. Whether it is an image of a man whose wings are being clipped as he is forced into a lockdown, or a father whose son refuses to get off his back during the mandatory work-from-home situation, or a man struggling to keep his mask in place while balancing heavy bags of groceries in both hands — the artist presents his subjects with an affectionate gaze. He acknowledges their struggle for survival and desire for freedom. The use of text in Mukherjee's comics is minimal, adding more impact to his visuals. There is a resemblance to them, an absence of cleverness, and a light-hearted look at what constitutes the new normal.[12]

4 DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATIONAL BOOKS WITH COMICS INTEGRATION

The fusion of emotional content and scientific information makes comics a valuable tool for creating interest in youth. Today's Youth are familiar with graphics of exceptionally high quality while gaming, and they expect digital educational comics to have similar standards. Educational comics are one of the materials designed in a digital environment and apt for use in the learning environment. At the same time, Comics can be applied across different subjects and can attract students' interest, increase motivation, and make learning fun. According to the results of the research conducted and applied in the digital environment, educational comics have educational competencies as follows: it increases the permanence of learning, enables learning with fun,

and increases in academic success.[9] As a result of this, it facilitates the learning of abstract concepts. The use of educational comic material is predicted to help educators, especially during the pandemic period and in distance education. Comic Educational Books serve as a pack of references that are helpful for supplementing content. Content comes alive through the medium of Images which makes it a fun learning process. Comics through the path of STEM Education jumpstarts its curiosity, by giving learners an ability to think critically about the topic. This Covid certain Comic Educational books/ Graphic Novels helped learners to cope up with their learning in a much engaging way. To name a few:

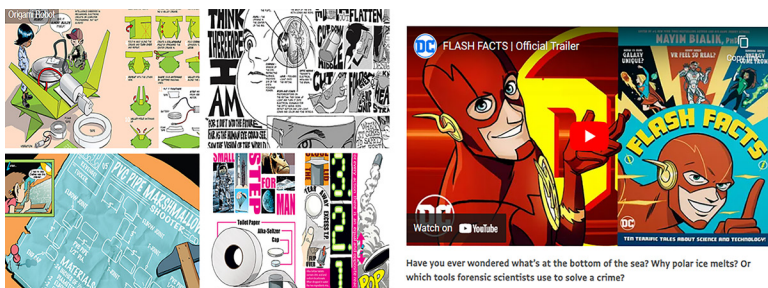


Fig. 5. Educators use these Graphic Novels/Comics to Promote Engagement, Equity, and Diversity in Flipped Classrooms.

CONCLUSION

As Covid-19 Pandemic broke out all over the world, education took another turn to reach out to learners with Interactive Classrooms. Schools today are so caught with limitations, that they hardly realise that their duty is not to burden students with information but to help them explore the relevance of that information in their lives digitally and through fun learning process. STEM education allows "Asking questions and searching for answers by doing experiments". Some of the methods that encourage active learning in the classroom are discussion, practice sessions, structured exercises, team projects, and research projects and through different apps like kahoot, adobe flash etc. Teachers used the

Digital illustrated narratives to not only engage the students creatively but to also make Science and Mathematics extremely exciting to a more diverse group of students. We need individuals with highly developed visual-spatial abilities for advancement in arts, technology and business that can foster learning motivation and student engagement involved in learning. Besides that, the introduction of game-based learning is also introduced to improve student learning outcomes and creativity. Meanwhile, teachers also find it easier to evaluate students' abilities. As a result, student learning outcomes have seen a significant rise across various subjects. Perspective coming from Comics can't match the content of the book, Educator as well as Learner live up that perspective by reading that content. Comics mainly work on 3E's: Engaging (Learners love them), Efficient (Gives a lot of Information), and Enhanced (Enhances Learning). Let's see Educations through the eyes of COMICS for more interactive learning in our digital Classrooms.

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Animations, Comics, and Infographics: Understanding the Transdisciplinarity at work in the Asian Representations of the Pandemic

Keywords:
*Infographics,
intersectionality,
thick description*

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary world moving in the digital age is an intricate network and the COVID pandemic has made it all the more evident. The pandemic itself, with its origin in biology, has become an intersectional compound with aftershocks that can be felt in politics, economy, culture, ecology, psychology, et cetera, bulldozing the compartmentalized world as we know it. This new world has brought with it problems that demand transdisciplinary solutions. Differences in presentation of the same scientific information can have different effects on the population. As such, studying the behavioral psychology, employment, age and other demographical details of the human population becomes significant in controlling and channelizing the circulation of information. The pandemic has brought to the forefront various comic artists creating colorful infographics to make scientific information accessible to the general population by making use of colorful diagrams, cartoony symbols and vector iconography to create an eye-catching visual

narrative educating people about COVID symptoms, precautions, social distancing, and the difference between the perceived social bubble and the actual network of socially connected people. Various comic artists across Asia have been exploring the intersectional impact of the pandemic on the basis on nationality, race, age, employment status, et cetera. Analyzing the intersectional complexity of the pandemic, these artists have brought to light the inequality of medical infrastructure and supplies between the developed and the developing countries to fight the pandemic. For instance, Debjyoti Saha's animated short series called Korona exposes the inequality faced by migrant workers, racial discrimination, mismanagement, xenophobia, and the poor medical infrastructure in India. The present research project through its analysis of animations, comic infographics, and illustrations explores a multimodal and transdisciplinary field of study addressing the intersectional aftermath of the pandemic in Asia.

As the COVID19 pandemic continues to rage across the world, humanity can be seen responding and adapting to the conditions created by it. Remote learning and work are here to stay for many. The pandemic has also evoked other responses which are political, economic, cultural, and psychological. All around the world, artists have been responding to the pandemic in different ways, exploring its intersectional ramifications. The present paper explores the representation and response to the pandemic through animations, comics, and infographics posted on Instagram by Asian artists which specifically bring forth the peculiar impact of the pandemic in the Asian context. The iconic design of the coronavirus by Alissa Eckert and Dan Higgins, illustrators at the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), helped in providing a concrete form to an otherwise abstract scientific concept. Once COVID became

a tangible entity, it became easier to talk about it. Many resources made use of this illustration which was designed based on the information provided by the Protein Data Bank. Infographics succeed in breaking down complex information to make it more accessible to the varied human population in the form of diagrams, bullet points, images, illustrations, pie charts, et cetera. This information also has a connotative and emotive significance which helps in shaping up the reaction of the audience to a particular piece of information. A recent paper published by BMC Public Health titled "Evaluating the effect of infographics on public recall, sentiment and willingness to use face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic: a randomised internet-based questionnaire study" explored how the use of infographics depicting the correct way to wear a mask and the necessity to do the same helped the participants of the study to better comprehend the process, feel at ease with it, and become more inclined to wear a mask in the future. The paper stated: "The greater understanding of modes of transmission, evidence of efficacy and subsequent national guidance, has therefore led to an inevitable increase in the support and prevalence of face masks" [1].

Many artists around the world are making use of different art forms and crossing disciplines to respond to the pandemic in different ways. They are circulating important information and sharing their human experiences that make the experience relatable and ensuring that people do not feel emotionally and socially distant while exercising physical distancing. These art forms, meant to generate a subjective response, are quite powerfully wielded by these artists and often do more than their scientific sources. In the words of Alamahodaei et al.:

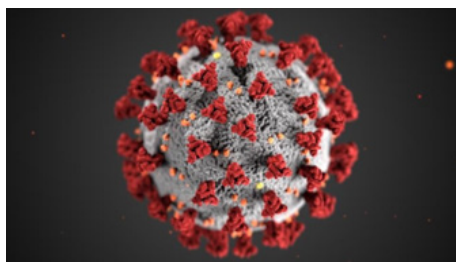


Fig. 1. The illustration of coronavirus as designed by Alissa Eckert and Dan Higgins

In the comics medium, the somatic and psychological experience of one's changing health identity is found in hypervisualized graphic embodiment that allows for a humanizing representation that shows how a person experiences part of the medical process—for example, a diagnosis or proposal for treatment—allowing access to some of the inner world of emotion that is difficult to represent in other visual forms. This can be as simple as a thought bubble or split panel that adds layers to the narrative of an interpersonal interaction or event. [2]

Mona Chalabi, a data journalist of Iraqi descent, employs infographics and posts information about topics such as the use of facemasks in flattening the curve; the intersectional impact of the pandemic across race, nations, cultural communities, economic classes; the symptoms brought about by the virus; development of vaccination, et cetera [3]. A Singaporean artist by the username of @evacomics posted infographic comics titled "How to Dispose Your Mask Correctly" and "How to Reuse Your Own Mask" depicting the dos and don'ts of wearing masks [4]. The visual illustrations make information easy to access at a glance.

Fig. 2. Comics by @evacomics



In another post, she shared the Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) in Singapore, citing her information source as Channel News Asia (CAN). In her comic, she made it easier to distinguish

between orange and red responses by breaking down their relatable contexts.

The minimalistic design of the comics that make use of basic objects and referents to make ideas clear, tend to stick to the mind. For instance, to depict the deaths at hospitals, she drew a hospital bed with a white sheet covering a body; to show the closing of schools, she depicted a gate with a "closed" sign hanging outside it; to portray the need to avoid crowded places, she drew a red cross over a drawing of a gathering. She also finds attractive cartoony ways to depict physical distancing, the need to stay at home, the washing of hands (a slide where she depicted the imaginary experience of waiting behind an octopus washing its innumerable tentacles), the need to avoid touching the face, wearing a mask, exercising, and sleeping well. In an animated video, she depicted the fight against the coronavirus in a Street Fighter game format in which the virus is defeated in different rounds by the ICA officer, the cleaning person, by the medical staff, and even a normal person using a mask, proper protection, gloves, disinfectant solution, injections, washing of hands, social distancing, the use of tissues, and quarantine. She also made comics on how the mask itself begins to feel like a second skin and how shopping for essentials like tissues has almost replaced shopping for clothing. In another comic, she depicts how in pre-COVID times, people who worked from home were thought to have no proper job. Now, working remotely has become a new norm. Other artists also made the pandemic experience more relatable for people around the world. While @bakarmax represented the dire depression of working



Fig. 3:
@evacomics
depicting
DORSCON.

remotely, Alicia Souza evoked the positives and the silver lining of the pandemic, by curating a list of things one had to be grateful for [5, 6]. Other comic artists depicted the conditions of staying and working at home and the impact it had on their mental condition. A Korean comic artist by the name of Dami Lee made relatable comics about missing the outdoors and overgrowing your hair [7].

Many artists go a step further to explore the intersectional terrain of the pandemic experience which is often socio-culturally specific. For instance, Huda Fahmy, @yesimhotinthis, depicts her experience as a Muslim woman having prepared her for avoiding physical contact and her wudu ritual involving ablutions being similar to the repeated handwashing required during the pandemic [8]. @evacomics provides information in one of her posts about the steps taken by the government of Singapore to flatten the curve. She also depicts the evolution of people's viewpoints regarding the wearing of masks which was already fairly common in Asian countries during the pre- COVID times to prevent hay fever and to prevent the spread of flue amongst the people around them. Many Asians living abroad were teased and looked at for wearing a mask. Yet now, it is the new norm. One of her comics also satirically showcases the inconsistency between the guidelines for avoiding gatherings and the contradictory exoneration of

Fig. 4. Comic panel by @appupen.



elections by the government. An Indian artist, Sailesh Gopoalan, known by the username of @brownpaperbagcomics depicts the failure of social distancing in an Indian setup [9]. He depicts an incident that was fairly common to see and can still be seen in India. In a comic he depicts his experience of standing in a queue following protocol and keeping a physical distance from the person in front of him when a man

comes and stands between him and the person in front of him, closing the space and breaking the queue as well as the social distancing protocol. This portrays the failure of social distancing in India and how people do not take social distancing seriously. Another Indian artist by the username of @appupen posts satirical comics about the ways in which the pandemic is often treated non-seriously by the people and the Indian government [10]. In a post, he depicts how the containment zone board is disrespected by the people who continue to walk across it, downplaying its role.

It also depicts the non-seriousness of the government who simply wishes to stay positive without taking the necessary precautions that come with it. In another post, he depicts the government to be the actual virus. In a post describing the types of masks, he again criticizes the government depicting a 'modimaks' that uses the drawing of a smiling clown, supposedly comes with a pair of earplugs, and apparently, spreads only good vibes—showing the utter denial of the government in the face of a harsh reality.

This points to the baseless sense of positivity and ignorance towards a reality that the government finds itself incapable of dealing with. The artist also satirizes the government's proposed Central

Fig. 5. Politically satirical comics by @appupen



Vista project by depicting a statue of a golden boot of the government crushing the voices of the dissent. In the middle of the pandemic, many people raised their voices against the decision of the government to spend money on something that was not a necessity in a state of emergency brought about by the pandemic. In another post, the artist depicts the lockdown as a metaphor for the 'lockdown' dictatorship of a government that employed tools of oppression and surveillance to keep its population and opposition in check. He depicts how the citizenship locks, laborer locks, and national security locks were all changed. The Aarogyasetu application gets its own special criticism in another post as he depicts how irrespective of the consent of the people, the application was made mandatory, even though issues were raised about how it made use of user information.

Fig. 6. Panels depicting the political satire by @appupen.



The artist also depicts what he calls the "Divide and Fool 2.0" policy of the government which wishes to twist the narrative of the pandemic to their advantage by reducing the testing and makes use of the pandemic as a distraction from being answerable to protests and other issues the predated the pandemic. A comic titled "The Flight of the Migrant" depicts the struggle of the migrants to reach their homes in the middle of a lockdown comparable to the journey of the Jewish people to Palestine, the promised land.



Fig. 7.
A diagrammatical
representation
of the types of
distancing during
the pandemic by
@appupen.

In another diagram, the artist critiques that while the population of India did not exercise social distancing, it exercised all the other kinds of distances like cultural, ideological, caste/religion, economic, and intellectual/emotional in an increasing order. Most of the people were only concerned with their particular nation, state, neighborhood, family, or self in the middle of a pandemic that should have united humanity at large.

Debjyoti Saha, another great comic artist, and animator based in India depicts scenes from the pandemic as it played out in India [11]. In a video, he made use of the official caller tune issued by the government with directions on COVID and juxtaposed it with red monochrome visuals depicting the animated scenes showing people dying, the shortage of beds and oxygen, people having difficulty breathing, people mourning the loss of their family members, and families forever destroyed by the pandemic as the caller tune states that the phone was not answerable. In another animated video, Saha depicts a man doing

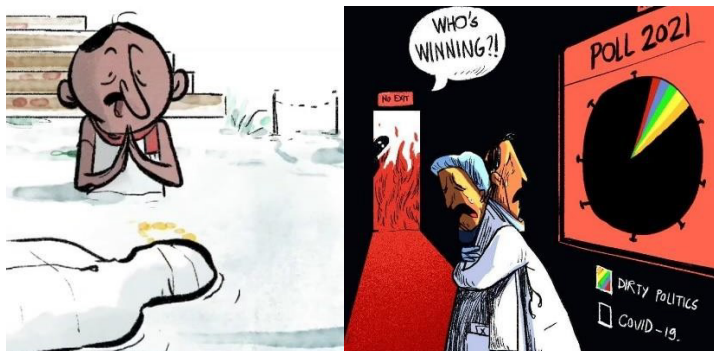


Fig. 8. To the left, a frame from the animated work by Debjyoti Saha. To the right a comic by Debjyoti Saha

ablutions in Ganga and coming across a floating dead body.

Saha satirizes both the government and the Indian population in their failure to deal with the pandemic. For instance, in a post, he showcases how the 2021 poll was won over by COVID. The government made buying liquor equivalent to purchasing essential commodities. People too were too quick to throw caution to the wind, toss away their masks once the restrictions were lifted, spread pollution in the world around them--in the air, the waters. Saha depicts that the real virus is humanity itself. In his animated series *Korona*, he also brings our attention to other intersectional issues in India like class difference, the condition of the migrant workers, racial discrimination, the plight of the medical staff, and xenophobia [12]. One of the shorts depicts a doctor being interviewed on camera format and asked about his opinion on being cheered on by the Indian citizens through clapping and plate banging for their efforts to curb and treat the spread of the virus. Yet before the doctor can expose the need for resources and request people to stay indoors, his voice is drowned by the noise of people banging on utensils, worshipping him, blowing conch shells, shutting off his mouth with a mask, and completely disregarding social distancing by partying and celebrating. Another short highlights the racial discrimination and xenophobia against other Asian communities during the pandemic, by showing

a series of images in a montage that a woman associates with the boy who picks up her medicine for her, which includes Chinese costumes, a Fu Manchu moustache, memes, noodles, momos, the image of the coronavirus, what she read and saw on WhatsApp, news footage, chopsticks, mock-Chinese language, Trump's voiceover calling coronavirus the "Chinese virus", et cetera.

Saha states: "The lockdown and its aftermath revealed fault lines in our society and how they have got worse. What I felt had to be channeled somewhere and that is why I started to work on a series of shorts titled Korona..." [13]. In one of his Korona shorts, he depicts the difference between the experiences of the migrant laborers and the more privileged population of India in the way the pandemic affected them. He used parallel panels to depict the stark contrast in their conditions. While the more privileged people stayed in the comfort of their homes, the migrants suffered during their endless journeys on foot. While the former worried about their Wi-Fi connections, the latter looked on in dismay at their empty purses. While a privileged faction slept in their comfortable beds, the underprivileged slept on newspapers. While some of them were busy making Dalgona coffee, exercising, and following current trends, the migrants were fighting a battle to simply survive.

Asian artists around the world are succeeding in igniting particular discussions and evoking the socio-

Fig. 9. Use of parallel framed in Korona



cultural thickness of intertextuality in their response to the pandemic by bringing forward important debates. These artists succeed in evoking an emotional response in the people. The present study can conclude the following:

- 1) Artists across the world can make the information accessible to people and make it easier for them to understand it.
- 2) Since people are able to comprehend this information, it makes it more probable that they will follow the instructions.
- 3) The information is designed and presented in a way that evokes an emotional response in the people.
- 4) The artists do not shy away from satirizing and critiquing the malpractices of the people and the government.
- 5) The artists succeed in exploring the more intersectional and culturally specific ramifications of the pandemic, making these descriptions and narratives thicker and more locally accurate.

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Thematic analysis of 255 most-interacted pandemic-related comics on Reddit

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ABSTRACT

The r/comics subreddit on the website Reddit is one of the largest communities of comic creation and readership on the internet. The forum is subscribed by approximately 16 lac users while it is common to see around 1000-2000 users browsing the forum live at any given time. The subreddit is used by subscribers to post and read new digital and web comics every day.

This study examines the engagement of around 205 most interacted pandemic-related web comics on the platform of r/comics between the years 2019-2021. The research aims to understand the general perception of viewers on a large scale. This is done by examining the content, text, and intended message of the digital comics where the analysis tries to extract thematic patterns within them. The findings largely observe comics and their subsequent engagement, hosting themes which related to 'lockdown', 'following protocols', 'habits during pandemic' and many more. The paper also contains a separate section of 50 pandemic-related comics that are specifically posted on the r/india subreddit. This section then draws a comparison between these 50 Indian comics and the former 205 global comics to analyze whether there exists

a thematic alignment. The analysis reveals that both subreddits share 3 thematic patterns which are 'following protocols', 'essential workers', and 'distressing news'. The study is of interest in the present as well as for the times to come as a comparative analysis with future pandemic-related comics could reveal information that can help discern evolving patterns amongst comic creators and readers globally as well as in India.

1 INTRODUCTION

Hayman and Pratt(2009) try to define comics as a "pictorial narrative" in their essay[1] which is notably an improvement on Eisner's(1985), McCloud's(1993), Carrier's(2000) definition which claim that comics are essentially an art of compositing, which can seamlessly combine elements of the visual with verbal [2][3] [4]. Kunzle(1973) thinks of comics as something that should tell a story and be topically moral[5], while Harvey(1979) feels that in essence, comics should be a narration formulated through visuals[6].

It has been largely agreed upon in literature that though comics can serve purposes of entertainment, they are also culturally important in many places and do hold some influence over culture [7][8]. Even in India, comics have been reported to be influential in guiding cultural and social narratives [9]. Nadikattu (2014) has reported Indian comics to be different in their topics from their American counterparts where the former focuses more on political issues while the creators of the latter tend to depict experiences related to relationships more[10]. Although the finding by Nadikattu(2014) sheds light on differences in socio-cultures regarding how comics are perceived, there seems to be no such comparison found between Indian and global comics that were created and published during the time of the COVID pandemic between 2019-2021.

2 METHODOLOGY

The research explores the content and themes followed by pandemic-related digital comics posted on the website Reddit. The comics posted by the website users are openly available and the users are only identifiable by their usernames. To ensure the anonymity of the posters, this report does not include the names of any of the comic creators. The first stage of this research consisted of gathering the top 205 most interacted comics of the "r/comics subreddit" and 50 of the most interacted comics of the "r/india subreddit". This was done by sorting the posts by the 'top of all time' tab on the respective subreddit which presents the most interacted comics in descending order. The second stage of the research consisted of thematically analyzing both the batches of gathered comics [11]. The last section of the research was to compare the thematic trends that emerged out of both collections.

3 DATA SOURCING

Reddit.com is an online discussion forum where users can post and chat about various topics anonymously. Reddit is currently one of the most frequented websites globally (around 430 million monthly active users). The website allows users to display their unique username, the date of joining, a history of their posts, and options to send or receive messages from other users. Generally, users use a personalized avatar instead of a picture on their profiles [12].

Subreddits exist within Reddit as dedicated forums to discuss certain topics. They are moderated by a handful of users who are generally volunteers and the rules of participation change from subreddit to subreddit. Users can subscribe to certain subreddits of interest and then those subreddits become a part of their Reddit front page. Subreddits are used by their subscribers to post and discuss certain topics through initiating new threads [12]. For example, the subreddit

r/cars is a dedicated space to initiate a discussion about cars by posting relevant images, text posts, and/or links.

The data collection for this study was mainly done by sifting through the posts of the subreddits r/comics and r/india. The r/comics subreddit is one of the largest venues for posting and discussing digital comics with 1,653,611 subscribers at the time of data extraction (9th November 2021). The language of communication is largely in English. For the first stage of analysis, the research took 205 of the most interacted comics of the last 3 years (2019-2021) which were related to the pandemic in any way. In the second phase of analysis, the research took 50 of the most interacted comics in the last three years from the subreddit r/india. This subreddit is solely dedicated to discussions related to India with 643,943 subscribers at the time of data extraction (9th November 2021). Although r/india is not solely focused on comics, users frequently post and discuss India-related comics on there.

3.1 INCLUSION CRITERIA

The inclusion criteria of data collection for this research was as follows: (i) the comics had to be related to the COVID pandemic of 2019, (ii) the comics had to be in English, and (iii) the comics should have at least 100 engagements or more (on Reddit, engagement can be in the form of upvotes, downvotes, or comments). For the comics collected from the r/india subreddit, all the previous inclusion criteria were applicable with the addition of one more which was: (iv) the comics should be related to India in some way or the other. The number of comics was limited to 200 comics for r/comics and 50 comics for r/india. The number for the comics collected from r/india was less since this subreddit was not dedicated to comics, however, it was the largest venue on Reddit to find India related comics.

4 MEASURES

Approaches that have been formerly confirmed were employed to establish the content rationality used in the present study regarding Reddit.com [13][14]. As to what could be defined as digital comics, this study rationalised the selection based on the definition of Aggleton (2018) which states that for an artwork to be a comic, it should (i) be published digitally (ii) either consist of a single, or a series of panels that host images (iii) the item should have a semi-guided reading pathway. Other additions that could solidify an artwork as a comic could be (i) panel frames that are visible (ii) conventional iconic symbols like the dialogue balloon (iii) lettering which could seem handwritten. Aggleton (2018) clearly states that a comic should not be (i) a purely moving image which could be a video or (ii) purely an audio piece [15].

5 DELIMITATIONS

The data collected for this research originated entirely from the Reddit website. The findings of this research might give an accurate representation of the perceptions of the users from the respective subreddits, however, whether those representations map well onto a larger population base is undetermined. Another perceived limitation of this study is that it only gauges the visual content of the comics and not the discussion that happens under the post itself. Another more detailed analysis of all the comments under each posted comic would provide for a more rigorous analysis of the populations' perspectives.

6 DATA ANALYSIS

A summary of all the findings that emerged from this entire study is presented in this section.

6.1 EMERGENT THEMES FROM R/COMICS

The following analysis showcases the themes that emerged from the content of 205 comics from the r/comics subreddit of Reddit.com. In descending order, the themes were related to the global lockdown, adherence to pandemic protocols, habits developed during the pandemic, experiences of online meetings, antimasking, experiences of working from home, references to popular culture, the future impact of this pandemic, antivaccination, distressing news during the pandemic, and virus biology. The percentage distribution is depicted in Figure 1.

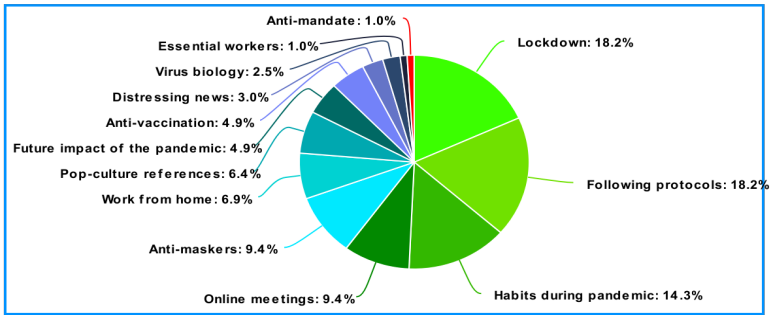


Fig. 1. Emergent themes from 200 pandemic-related comics on the r/comics subreddit

6.1.1 Lockdown

The highest number of comics depicted a reference to the lockdown that happened globally. Standing at 18.2%, the content of these lockdown-related comics depicted things like coping mechanisms staying in quarantine. For example, several self-help comics recommended learning new skills like baking, playing musical instruments, or even jokingly suggested becoming an amateur epidemiologist on Twitter.com. Other comics depicted the absolute despair and existential crisis that the creator of the comics was going through. Some artists portrayed the lockdown from the perspectives of pigeons with quizzical looks in regards to where everyone had disappeared. One artist portrayed the Earth as a patient confessing

to their doctor as feeling 'much healthier' since the lockdown had begun. A couple of comics portrayed the artist's rendition of experiencing a lockdown that never ends, referencing the consecutive lockdowns that happened worldwide. In these comics, artists also joked about experiencing hallucinations of better times. Similarly, another comic depicted the creator experiencing a better life, which in the end was revealed to be a game that they were playing on their laptop. One comic alluded to the experience of people were forgetting what day of the week it was currently. Some comics showed the experiences of different kinds of people during a lockdown by comparing an extrovert with an introvert with a shopaholic, while other artists depicted how they developed a habit of scrolling endlessly on their phones.

6.1.2 Following Protocols

Standing similarly at 18.2%, the content of this section of comics solely depicted instances or experiences related to COVID protocols and their adherence. Many artists rendered themselves disliking people who were not following the protocols like wearing masks, social distancing, and/or self-isolation. In one comic the artist even resorted to aggression towards people wearing their masks below their noses by poking them in their nostrils. Another topic related to the following protocols was vaccination. One artist showcased herself as feeling okay after the first dose and underestimating how feverish and tiring the second dose could be. One comic depicted the notion of heaven and hell as being closed due to lockdown protocol and a patient being successfully resuscitated because of it. One comic showed a class teacher purchasing sheets of plastic covers and taping them together to make a see-through plastic curtain so that she could teach her students while maintaining adherence to protocol. Few comics highlighted the fact that the acts of coughing, sneezing or even touching one's face were normalized in the pre-

pandemic times, whereas now public spaces like offices and parks had visceral reactions to anyone who might do so.

6.1.3 Habits during pandemic

This section, standing at 14.3% of the total contributions, depicted peoples' habits that were voluntary or involuntary formed during the time of the pandemic. The habit of wearing masks was illustrated in several of these comics, where one artist described how they would always frantically search for a mask before leaving for work, but their car is always full of spare masks. Other habits that were illustrated in this section included eating more food than usual resulting in tighter clothes, spying on neighbors and if they were going out unnecessarily during lockdowns, dating online or alone, playing games for passing time, bathing less frequently, and trying out self-haircuts at home. Other newly developed habits that were shown in one of these comics included people using barter systems to trade necessary supplies, while another comic depicted people asking their friends and dates to smell food to check whether they were experiencing loss of smell. In contrast to each other, one comic depicted gamers to be unaffected by the pandemic and enjoying their gaming habits undisturbed while another comic showed a group of friends trying to play a role-playing board game while trying to distance themselves socially.

6.1.4 Online meetings

Another popular theme emerging out of this analysis was that of online meetings. At 9.4%, this section contained comics that were pertinent in regards to online calls, meetings, and conferences. A common theme among a few of these comics was that of inappropriate dressing of the lower half of the body. These comics were referring to the fact that only the upper half of the body is visible during video calls

online and therefore did not require the participants to be entirely dressed. A few of the comics referred to background noises that usually can be heard during video calls through one of the participant's unattended microphones. The noises illustrated here were that of pets creating a ruckus, a participant snoring, and that of all participants talking at once. Even the visual interruptions caused due to the intrusion of house pets were illustrated in 4 of the comics. A couple of comics classified the various types of participants and how their actions always had a pattern. These included participants who always had their kids in the background, participants who were always eating on camera, participants who were stuck in traffic, inappropriately dressed participants, those with connection issues, those who keep their microphones and cameras turned off, some who accidentally shares their screen, and many more of other kinds.

6.1.5 Anti-masking

This group of comics solely illustrated criticism towards people who chose to not mask themselves. Although the act masking or not masking could fall under the umbrella of the above section 'Following protocols', the researcher decided to give it a separate compartment as it was the third most popular theme standing equal to the section 'Online meetings' at 9.4%. The comics from this group tried to illustrate the dangers that the anti-masking community were bringing to society at large. Some comics even alluded to the fact that the anti-masking communities were severely misinformed and that they had contradictory opinions with themselves and were therefore living in a state of hypocritical cognitive dissonance. The theme of the anti-masking crowd being misinformed by biased self-research was repeated a few times. Some comics compared anti-maskers to criminals while others illustrated them as enraged conspiracy theorists. Most of the

comics visualized the anti-masking community in an aesthetically unpleasant manner.

6.1.6 Work from home

At 6.9%, this section grouped comics that were specifically illustrating the phenomenon of work-from-home during the pandemic. In contrast with each other, some artists depicted extended work-from-home environment to be harmful to mental health, where characters were shown as being driven crazy working alone, while other artists depicted it to be the best thing to happen to them as they did not have to wake up early unnecessarily, they could spend more time with their ageing pets, and because they could take naps immediately after meetings. Some artists attested that the practice of work-from-home was making people work harder and longer than conventional offline office hours. One comic depicted a couple imagining work-from-home to be a blessing whereas, in reality, they ended up miserable with each other's constant company.

6.1.7 Popular culture references

This section had comics that had content from all other sections, however, they all used global popular culture as references in them. The research, therefore, grouped them together in this section which contributed to 6.4% of the sample collected. The references ranged from other popular comics like the Justice League to popular video games such as DOOM. Other references included The Lion King character social distancing, Rudolph the Reindeer that wore a mask, Jason Voorhees who is a popular fictional serial killer running out of victims as everyone was under lockdown, Spiderman who was wearing a mask within his mask, Uncle Sam who is a popular American icon of patriotism asking the viewer to stay at home, and another which showcased protagonists from a popular fictional movie Suicide Squad being

saved from aliens as they were wearing masks. One comic also referenced *Among Us*, a video game that became unexpectedly popular during the pandemic [16].

6.1.8 Future impact of the pandemic

10 comics that made 4.9% of the total contributions explored the future consequences that might arise from this pandemic. The creator of one comic illustrated that people clearly liked the benefit of working from home, however, the world will go back to the regular work conventions no matter what. A few comics tried to prophesize people's difficulties to shake off habits learned during the pandemic, for example shaking hands and conducting meetings in person. A couple of comics illustrated how people have been wishing for physical affection through the entire pandemic while another couple of comics focused on the impending apocalypse-like devastation of the economy in the near future.

6.1.9 Anti-vaccination

Standing equally with the previous section at 4.9%, this group of comics focused on the people who oppose vaccinations. Four comics explored the experience of children who have parents that are against vaccinations. The themes of these comics were generally how the children might end up having a quick death due to the negligence of their parents. One comic depicted a few, famous American personalities who had been publicly against vaccines but hypocritically got themselves vaccinated, while another comic focused on how people were not getting vaccinated even though their close ones were dying because of the same ignorance. One comic even joked about locking an anti-vaccination crowd in a library to force them to research better. Other comics explored the same idea of the anti-vaccination crowd being misinformed.

6.1.10 Distressing news

At 3.0%, this group of comics focused mainly on the despair-filled headlines that were common during the pandemic. One comic illustrated characters distracting themselves from bad news by constantly playing games on their phones. Another comic depicted a mobile phone as a character that self-professed its function to keep the user in a stressful state by constantly supplying them with pictures of empty shelves of grocery stores as people had panic bought most of the items. Empty shelves of grocery stores were depicted in another comic as well, where a parent could not find essential supplies for their child battling cancer for the same reason as the previous comic. Other comics explored the idea of how the news of close ones passing away had become a common occurrence.

6.1.11 Virus biology

2.5% of the comics explored the themes of the biology of the virus. One comic depicted the virions (single virus molecules) as characters making fun of the initial antibiotic molecules that they were resistant to due to their constant mutations. Another comic by the same creator showed two virions as a father and son duo, where the father character his son to be a strong independent virion and the son character fails to latch onto a host cell on time and gets eradicated in the process. One comic depicted virus molecules answering their door to an RTPCR test, while another comic satirically presented the myth of how some people think that the virus does not attack physically fit and strong individuals.

6.1.12 Essential workers

Two comics explored the role of essential workers during the pandemic. Essential workers are generally defined as essential infrastructure workers during the

COVID-19 epidemic who "protect their communities while ensuring continuity of functions critical to public health and safety, as well as economic and national security" [17]. One comic depicted them in a conventional superhero line-up where the aesthetics resembled the cover page of a superhero comic book. The other comic illustrated how even though the essential workers were some of the most important people throughout the pandemic, they were not appreciated enough by the corporations where they worked and some were even denied a living wage. This section stood at 1.0% of the total contributions.

6.1.13 Anti-mandate

Two comics illustrated the instances of people being 'anti-mandate' when certain rules were enforced. The term 'anti-mandate' was mostly in reference to vaccines mandates put in the United States of America in 2021[18]. The characters in these comics were depicted as trying to cure themselves through inappropriate self-research methods but avoiding the vaccines. The second comic depicted a protagonist as being ignorant of the mandates themselves by going to a bar and then being scared for humanity's future when he sees other people doing the same thing. This section stands equal to the previous section with contributions at 1.0%.

6.2 EMERGENT THEMES FROM R/INDIA

The following analysis showcases the themes that emerged from the content of 50 comics from the r/india subreddit of Reddit.com. This subreddit mainly had 5 themes that were consistent throughout the illustrations. The thematic patterns observed were criticism of the government bodies, following protocol, essential workers, disparity of living conditions, and distressing news. The percentage distribution is depicted in Figure 2.

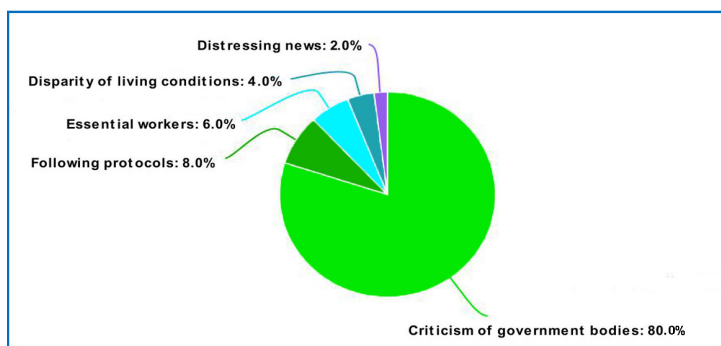


Fig. 2. Emergent themes from 50 pandemic-related comics on the r/india subreddit

6.2.1 Criticism of government bodies

The largest section belonged to the comics that were criticizing the government in one form or another. Taking up 80% of the total contributions, this group had subthemes within itself, however, critique of the government figures or bodies were the common denominator for all. Out of the 40 total comics in this section, 29 had a direct reference to the current prime minister of India in the form of cartoonish illustrations, where they blamed him for the following: the deaths during the pandemic, mismanagement of the vaccines, incompetence of the government, publicity during vaccine distribution, stealing credit from the supreme court of India for free vaccinations, hiding numbers during the pandemic, economic inflation, and lack of facilities. Some comics portrayed him as a crocodile that was crying tears at the death of Indians, while another portrayed him as a grave digger trying to get votes from buried corpses. One comic displayed the PM's face with a beard made out of skeleton heads. In other comics where the focus was not on the prime minister of India, several comics targeted the government bodies for letting the vaccines get approved before proper testing, letting certain religions gather in masses, mishandling of the government vaccination web portal called *cowin.gov.in*, and the spread of misinformation during the pandemic.

6.2.2 Following protocols

At 8.0%, this section of comics illustrated instances of people adhering or not adhering to protocols placed in India during the COVID pandemic. One comic illustrated a police constable running after a civilian who was out during a curfew, while another comic showcased a character wishing everyone on a religious festival but still wary of the social distance. One comic portrayed followers of the two largest religions of India being equally ignorant about the pandemic and illustrated them as praying to the coronavirus itself. Another illustration highlighted the hypocritical behavior of the Indian politicians where don't adhere to the wearing of masks.

6.2.3 Essential workers

6% of the total sample had illustrations on the themes of essential workers. Two of the comics depicted the world being thankful to the essential workers of the country, which were the doctors, the police, the sanitation workers, and the nurses. One of the comics visualized the people of India sitting in a boat, while the essential workers saved them from a shipwreck by carrying the boat on their backs. A single panel comic illustrated a character wearing hospital scrubs in the form of a conventional Hindu goddess with six arms. The arms respectively held a thermometer, a scalpel, a clipboard, a sphygmomanometer, an injection, and a bottle of medicine.

6.2.4 Disparity of living conditions

Making up 4% of the total contributions, this section of comics drew comparisons between the living conditions of certain groups of people. One comic showcased an urban family enjoying their work-from-home jobs and paralleled it with another poor family struggling during the lockdown because of a lack of work opportunities. Another comic depicted a

character from America who was against vaccination proclaiming their refusal to get vaccinated which was paralleled with an image of a woman in India who was standing around a busy crematorium asking the previous lady if she could take her unused vaccine instead.

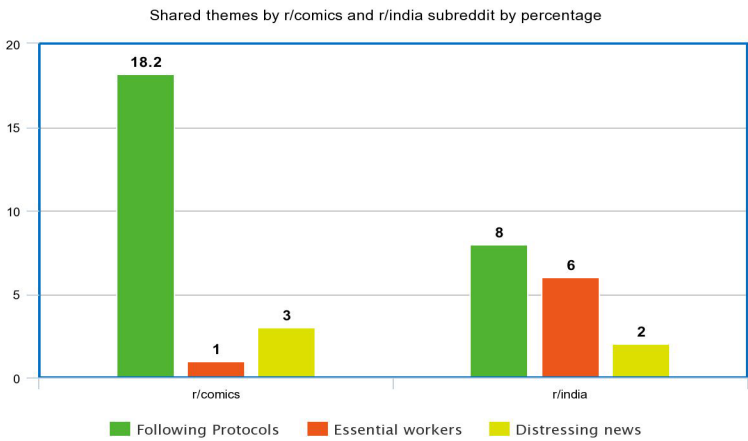
6.2.5 Distressing news

The final theme that arose from the data was that of distressing news. 2% of the comics showcased characters who were sitting at their home watching the news and learning that they were getting increasingly surrounded by virus molecules.

7 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis shows that the 205 most interacted comics of the r/comics subreddit yielded 13 distinct themes of topics, whereas the analysis of 50 most interacted comics on the r/india subreddit produced 5 distinct themes. The most consistent themes for the former subreddit were comics regarding 'Lockdown' and 'Following protocol' at 18.2% each whereas the latter subreddit was dominated by the theme 'Criticism of government bodies' at 80% of the total contributions. Three themes that were shared

Fig. 3. Shared themes by r/comics and r/india subreddit by the percentage of total contributions



by both the subreddits were 'Following protocols', 'Essential workers', and 'Distressing news', however, their percentage distributions were varied, which is depicted in Figure 3.

8 CONCLUSION

This paper tried to thematically analyze the top 205 comics from the r/comics subreddit and 50 comics from the r/india subreddit. The intent was of the research was to gain insight into the content of the comics that generated the most interaction from the users of these subreddits. It was found that both the forums only shared 3 themes of similar content whereas 12 were uncommon, 10 from r/comics and 2 from r/india. Even the shared themes showed variability in their percentage distribution amongst the total contributions for both subreddits. This paper finds that the themes that are found to be most engaging in r/comics do not align with the topical interest of the users from r/india. Several factors could be influencing this non-alignment, some of which are inferred as follows: (i) r/comics caters to a global viewership while r/india is mostly browsed by Indian users (ii) r/comics is a subreddit dedicated to comics whereas r/india, though frequently populated with comics, is not solely focused on them, and (iii) there is a mismatch between the number of engagement and subscribers between both the subreddits. A more focused study is needed that can accommodate for all the influencing factors described above, however, that is the scope of future research.

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Keywords:

*Isolation,
resilience, hope,
pandemic comics,
digital graphic
anthology.*

Resilient Comics for Troubled Times: Reading the Indian Comics Anthology “Hope On”

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ABSTRACT

In situations of crisis such as a global pandemic, which manifests as a deeply personal and embodied crisis, the idea of solidarity can be fraught. Comics have been at the forefront in educating, edifying and documenting the way we deal with this humanitarian crisis (Venkatesan and Yuvar, 2020). In April 2020, comic artists in Ernakulam district, from Kerala (India), collected real-life stories on life during the pandemic from strangers on social media. Six of those stories were adapted and presented in the form of a digital comic book titled, Hope On- An Anthology of Comics. Portraying themes of optimism, compassion and solidarity, digital copies of the comics have been circulated freely on social media, and have been hugely popular since mid-December, 2020. All the stories in 'Hope On' have been curated and edited by Kochi based comic artists Sanid Asif Ali and Nitin Mathews, focusing on women and the issues they faced during the pandemic. An atypical collaboration organised digitally, the comics anthology portrays issues such as isolation, mental health, domestic violence, but in a way that inspires hope in the reader. I propose that the comics serve as a model of resilience in the creative

medium, capturing new modes of engagement with social anxieties in a crisis situation. Scholarship on resilience literature would be used to analyse how the form as well as content of this anthology looks at new ways of cultural solidarity in isolating times such as the one propelled by the Covid-19 pandemic. While looking at the idea of solidarity in the narratives, we also look at the borders of engagement, that gatekeeps the marginalized, who do not feature in these stories.

1 INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about shifts in global politics, economic, health, socio-cultural and religious practices, resulting in abrupt changes in livelihoods all around the world. It has led to a rise in fear, anxiety stress and depression among the population [1]. Public health actions, such as social distancing, made people feel isolated and lonely and increased stress and anxiety. A number of studies have shown the impact that COVID-19 can have on people's well-being, due to its ability to produce a full-scale mental health crisis, especially in countries with a large number of people affected by the disease [2]. To address the mental stress created due to the pandemic, WHO advised paying "attention to [your] own needs and feelings" and to "engage in healthy activities that [you] enjoy and find relaxing" [3]. There was a need for communication to create awareness and to lessen the fear that the virus had created in the people, and various media of communication were engaged. In the early days of the global pandemic, human creativity has centered largely on simple forms of relief and release. Amidst the confinement measures put in place due to the pandemic, people sought to cope through the extended stasis via creative methods of communication and the mass art form of comics have been one such outlet. This paper attempts to study a

digital comic anthology, titled *Hope On- An Anthology of Comics* (2020), collected and edited by comic artists in Kerala (India), on real-life stories regarding life during the pandemic from strangers on social media. Portraying themes of optimism, compassion and solidarity, I propose that the comics serve as a model of resilience in the creative medium, capturing new modes of engagement with social anxieties in a crisis situation. While looking at the idea of solidarity in the narratives, we also look at the borders of engagement, gatekeeping the marginalized, who do not feature in these stories.

2 INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has transformed bodily and communal spaces, thereby bringing massive transformation in social interactions and daily routines. These disruptions occur concomitantly across a multitude of perspectives (scientific, political, social, cultural) and levels of seeing (microscopic, personal, national, global) that encapsulate the full scope and impact of the pandemic [4]. Literatures of the pandemic, both immediate (fragmentary, expressing the lived experience of the pandemic in real time) and remote (works written much after any pandemic, as well as works written about imagined future pandemics), are archival repositories of these disruptions during times of crisis. Sucharita Sarkar notes that both these types—immediate and remote literatures of the pandemic—offer readers a “range and depth of coping and learning resources” that make them both “instantly and enduringly popular and fascinating” [5]. These pandemic narratives—print, film, graphic, text, audio, visual—take us out of our “individual experiences of fear, grief, despair and miscomprehension” towards more “affirmative and enabling connections with others and with the world: from isolated panic to collective understanding” [5]. In an increasingly visual society, images are a vital component of pandemic literature(s), and contribute to mapping a visual culture

of contagion.

Comics, being pop cultural artefacts, have immensely contributed to the visual culture of contagion, and have been globally used for knowledge transfer during the Covid-19 pandemic. From newspaper cartoons, to drawn diary comics, to webcomics, to graphic art narratives of quarantine, visual mediums have been critical in documenting the impacts of the pandemic. Historically speaking, comics have served a crucial function in illustrating and constructing specific views of the social world during pandemics. For instance, comic responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1980s and '90s include *Doonesbury* by Garry Trudeau, *Risky Business*, *Safer Sex Comix*, *Strip AIDS USA*, *The Adventures of Bleachman*, and *AIDS News* etc., addressing political, social, and medical aspects of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Comics' engagement with recent pandemics such as H1N1 and Ebola is significant, such as Gary Varvel's editorial cartoons on H1N1, or even comics such as *Sarszilla* by Dan Collins on SARS. The graphic medium has various advantages in this regard: "the possibility of participation and intervention during the reading process", illustrations overcome "cultural and linguistic barriers", "sensitive issues" can be approached easily, the creative format encourages "curiosity for further reading", as well the development of critical thinking [6]. As such, comics can depict and articulate spatial, temporal, and relational aspects of the pandemic in ways that may be more challenging for other media to portray. As Sweetha Saji, Sathyaraj Venkatesan, and Brian Callender note, comics, as both a visual medium and cultural product, "capture the intricate stories, agonies of existence, and new terms of social, cultural, and political engagement" of the pandemic in immediate and visceral ways [7]. Venkatesan and Yuvaraj note that comics have been at the forefront in "educating, edifying, and documenting the way we deal with this humanitarian crisis" [8]. Unlike other media, comics are "engaging, colourful and compelling", which is why they have been "grabbing attention relatively

effortlessly" [8]. These graphic documentations range from narratives on education, ethics, health care during the pandemic, historical pandemic related art, comics by healthcare providers/patients, as well as documentations of everyday survival during these periods of crisis. In short, through "harnessing the power of visuals, text, and storytelling in a memorable and engaging format", comics function as a vehicle to educate and inform the public about the virus and healthful behaviours. [9]. Saji and Venkatesan and propose the term 'covidity' to encompass the totality of experiences that these comics express. In other words, the neologism covidity captures the "philosophical, material, and emotional responses" to the COVID-19 pandemic [7].

Responses to Covid-19 in the form of comics have been burgeoning on both traditional and non-traditional platforms. The 2020 pandemic saw a shift of the comics media from print to digital form. Primarily circulated through social media, these comics serve to document the pandemic, share public health information, and provide a creative outlet for expressing the trauma of Covid-19. Comics shared by social media have given voice to a breadth of global experiences of the pandemic, bypassing traditional gatekeepers that usually determine which narratives are shared [10]. They also present the readers with a greater degree of dialogue through interactivity that may be impossible in print format. As such, these comics are guiding the way we remember and process the pandemic experience. Digital comics like these may resonate with many because they depict not only a sense of shared trauma, but also shared resilience.

3 READING HOPE ON: AN ANTHOLOGY OF COMICS AS A PUBLIC RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Graphic documentations of the pandemic have globally focused on recording the lived experiences of people, who have been isolated socially and

geographically, yet are connected through the commonality of the crisis at hand. Alabi notes that these comics serve as tools for depicting social realities such as disruptions in socio-political, economic, and religious practices, for communicating crisis through education and awareness, as well as for serving as a coping strategy to allay fear and distress [11]. The comics medium serves as a conduit for social enlightenment and critique, as well as a vehicle for communicating experiences of psychological distress or relief in critical times.

Comics have served as a popular medium of community art in these deeply isolating times. Serving as participatory mediums, comics challenge "reductive, dehumanising and apolitical narratives" that are often propagated via mainstream media or even academia, thereby highlighting everyday experiences that are usually overlooked [12]. As a learning and coping strategy, the use of comics to create a sense of community has been tapped globally during the Covid-19 pandemic. A notable example is the Drawing Together initiative by the Graphic Medicine International Cooperative, which is part of a global, collaborative process of sense-making of the Covid-19 experience that has entangled humans across social, geographical and disciplinary boundaries. This initiative arranges virtual meets on a weekly or monthly basis, where participants are given a topic which they draw and share, with the help of a facilitator. These initiatives are an effort to "combat the social isolation of pandemic related lockdowns, and to support and promote community" [5].

In India, a similar initiative has been launched by Kochi based comic artists Sanid Asif Ali and Nitin Mathew. In April 2020, they initiated a call for real-life stories on life during the pandemic from strangers on social media, at a time when people were "isolated on little islands", enveloped in "despair, confusion and agony" [13]. Six of those stories were adapted and presented in the form of a digital comic book titled, *Hope On- An Anthology of Comics*. Portraying

overarching themes of "optimism, compassion and goodness", the anthology focuses on women and the issues they faced during the pandemic, and their "karmic journey towards redemptive change" [13]. The six stories in *Hope On* have been curated and edited by Ali and Mathew, who circulated digital copies of the comics on social media. The anthology has been hugely popular since mid-December, 2020, with a print version also being rolled out recently (2021). An atypical crowdsourced collaboration, the comics anthology portrays difficult issues such as isolation, mental health, domestic violence, but in a way that inspires hope in the reader.

In the preface to the work, Ali and Mathew state that the book is about hope, and that each of the stories cling to this thematic, created as they are in the deeply uncertain times of a global pandemic. Each of the six stories in the collection trace an individual's trajectory towards the path of positive reflection and growth, by overcoming mental and physical roadblocks through grit and perseverance. I propose that these stories can be read as narratives of resilience, that use the medium of comics in the confessional mode to (re)live a traumatic past/present vicariously. By knitting together these disparate stories with a similar moral bent, the anthology makes connections between the embodied experiences of people facing the same situation of crisis, and the universal will to overcome trauma through resilience, hoping for a better future.

The concept of resilience involves "an ability to bend but not break, bounce back, and perhaps even grow in the face of adverse life experiences" [14]. It includes a refashioning of "self that includes a conscious effort to move forward." [14]. Against the overwhelming chaos of life, resilience involves a recognition of hope, that "life does indeed make sense, despite chaos, brutality, stress, worry or despair" [14]. In other words, the resilient individual struggles against the absurdist notion of the 'meaninglessness' of life to

create meaning and purpose in suffering, finding the will to "move forward" [14]. The idea of moving forward is crucial to the component of resilience, since it indicates the subject's successful navigation towards a better future. The sufferer draws on his or her "beliefs (eg, religious, spiritual, or beliefs about justice), values (eg, mattering), existential goals (eg, purpose in life or guiding principles), to motivate or sustain coping and well-being" [15]. In essence, this sense of 'hope' or 'meaning making' is a crucial aspect of resilience as an individual concept. However, the concept of resilience is indebted to culture, because it a normative concept, related to moral values and social aspirations [16], [17], not just a functional concept related to doing well in the face of adversity. Thus, resilience has important moral, social, and political dimensions. An ethnographic approach to resilience across cultures must take into account that individual resilience is a matter of navigating systems of oppressive poverty, insidious violence, vastly unequal opportunities for economic or educational advancement, or overt marginalization on the grounds of sexual or religious affiliation [16].

Each of the six stories place hope in human empathy, generosity, solidarity, and efforts to build new lives, in the face of adversity. The first story, "And that was that" by Neha Gupta, illustrated by Sanid Asif Ali, dwells on an act of kindness from unexpected individuals during the pandemic, building on the need for mutual cooperation during trying times. The narrative depicts a duo of women, shifting into a new apartment at the beginning of the pandemic. With the onset of the lockdown, they are trapped in their place, and become restless, which is depicted through the visual iconography of them performing the same tasks round the clock, for days on an end.. They muster up the courage to ask the landlady for the keys to the terrace for fresh air, and expect the worst, their faces a mask of apprehension. A random act of kindness (passing on the keys for them to keep)

on the landlady's behalf, allows the girls to avoid their mundane circumstances, and access the terrace, thereby stressing on the need for mutual cooperation during these tough times. Another narrative that runs along these lines is "Knock for Chocolates" by Nirosha Shanmugam, illustrated by Nitin Mathew, which is a take on the simplicity of human connections, depicting a night when random strangers got together in order to celebrate Christmas with the protagonist. In a new place away from home, the protagonist attempts to ward off biting loneliness and nostalgia by putting up the effort to socialise, inviting everyone to share chocolates with her. The narrative makes a point for empathy and connection, in times when these feelings are fleeting and have to be carefully cultivated. The theme is further elaborated in Sheeba Nath, Sneha Cecil and artist Geeti Barai's "Stepping Up", depicting the heroic story of the narrator's mother, who stepped out of the comfort of her home to mobilise help and support for the needy, during the early days of the pandemic. Hope begins in the dark, the narrative argues, as the narrator's mother braves the rising rates of infection to serve the people. In the final panel of the story, the mother stands firmly, her conscience at peace for the services she renders, and her figure stands as a beacon of hope in the dark night. This figurative enunciation of resilience harkens upon the broader thematic of empathising and being hopeful in times of crisis.

The next story, "Changes" by Padmakumar Narasimhamurthy, with art by Aakash Ambekesh, depicts the inevitability of change in life, and the inherently human tendency of error and reform. The narrator's mother, who has an aversion towards a Muslim friend of the narrator, changes her attitudes when she is cared for by a Muslim girl during the terminal days of her life. "Ties that Bind", contributed by an anonymous narrator, and illustrated by Parvati Menon depicts the ties binding human life, drawing upon the strength of two friends with mental health

issues, who break their friendship to save each other from spiralling into further trauma. It draws upon the idea of inner strength to break free of traumatic pasts, that humans don't realise they have within themselves. In a similar fashion, "Broken Crayon" by Jayashri K S and artist Jess M J depicts the protagonist's journey from a dark and abusive pit of violence to walking away from destruction, towards a future rife with possibilities, spurred by a random act of kindness by a stranger. These two narratives are extremely potent in bringing forth two aspects of the pandemic wrought havoc – that of mental health issues, and of domestic violence, which peaked during the lockdowns. These stories depict how change is the only constant, and embracing it is the only way to move forward.

These narratives visualise resilience and celebrate the transition from vulnerability to strength. The colour palette is bright, all throughout, despite the sombre themes that the book interacts with, in conjunction with the broader thematic of reflecting positivity. The women in each of these stories go through moments of self-questioning during crises and move towards a positive re-fashioning of the self, creating new meanings and hopes for existence. The visual iconography in each narrative begins with apprehension, and a mood of tension: be it through the bruised face of the abuse survivor in "Broken Crayon", or the worried face of the lady in "Stepping Up", as she wonders whether to leave her home for community service, in the thick of pandemic, or even through the protagonist's lonely and homesick expression in "Knock for Chocolates", as she thinks of spending a festival away from home, in isolation (Fig 1). The iconography of mistrust and apprehension gradually gives way to realisation in each of these characters, depicting a shift towards the will to move forward, to connect, in spite of adversities. This is visually implied through the images of protagonists in the final panels of each story: each of them experience change in novel ways, and enjoy liberation (Fig 2). This liberation, for instance, may be from past

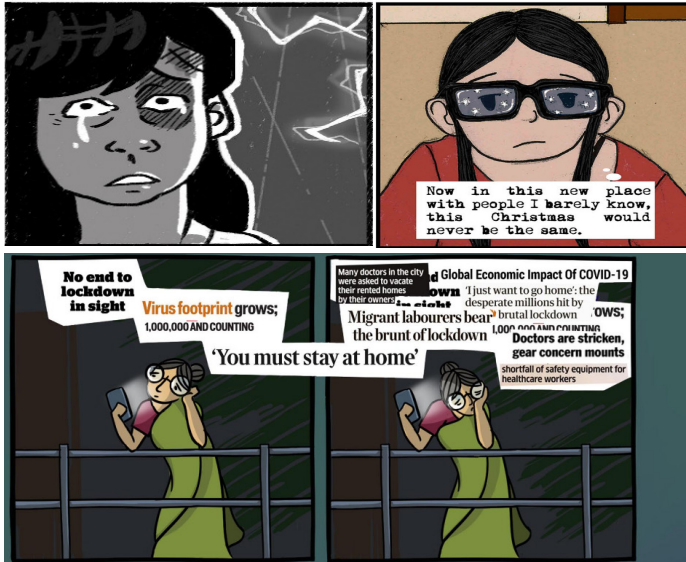
trauma in "Broken Crayon" (which is depicted from the use of colours in the final panel of an other wise monochromatic storyboard, depicting the detachment of the protagonist from an abusive past), or liberation from ties that we hold dearly, but are harmful for us, as portrayed in "Ties that Bind" (where the narrator and her friend are visualised as connected by the two ends of a thread, depicting companionship, only for the narrator to realise at the end, that true companionship can be sought from within, and that the other end of the thread lies in us), or even the liberation of the mother from self-doubt in "Stepping Up". The ability to work towards a new life of liberation in vulnerable times is what these narratives endorse. Some of the narratives do not refer to the lived experience of the pandemic itself – instead, they reconstruct a time when the protagonists faced situations that are eerily similar to what the world faced during the pandemic. These reconstructions of past events to evoke a picture of the present indicates a participatory 'acknowledgement' both on behalf of the reader and the narrator, of the resilience to walk away from counterproductive situations. These image-text

Fig. 1. (i),(ii),(iii) The visual iconography in each narrative begins with apprehension, and a mood of tension.

Fig. 1. (i) (top left)
From "Broken Crayon"

Fig. 1. (ii) (top right)
From "Knock for Chocolates"

Fig. 1. (iii) (bottom)
From "Stepping Up"





narratives thus evoke the need to connect people through similar psychic and social pressures that arose in course of traumatic events like the pandemic. The need to keep hope alive against all odds binds all the stories together.

Hilary Chute, in *Disaster Drawn* explains that the comics format supports the act of “bearing witness” to traumatic events [17]. The autoethnographic work of sharing a story, and making a comic serves the purpose of community participation, allowing for the integration of an enjoyable activity (drawing, making comics, sharing them with family and friends) during times that have been stressful for all. Also, by its very nature, the comics medium is one of co-creation, that requires equal participation on behalf of the artist as well as the reader, allowing them both to engage in a dialogue, which is all the more heightened during periods of isolation such as a pandemic. In so far as it uses the hybrid medium of text and image, the multimodal literacies embedded within the form allow for a deeper documentation of everyday struggles. Marianne Hirsch contends that it is this “visual verbal literacy” of comics that allows it to “respond to the needs of the present moment” [18]. As such, the comics format is resilient in itself, because of its capacity to represent narratives of the past and present with equal immediacy, and also because it remains firmly political in its representational tactics: in what is seen and what remains hidden.

Fig. 2. (i),(ii) Each of the protagonists experiences change in novel ways, and enjoys liberation from their vulnerabilities, hoping for a better future.

Fig. 2. (i) (left) From “Broken Crayon”

Fig. 2. (ii) (right) From “Stepping Up”

3 CONCLUSION

All these stories are directed as multidirectional engagements with the idea of resilience in the face of suffering, rather than being posited as competitive accounts. Yet, the narratives within the anthology are deeply restrictive in the sense that they are a product of the digital culture in India. The writers and artists are largely concentrated within the urban, middle-class, English-speaking demographic, whose experience of the pandemic is vastly different from a much larger demographic whose experiences have not made it to the anthology. The working class, for instance, represents one such category, who lived through dire circumstances owing to joblessness during the pandemic. Tens of thousands of migrant labourers in India walked thousands of kilometres from urban centres to their homes, due to lack of jobs, when the pandemic hit in 2020. Many died on the way. The question remains: what do resilience and hope mean, in the face of major socio-economic and structural inequalities? More importantly, what does it say about the inhibiting nature of this digital crowdsourced documentation of pandemic narratives? What/ who are these voices articulating their experiences and who reads and connects with them? The idea of resilience is entrenched in these narratives as an individual enterprise, but it cannot be divorced from its ethnographic engagement with socio-economic and political structures. As a response to the pandemic, the anthology situates the importance of hope in bleak times, but also raises important questions by means of its representational tactics: what happens to those marginalised voices that are not articulated during these times? Can their narratives dare to inspire hope?

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Keywords:

Comics, Folk
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Life, Love and Material in the era of Covid 19: Debunking the Populist Rhetoric

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ABSTRACT

The discourse on pandemic is subject to easy manipulation as it spans across several disciplines and in a way leads to a problematic conflation of nature, culture, biology, and technology thereby allowing politics of language and populist rhetoric to fester. The rhetoric within which nature is situated during the COVID-19 pandemic has leaned towards retribution. There have been innumerable conjectures, both based on research, and otherwise, to attribute the contagion to unleashing of nature's wrath. There is an immanent problem with proposition of natural retribution as it drives one's attention away from facts and leaves the masses in a credulous quandary. This paper aims to explore a range of visual depictions from comics, folk art and zines that encapsulate experiences of putting up a strong defence, caring, isolation and boredom. The study will be informed by the broader framework of media theory and culture studies for issues dealing with panic, boredom, and life in general to aid the critical analysis.

INTRODUCTION

As the world grappled with paranoia, pandemonium, and payload of misinformation around pandemic, it also found creative ways to channelize its anxiety and conquer boredom. While the state imposed laws of social distancing and quarantine, the reality of pandemic was captured by several artists which this paper touches upon in the light of theoretical and philosophical criticism produced during the pandemic. Pandemic forced people into confinement as the only manner in which this deadly disease could be contained was through isolation unlike the management model of leprosy which involved exclusion as stated by Foucault, "If it is true that the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, which to a certain extent provided the model for and general form of the great Confinement, then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects... The first is that of a pure community, the second that of a disciplined society. [45]" It is in fact true that the management model of COVID19 followed the lines of the management model of the plague as people were expected to observe discipline and were in a way trained to restrict themselves to their houses while meticulous measures were taken to create provisions for restricted mobility and training people to wear masks and to constantly sanitize their surroundings as well as objects that they bought from outside. The reason for this disciplinary mechanism was to prevent the spread of the contagious disease by imposing a strict control on the circulation of bodies.

SOUTH ASIAN WEBCOMICS: DISPELLING MISINFORMATION

On the one hand the relentless efforts were being made by the frontline workers and caregivers who persevered to render their services round the clock, on the other hand fake news and misinformation was also being circulated across borders quite fervently. An

uninvited infodemic came hurtling along in the wake of pandemic. "On March 8 2020, the director-general of the World Health Organisation warned of the "infodemic" of misinformation about the coronavirus, urging communicators to use "facts not fear" to battle the flood of rumours and myths. (Weaving)" Weiman Kow, a graphic designer based in Singapore, turned out to be one of the most effective Southeast Asian voices who practiced due diligence to fact check the information that she shared through her comics. In a bid to counter misinformation spread through several platforms, she has launched her own campaign, 'Comics for Good.' In an interview given to The Hindu, she said, "My focus is now on making sure good information reaches people in Third World countries, where health systems are weaker, where governments are unable to put in extensive tracing measures and subsidies for the public to come forward when sick."



Fig. 1. Facts Vs Fiction
© Weiman Kow

Most of her webcomics are six to nine panels long in which she presents a neat breakdown of loads of information in steps by using a wide range of closed-class lexical items such as indexical lines combined with variations in lettering to draw out the discerning ability in the reader. For instance, in the strip above, which is a part of a longer web-comic, she delineates the problems of convalescing fact and fiction in simple language without resorting to any visual metaphors, only simple illustration, underlining, numbering, and earmarking the sources and sites from where she collected information, thereby following a scientific approach, the importance of which has been

endorsed by philosophers like Latour and Žižek. Her webcomics serve as primers or guides in different countries to disseminate vital news and information.



one applies Erwin Panofsky's pre-iconographical description to a substantial corpus of visual response to the pandemic, one cannot deny there is a striking similarity in the form when it comes to depiction of the virus as a monster, a supervillain, bete noir (homegrown response Nagraj Strikes: The attack of Coronaman or Priya's Shakti) perhaps because as Panofsky would put it, the intrinsic meaning or the underlying concept is the same. Therefore, it is difficult to find overarching cultural inflections or variations in South Asian Graphic or Visual Response to the pandemic. Following a similar theme Ernest Ng, alias Don't Like that Bro, from Malaysia who wears many hats, a digital content creator has produced an anime style 'If Malaysia was an Anime: COVIDBALLZ', a webcomic that takes heed of the state's measures and people's response to COVID in their country. It presents an anthropomorphized version of COVID 19 as the supervillain who is on a quest to wipe out the masses as shown in the figure, the two panels show different portrayal of the two variants depicted as extra-terrestrial organisms in different shades of green and blue. While the first one seems to be low on its damage power the newer variant is better equipped with the additional headgear and briefs added to its sartorial ensemble while the doctors

Fig. 2. If Malaysia was an Anime: COVIDBALLZ © Ernest Ng

are fully clad with syringes looking similar to swords or light saber. In addition, Covidballz is a satirical reportage as it features real life political leaders and other personalities such as Health Director-General or the Prime Minister of the nation. This comic employs the oft-used military rhetoric to depict the tussle between the virus and the healthcare practitioners. The figure shows two panels from a longer comic, wherein the doctors have gained an upper hand slightly as they were successful in slowing the virus's pace of spreading eventually being able to establish control. However, their triumph is short lived as the new variant arrives which justifies its arrival by building on the populist rhetoric of nature's vengeance which is problematic as institutions start basing their decisions on false premises derived from bewildering imbrication of disciplines thereby obscuring the distinction between fact and fiction. This defensive posture of the post-truth era gets heightened when we see perhaps one of the ministers responding as: "Malaysia is not affected by Climate change," when Malaysia's climate change profile is high risk. Robert Samuels problematizes the use of cultural metaphors to depict the virus, "The reason why I think it is essential to separate nature from language is that we need to affirm the limits of our scientific understanding. If we project language and culture onto nature, we take on the position of being able to know everything, and then when we fail to comprehend something, like how to stop a virus, people turn against science and scientists. One problem is that most people do not understand that science uses probabilities and approximations of reality, and it works through trial and error and consensus.[22]" The usage of popular metaphors does help in establishing familiarity with an unknown disease but at the same time it initiates a sort of chain reaction that leads to spread of misinformation and factoids.

AMOUR AND ENNUI

The 'pan' in the pandemic is redefined in the works of folk artist, Anwar Chitrakar from a village in West Midnapore, Bengal. The ennui of the quiet country life is quite vividly manifested in his works with mirth and merriment, coaxing the audience caught in the frenzy of pandemic to pause and reflect upon their acquired privileges. One such privilege was that of the young lovers. Although touch was forbidden during these times like everything else, intimacy too was restricted and regulated as recreational spaces remained shut. Nevertheless, some respite was offered by the mask which did aid in concealing the identity of the mask wearers as shown in Fig. 3.

Fig. 3 (left) Amaar dushtu koi? (Where are you, you naughty?)

Fig. 4 (right) 60 na go peg © Anwar Chitrakar



While pandemic seemed to have reduced life to bare necessities and essentiality was being reformulated everyday, it also became a period of excess and ennui. As a result, it witnessed the revival of many old games. Arm wrestling within the confines of one's house is one such way to conquer boredom. [See Fig. 4] As the masses grew positively apathetic to the fear and frenzy perpetrated during the pandemic, leisure seemed to be wrung from the charges that Adorno charged free time with as the focus shifted away from bringing about a change to just bearing it. "Boredom is the reflection of objective dullness.

As such it is in a similar position to political apathy. The most compelling reason for apathy is by no means unjustified feeling of the masses that political participation within the sphere society grants them, and this holds true for all political systems in the world today, can alter their actual existence only minimally. [192]" The modern rendition of folk art, pattachitra style, showed not only the dexterous skills of the artist but also the labour demands imposed upon the artist in such trying times.

Another homegrown response that quite succinctly captures the leisure coping mechanism is Sailesh Gopalan's Saigootherapy, Session number 10-Efficiency deficiency syndrome. The pervasive anxiety underlying unplanned free time gave rise to the DIY wave and a surge in the productivity urge.

Studies have shown that "Confinement, loss of usual routine, and reduced social and physical contact with others were frequently shown to cause boredom and frustration. (Brooks et al.)" To combat such stressors, the symptoms which are exhibited by the perpetual achievement subject- the client are reflected in the figure. The real-life portrayal of a therapist client session in progress visualizes the angst expressed through the frowned eyes of the client and the

alarm expressed by the gaping mouth of the therapist lead to an emotional exchange can be easily felt by the user without using any visual metaphors. On the contrary, Sailesh Gopalan uses the panels as attentions units that Neil Cohn has referred to as a 'window' to any visual scene which highlight parts of a scene in different ways. One can see the constant switch from mono frame-which depicts single active entity to micro frame that depicts less than one active entity in these panels. The fact that coping with the pandemic induced free-time and the

Fig. 5. Efficiency Deficiency Syndrome
© Sailesh Gopalan



guilt of the leisure class posed a serious challenge is also reflected in the comments section.

ZINE ART AND MATERIAL REALITY

Like many other occupational and vocational arenas, the underground art world too suffered a setback if not a major one due to the virtual shift during the pandemic. However, towards the end of the year 2021, Bombay Underground organized Bombay Zine Fest which housed zines by artists from all over the country, a few of which revolved around their experiences during the pandemic. As discussed in the previous examples, pandemic imbued a new life into things and suddenly the most commonplace objects and accompaniments acquired new meanings and in turn, their absent presence reneged and gave way to an extraordinary conspicuous presence on one hand and on the other, the human subject becomes absent. This is quite poignantly illustrated in this zine titled 'Objects' by an Indian graphic designer and design educator Subir Dey, who brings this materialist turn of the pandemic into focus. The frame presents a conglomeration of objects that are spatially focalized by the extradiegetic narrator's voice represented by the captions in red, and temporally by the dates which also in a way testifies its periodization from August 2020 to 8th January, 2021. This periodization is in no way final and fixed as the particular date in January marks the day when the stack of books referred to as 'boi-er-bari' in the vernacular could have been installed, books also became an important part of material experience during the pandemic as physical activities were mostly restricted. The chair on the right side of the frame could be metonymical, standing in for the absent human subject or it could be anthropomorphized as it seems to be lost in thoughts reflected in speech bubble with ellipses lost in thoughts, some dark and some about love. Byung Chul Han's talks about peculiarity of material in the pandemic, "I refer to objects as resting places for life

because they stabilise human life. The same chair and the same table, in their sameness, lend the fickle human life some stability and continuity. We can linger with objects.

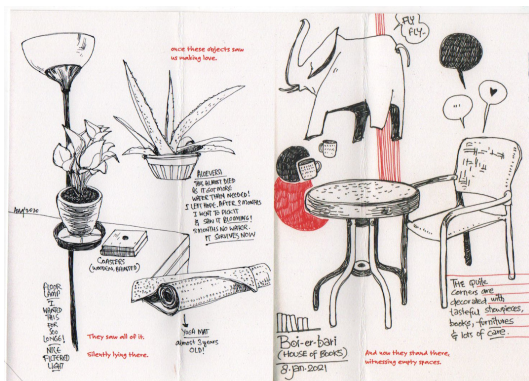


Fig. 6. Objects
© Subir Dey

With information, however, we cannot. (Borchardt)" The picture can also said to be, ostensibly, about love indicating the precarity associated with carnal love when corporeal contact was anti-normative. The figure is, therefore,

a visual iteration of Zizek's stance on love during these times, as stated later. Meanwhile, the non-human compatriots in the frame, elephant yearns to fly away almost absconding like a fugitive leaving the scene in a jiffy scattering the coffee mugs around neglecting the 'care' and 'taste' with which things have been installed in this corner. On the contrary, the left side of the frame seems to have been peopled by painstakingly chosen bric-a-bracs starting from the floor lamp that was invested with desire for a long period and was finally acquired leading to a sense of accomplishment and fulfilment possible due to availability of free time during the pandemic. The 'almost three-year-old' yoga mat points to leisure, perhaps, that has been granted thanks to the pandemic but it in no way guarantees if that is going to be utilized, thus yoga mat just becomes a fetish. The aloe vera plant is a typical example of how politics of care operates especially in the environmental domain. Thus, even care that entails a laborious commitment on the part of caregiver becomes fatal when it is misdirected and misread. The simple line drawings with occasional hatching in black and red coincide

with its zine like attributes at the same time capturing the emptiness and silence of life craftily depicted through a self-reflexive book object, a zine, produced during the pandemic.

From an amorphous portrayal of life during the pandemic, the next zine presents the deontic restraining and quarantining that had become a part of collective reality for people across the globe in the form of a visual analogy wherein the artist likens the human to a shrub that apparently grows indoors. The subject of the visual depiction is analogous to the initial phases of lockdown when humans did have a shrub-like existence, blooming presence albeit defined by the confines of the four walls. The so-called 'proportion' is forced and dictated by the external circumstances. The captions rightly record the experience as 'crippling', the deliberate symmetry in the size of shoots doesn't appear natural but seems like an outcome of pruning or a result of measured care. The existence of such restrictive circumstances is qualified by the time adverbial 'sometimes' indicating hope that is imbued in the last frame of the zine which as far as the template is concerned is an exact replica of the first image, the only difference being the outstretched shoots of the plants whose growth is not tailored by the borders, in fact, the

Fig. 7. Boxed In ©
Funkaree & Anisha
Shetty



branches now permeate the border and go beyond symbolizing a human aspirations and hopes that take shape on their own and decide their own paths. At least with respect to these two images, there's no experiment done with the colour scheme in order to draw parallels with the paradoxical times that the onslaught of the pandemic entailed which is stillness of life as it imposed grave checks on the narrative of progress or downfall that the human race was so busy orchestrating.

CONCLUSION

As the world tries to recuperate from this collective experience of isolation and suffering, it also has to question faulty suppositions, conspiracy theories and heaps of misinformation about the pandemic which will take a long time. The world of visual media has bestowed a fitting response to Covid 19 characterized by the panic presciently summed up in the words of the Slovenian philosopher, "We live in a moment when the greatest act of love is to stay distant from the object of your affection. When governments renowned for ruthless cuts in public spending can suddenly conjure up trillions. When toilet paper becomes a commodity as precious as diamonds.(Zizek)" There is an immanent ambiguity of the populist rhetoric employed in the discourse on pandemic wherein incontrovertibly the caregivers and healthcare workers are perceived to be imbued with superpowers, but at the same time they are in relentless service of the leisure class who has surplus time for play. Nevertheless, visual media has certainly played a very crucial role in spreading awareness and narrating experiences of the ones who were locked up in isolation. Panic, when historically perceived, has given birth to innumerable cases of hysteria, anarchy and disorientation which remained in check to a certain extent owing to this selective privilege granted to many who creatively express their anxiety.

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Utterly Butterly Indian: A Study of Amul Panels during the COVID- 19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Placing itself under the scholarship concerning 'postcolonial modernity', this paper proposes a framework for the study of Amul panels published during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper is divided into two parts- Communication of Information and Evocation of Popular Culture- that explore the possible roles fulfilled by the Amul panels during the pandemic. These arguments are illustrated by a thorough analysis of a selection of Amul panels published during the pandemic between March 2020 and May 2020. The aim of this exercise is to offer a potential theoretical framework for the study of hybrid mediascapes that saturate the South Asian societies.

1 INTRODUCTION

... to announce the general end of modernity even as an epoch, much less as an epoch, much less as an attitude or an ethos, seems premature, if not patently ethnocentric, at a time when non-Western people everywhere begin to engage critically their own hybrid modernities. [1]

Spatialization and periodization of modernity as a Euro-American cultural phenomenon bound to the early half of twentieth century, brings down the curtain of modernity even before the creative agencies of the Third World countries have had their chances to perform. The 'nominal' definition of modernity, a noun-based designation, establishes Western aesthetics as the ideal standard against which artistic endeavours of rest of the cultures are mapped merely as 'derivatives' [2]. This misleading binary of innovative centres and imitative peripheries has been responsible for the stunted growth of scholarship concerning the visual cultures of South Asia [3]. Since the primary focus of art historians is directed by Western standards, the material diversity of visual cultures that saturate the public arenas of these societies has largely remained unexplored. However, writing at the turn of twenty-first century Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, in their essay "Public Modernity in India", break this cultural monopoly of the West over artistic trends and conceive modernity as a global experience. Appadurai writes, "Modernity is now everywhere, it is simultaneously everywhere, and it is interactively everywhere" [4]. This framework of locally produced modernity allows to expand the tightly focused concentration of fine arts to mediascapes of urban India like- cinema, public parades, theme parks, posters, pamphlets, magazines, commercial billboards, signboards, paintings on vehicles and the sidewalks [5]. Once side-lined as pale reflections of a Euro-American original under the bias of Western aesthetics, these dense sites of expressions can now under the umbrella of 'postcolonial modernity' studied via an interdisciplinary approach. "Utterly Butterly Indian" is an attempt to explore one such mediascape- the Amul panels.

"There is something about butter- soft and mellow-gold as winter- that evokes nostalgia" [6]. The nostalgic quality that Jug Suraiya here ascribes to butter, is not an intrinsic element of the food item but a consequence of the unchanged advertising legacy of the Amul

brand. Beginning from 1966, Amul- India's leading dairy production company, has made use of visual commentary to market its products, a model that remains successful even today. In this journey of 54 years, while depicting various themes the Amul girl has played the roles of both the mascot of the company and the chronicler of the contemporary India. Almost all themes be it- sports, politics, films and social issues, are pictorially covered by the Amul panels [7]. Therefore, going through the archives of Amul panels is like taking a nostalgic journey down the memory lane. A treasure trove for cultural historians, these panels offer a good gist of the major milestones of the nation. However, the focus of the present paper is not a historical event, but the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper proposes to offer a theoretical framework for the study of Amul panels, through a close analysis of the Amul panels published during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 2020 and May 2020. The paper is divided into two parts: Communication of Information and Evocation of Popular Culture. The first part of the paper foregrounds communication as the primary duty of newspaper cartoons and even outlines the necessary conditions to fulfil this task. This is followed by an analysis of Amul panels that communicated information during the pandemic. The purpose of this section is to establish the role Amul panels as the national dispenser of information. The second part focuses on use of popular culture in newspaper cartoons to convey the message. Drawing from the use of pop culture in Western media, this segment discusses how the Amul panels connect with the consumers by evoking popular culture. To illustrate this point, the paper offers an examination of pandemic culture exhibited in the Amul panels. The paper ends by deliberating the limitations of these theoretical frameworks and eventually indicates towards the 'generic slipperiness' of the Amul panels. This part of the paper also tries to address the issue of

objectification of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Amul panels.

2 COMMUNICATION OF INFORMATION

Martin J. Medhurst and Michael A. DeSousa in their essay "Political Cartoon as Rhetorical Form: A Taxonomy of Graphic Discourse" build upon Phillip K. Tompkins' rhetorical criticism on non-oratorical works, to propose a scheme for the analysis of newspaper cartoons. Medhurst argues that slight modifications in the neo-classical canons of rhetoric allow the cartoonist to shape audience responses for 'persuasive communication'. While these specific rhetorical techniques may not be applicable to the Indian breed of Amul cartoons, the idea of communication offers an apt framework for the study of the panels. Medhurst emphasises, "... to account adequately for the central fact of the art- that cartooning is a form of persuasive communication" [8]. Therefore, whether the newspaper cartoon employs pictorial rhetoric or not, it should achieve the task of communication. This centrality of communication is also echoed by E.H. Gombrich in his chapter "The Cartoonist's Armoury" where he writes, "... telescoping of a whole chain of ideas into one pregnant image, is indeed the essence of wit" [9]. Commending the ability of the graphic artist to compress a complex idea into a comprehensive image, Gombrich foregrounds communication as the primary duty of the cartoonist. An equally important party in this equation of communication is the newspaper reader, who should be easily able to decode the pictorial message. Discussing the reading patterns of the modern newspaper reader, Lawrence H. Streicher writes, "For the man in a rush or the reader of only the headlines or lead paragraphs the caricature is a way of catching at a glance the meaning of an event, a person in the news, or a pictorial summary of a current power constellation" [10]. To communicate with these modern readers, the newspaper cartoon needs to so

precisely depict the issue at hand that it is made clear at a glance. With an experience spanning for more than five decades the Amul panels have achieved this level of expertise in the business of communication, something that was put to a great use during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Fig. 1 (left) *Better saaf than sorry!*



Fig. 2. (right) *Khaali haath nahin, thaali haath thanks*

As number of corona cases were rising all over India, it became imperative to remain updated with governmental policies and the latest information regarding the healthcare services. Regularly published both in the newspaper and online platform, Amul panels ensured that all this information gets pictorial communicated to the public. In March 2020, when WHO declared coronavirus a global pandemic [11], Amul launched its first panel on this issue with the tagline "Better saaf (clean) than sorry!" (fig. 1). In the cartoon, Amul girl can be seen washing her hands at a washing basin, urging the fellow citizens to regularly wash their hands to prevent the spread of the virus. The title below Amul logo reads "Always Safe" suggesting that Amul butter is prepared under hygienic conditions. Soon after the WHO declaration, PM Narendra Modi in his first address to the nation on this crisis called for a Janta curfew on 22nd March 2020 and urged the citizens to express appreciation for essential service workers by clapping and banging utensils at 5pm [12]. With utmost excitement the Amul

Fig. 3. *Do the Light thing!*



girl carried out this task as in the panel she can be seen banging plates from the balcony (fig. 2). The tagline of the panel asks the citizens to not sit idle and express appreciation by clapping the utensils. In his subsequent

address the PM appealed the citizens to switch off electric lights at 9pm on 5th April for five minutes and light candles or diyas or flash torchlights or mobile lights, standing at their doorsteps or balconies. The PM reasoned that this collective gesture will dispel the darkness spread by the coronavirus and kindle a ray of hope amongst the countrymen [13]. Like a faithful citizen the Amul girl also participated in this symbolic gesture, suggesting that lighting the diya is the right thing to do (fig. 3). In all these instances, the Amul girl acts as an ideal government ambassador for it not only communicates the governmental plans but also take this communication a step ahead by actively participating in these plans.

Apart from communicating activities that demand pan India participation, the Amul panels also communicated the newly emerging pandemic terminology and the more serious government strategies devised to combat the crisis. In a panel released in April 2020, the Amul girl along with her companion can be seen explaining the need to flatten the curve of corona cases (fig. 4). The tagline of the panel puns over the word curve as "Yahi curvana padega!" (This needs to be get done) [translation my own]. The Amul panel also explained the government scheme of red, orange and green zones, implemented to contain the spread of the virus (fig. 5). Even the government policy of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', proposed to tackle the economic crisis of the pandemic, is funnily conveyed in the panel titled "Aatmakhanirabhar!" Therefore, all through the pandemic the Amul panels pictorially condensed the important information and successfully

Fig. 4. (left) Yahi Curvana padega!

Fig. 5. (right) Red Zone, Orange Zone, Green Zone..





Fig. 6.
Aatmakahnirbhar

with Amul girl as its most enthusiastic news anchor.

3 EVOCATION OF POPULAR CULTURE

While the content communicated in the panels is important, the cultural tools employed to achieve this end also demand an equally close attention. Nicholas Garland, cartoonist for the Daily Telegram, writes, "... bare statement of the idea does not do justice to the force of the cartoon ... caricature, requires some or all of a mixture of caricature, metaphor, distortion, surrealism, deliberate misunderstanding and mockery" [14]. For Garland, it is not only the message but also the means by which it is presented that gives the cartoon its power. Building on Garland's this suggestion, Steve Plumb in his essay "Politicians as Superheroes", discusses how the popular iconography of the superhero comic provide an apt vehicle for the newspaper cartoons to critique the excesses of the politicians. The conclusions drawn by Plumb in his analysis echo Joan L. Corners' statement, "Not only does popular culture reflect our political culture, but the attention to the former may impact our impression of latter" [14]. Therefore, for the western stock of newspaper cartoons the popular culture acts as a creative launch pad to allow the cartoonist to actively respond to the current political equation. This partnership of the political and the popular may not be very profound in the Amul panels however, the Amul panels heavily rely on popular culture for its content. While the Amul panels feed on all popular cultural references- films, sports and literature, the political quotient of these allusions remains understated. Instead of exploiting the popular culture



Fig. 7. (left) Salaamul Namaste

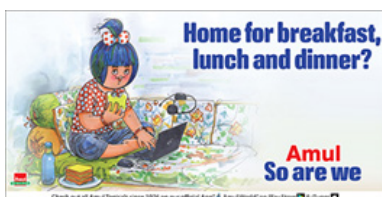


Fig. 8. (right) Home for breakfast, lunch and dinner?

to make overt political critique, the Amul panels evoke popular culture to build affinity amongst the readers and consumers. Geniesa Tay in her study *Embracing Lolitics* remarks, "... part of popular culture's allure is the way audiences identify with each other through similarities in consumption pattern" [15]. Therefore, the Amul panels pictorially depict popular trends practised in the daily life to create a common pool, with which the brand can conveniently associate. Apart from its regular fodder of films, sports and literature, the COVID-19 pandemic offered the Amul panels its own peculiar popular culture.

The unexpected outbreak of the coronavirus brought in new lifestyle practices that completely remade our daily experiences. The Amul panels ensured that they capture these shifting trends and communicate the new practices to the public. The regular form of greeting the handshake was no longer acceptable and had been replaced by the traditional 'namaste' [16]. The Amul panel refers to this development in social greeting in the panel titled "Salaamul Namaste", a witty reference the Bollywood movie (fig. 7). Social distancing also meant that people could no longer visit the restaurants to enjoy their favourite dishes. This change in the lifestyle is depicted in the Amul panel where the Amul girl can be seen enjoying bread-

Fig. 9. (left) Mahabutter



Fig. 10. (right) Covideo Conferencing?



butter for breakfast, lunch and dinner (fig. 8). If not proper food, the government ensured that the public remains entertained and so during the lockdown it re-telecasted the iconic Indian TV series Mahabharat. This return of the epic series became not only the new daily household ritual but also a topic for all the media platforms- the old actors were interviewed and memes were made on the TV series (Hindustan Times). Amul also participated in this trend with its panel titled "Mahabutter" (fig. 9). In the panel the Amul girl enjoys her bread-butter as she watches the epic series. An important challenge during the pandemic, was to stay connected with friends and family. The web tools and video applications, now became the new medium to communicate with family and friends. As the Indians got accustomed to these new virtual platforms, the Amul girl also connected with her friends in the panel titled "Covideo Conferencing?" (fig. 10) Therefore, the Amul panels succeed to register every changing pulse of new lifestyle, ushered in by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4 CONCLUSION

Both these categories of communication of information and the evocation of popular culture are neither rigid nor exhaustive. While communication creates popular culture, popular culture informs the communication in these panels. Moreover, there is more to Amul panels published during the COVID-19 pandemic than just these two categories. However, a constant in all these panels is the strand of advertisement. In all panels under the logo of Amul, is a subtitle that connects the larger issue at hand to the advertisement of butter. "Always safe!" (fig. 1), "Janta's favourite" (fig. 2), "Makes kitchens self-sufficient" (fig. 6), "Greet the Treat!" (fig. 7) and "Epic Taste!" (fig. 9), are deliberately interwoven within the panels to advertise the product butter. This then logically pushes towards the suggestion that Amul panels exploited topicality of the COVID-19 pandemic to market its product.

This suggestion becomes all the stronger, when one realizes that sales of Amul rose rapidly during the pandemic [17]. In spite of being a very convincing argument, one should revisit this deduction in the context of South Asian visual cultures.

In her essay titled "The Visual Turn: Approaching South Asia across the Disciplines", Sandria B. Freitag writes, "...the complexities of visual culture enable elements of its to serve in divergent and complementary ways, simultaneously facilitating certain objectification through documentation..." [18]. The material artefacts that populate the visual cultures of South Asia participate both in processes of meaning making and fetishization. The Amul panels published during the COVID-19 pandemic were not an exception to this paradoxical nature of South Asian visual cultures. As these panels communicated the pandemic information and evoked the peculiar pandemic lifestyle, they also indulged in objectification of the pandemic. However, one cannot draw any direct link between the employment of pandemic content in ad campaign and the rise in sales experienced by Amul during the pandemic. Moreover, the hold of Amul over the Indian imagination is so strong and old, that it does not need to advertise its products. Amul is no longer just a brand of butter, but has become synonymous with butter [19]. Therefore, to consider the Amul panels as just a means of advertisement that extracted the potential of pandemic topicality will be unfair. When placed on a hot pan, butter slips, melts and finally evaporates. This slipperiness of form in butter is reflected in the genre Amul panels. Neither purely advertisements nor truly newspaper caricatures, Amul panels escape any kind of clear categorization. This slipperiness of Amul panels is emblematic of the dense visual artefacts that characterize the South Asian modernity and demand new frameworks of study. Although limited in its scope, this paper has attempted to furnish one such framework concerning the study of Amul panels published during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Keywords:

Covid-19, graphic response, political implications, cartoonists

Comics and Covid-19: Indian Cartoonists on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Comics/ Cartoon is an effective medium taken up by the governments, journalists, health campaigns and critics during the Covid-19 pandemic in order to reach wider audiences. In 2020, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India released a comic book online titled Kids, Vaayu and Corona: Who Wins the Fight? to promote awareness related to Covid-19 for children. As such, comics as a tool of communication is used by government to reach the public as well as critics of government to express their disapproval of certain government policies and strategies. Recently, many graphic artists, both anonymously and otherwise, have virtually raised their voice pertaining to pandemic related issues on social media platforms. My paper will discuss the graphic figuration of Covid-19 pandemic that have occupied several social media platforms. PenPencilDraw, Sameera Maruvada, Sayan Mukherjee, Satish Acharya, Appuppen et al have created works related to Covid-19 pandemic to communicate nation's contemporary state of affairs. The topic of satirical critique by cartoonists include unexpected nationwide lockdown, government relief packages, plight of migrant labourers, etc. The paper will delineate how the visual imageries sketched out by the cartoonists provide social and political commentaries in response to the pandemic in the context of India.

INTRODUCTION

Cartoons are characterized by their potential to communicate socio-political issues concerning the society. Earlier, cartoons were largely and exclusively the part of newspapers as editorial or pocket cartoons. Nowadays, cartoonists' (both professional and amateurs) observation finds a space on social media such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. In a sense, cartoons on social media receive a larger audience in comparison to the newspaper readership.

Cartoons are like visual journalistic commentary which has the freedom to be blatant and preferential unlike news reporters whose professional ethics demands objectivity. "Cartoons, therefore, reveal themselves as more explicitly political and constructed rather than as attempts at objective renditions of social events" (Abraham, 120). With the advent of global pandemic in 2019, amidst the political measures given/taken by the governments, cartoonists have taken to social media to present satirical portrayals of the pandemic and the social realities associated with it. My paper examines the satirical depictions of cartoons available on the social media platform in the Indian context using artworks by select cartoonists. That is, the paper will reflect the socio-politico-cultural aspects of Covid-19 pandemic in the Indian context. The artworks by PenPencilDraw, Sameera Maruvada, Sayan Mukherjee and Satish Acharya were selected randomly to present varied aspects related to Covid-19 pandemic. Their cartoons reflect the political climate and social scenarios related to India's reaction towards the Covid-19 pandemic.

INTERPRETATION OF COVID-19 THROUGH COMICS

Comics depict coronavirus in a social space that comes in direct conflict with us and thereby validate the anxious relationship we share with the virus. Comics about the Covid-19 pandemic "help demystify the

invisibility of contagion, creates personal narratives about the pandemic, provides public health education, and can create a sense of solidarity around shared emotions and experiences resulting from the disruptions to social interactions, bodily integrity, and communal boundaries" (Callender B et al., 1063) [1]. The coronavirus has entered the lives at an individual, national and global level turning the experience as one of uncertainty. While official guidelines and information circulate among the people, comics reaction to pandemic on the social media by amateur and professional cartoonists from India make the rounds. Focusing on such comics representation, this paper examines the function and nature it entails. I have categorized the graphic response into political and personal – the images capturing political connotations followed by pandemic and the one exhibiting personal anxieties and hopes – to express varied impacts of pandemics on the public. The cartoonists generally present a humorous take on the adverse conditions associated with pandemic. They use visual metaphors and words to depict complex social and political ideas. The process of production and interpretation is influenced by the shared socio-cultural space of the creator and the audience. This suggests that one needs to understand contextual cultural signs in order to properly examine the messages in cartoons. Thus, if I take a cartoon as the system of signs (in the semiological sense), meanings can be constructed through the social signals transmitted by the written words and visual images. However, I will discuss about how these images bring out the social and political dynamics of the nation by looking at each artists' creation.

The PenPencilDraw post graphic images and memes related to Covid-19 pandemic criticizing government's decisions on Twitter and Instagram. The anonymous creators behind PenPencilDraw said "[a] lot of the work is related in some way to what's happening around us, so it can't but be political" in an interview with Quartz

How much notice PM Modi will give you

@pencilindraw

2 weeks	Appearance on Man Versus Wild
6 days	Handing over social media for 24 hours
2 days	Thaali Bajao/ Diya Jalao
4 hours	3-week nationwide lockdown
1 hour	Collapse of government
2 minutes	Alien Invasion

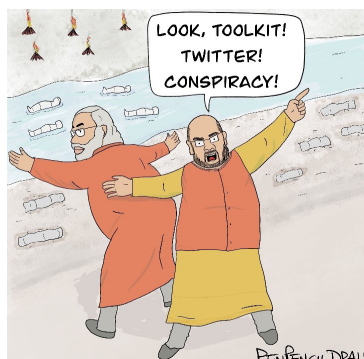


Fig. 1 (left)

Lockdown.

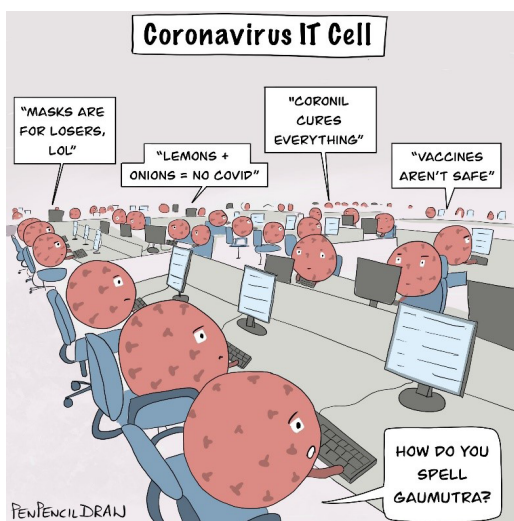
Fig. 2 (right)

Nothing to see here.

India (Quartz India) [2]. The handle posts contents regarding Covid deaths, Arogya Setu, Cowin portal, medical negligence, among others. Their cartoons are highly political and point to the duplicity in the political decisions and policies of the present government. For this reason, they prefer to remain anonymous as it would give them some protection from the current government which, according to them, seem intolerant towards dissent. They began posting from April 5, 2020 and acquired a huge following on social media since then.

Fig. 3. Corona

Virus IT Cell.



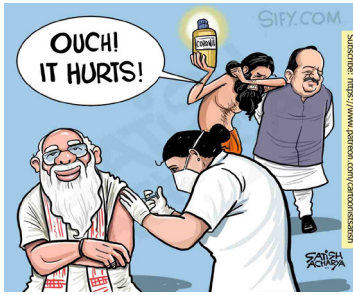


Fig. 4. (left)
PM Modi takes
Covid vaccine.

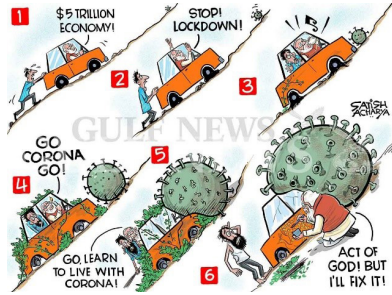


Fig. 5. (right)
India's corona
virus crisis.

Satish Acharya is an editorial cartoonist who shares his hard hitting pandemic related works on Twitter and Facebook. He is one of the first to produce graphic responses on pandemic. Beginning with lighter cartoons on social distancing and hand washing, it turns serious by dealing with issues such as the condition of the migrant workers, vaccines and others.

Fig. 6. (left)
Home remedies
to prevent
corona virus.

Fig. 7. (right)
Home
quarantine.



The kind of devastation that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused can be gauged from Arundhati Roy's



Fig. 8. (left)
Social
distancing.

Fig. 9. (right)
Stay indoors.

words where she argues about the virus which, similar to the capitalist structures, persists in proliferation but has actually curtailed the flow of money, travel and human interaction in general. She states, "[w]ho can think of kissing a stranger, jumping on to a bus or sending their child to school without feeling real fear? Who can think of ordinary pleasure and not assess its risk?" (Roy, para. 2) [3]. Roy argues that the pandemic, in a satirical manner, has exposed the limits of the digital surveillance methods in some of the most advanced countries with long-term political and social implications. Covid-19 pandemic and the ways in which it has affected the citizens all over the globe has been rallied to deliver satirical responses towards those governmental policies which have sought to restrict the organic flows of people due to ideological considerations. Social media, in this sense, functions as a coping mechanism where cartoon creators deploy humour and laughter to deal with the effects of Covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, these creators are not only able to examine the policy responses which miserably, at the time of the second wave, brought upon by the Delta variant but also deliver powerful punch through their satirical compositions to mock the illogical statements and naive ways of politicians to tackle the virus. "Go Corona Go," chant uttered by Ramdas Athwale in this regard, became a guiding mantra to caricature those forms of political understanding which simply led to more misinformation in society [4]. Artworks by PenPencilDraw, Sameera Maruvada, Sayan Mukherjee and Satish Acharya explore the

potential of the comics medium through its aural, visual and verbal components to provide social commentary on these aspects of everyday life; the life lived during the pandemic and composed of the new normal of wearing masks, sanitizing hands and maintaining a social distance from everyone all the time. These artworks rely on the importance of visual and verbal forms of communication which memes and cartoons contain and this multi-modal approach is effectively deployed to generate contrapuntal reading of the current political situation in the country. These artworks are layered and loaded with the interconnected narratives to make readers understand the implicit ideas and right-wing positions from which the policy-makers and even bureaucrats in medical bodies draw their support. These artworks do not stop there and through their satirical message attempt to resist the dominant responses from the government officials who seek to downplay the impact of the pandemic. The quick transmissibility of the message through these comic illustrations ensures that comics play a prominent role in the "public-opinion formation. Even if they apparently do not constitute a vehicle for political participation, the way it deconstructs social issues can have a vital effect on the public understanding of a political candidate or topic" (Mateus, 198) [5]. In terms of representation, the narrative and the conceptual framework of PenPencilDraw and Acharya's illustrations function as "ideational metafiction which seeks to represent the relationship existing between items in the world and things within people" (Hussein and Aljamili, 5) [6]. In this sense, these cartoons present a fit case to deconstruct the vacuous political responses which have been offered from various state officials and representatives to make sense of the Covid-19 crisis. However, I would like to point out here that some governmental agencies have also made use of the comics medium to spread awareness about the essential steps to be taken to prevent oneself from the Corona virus. This further lends credence to the

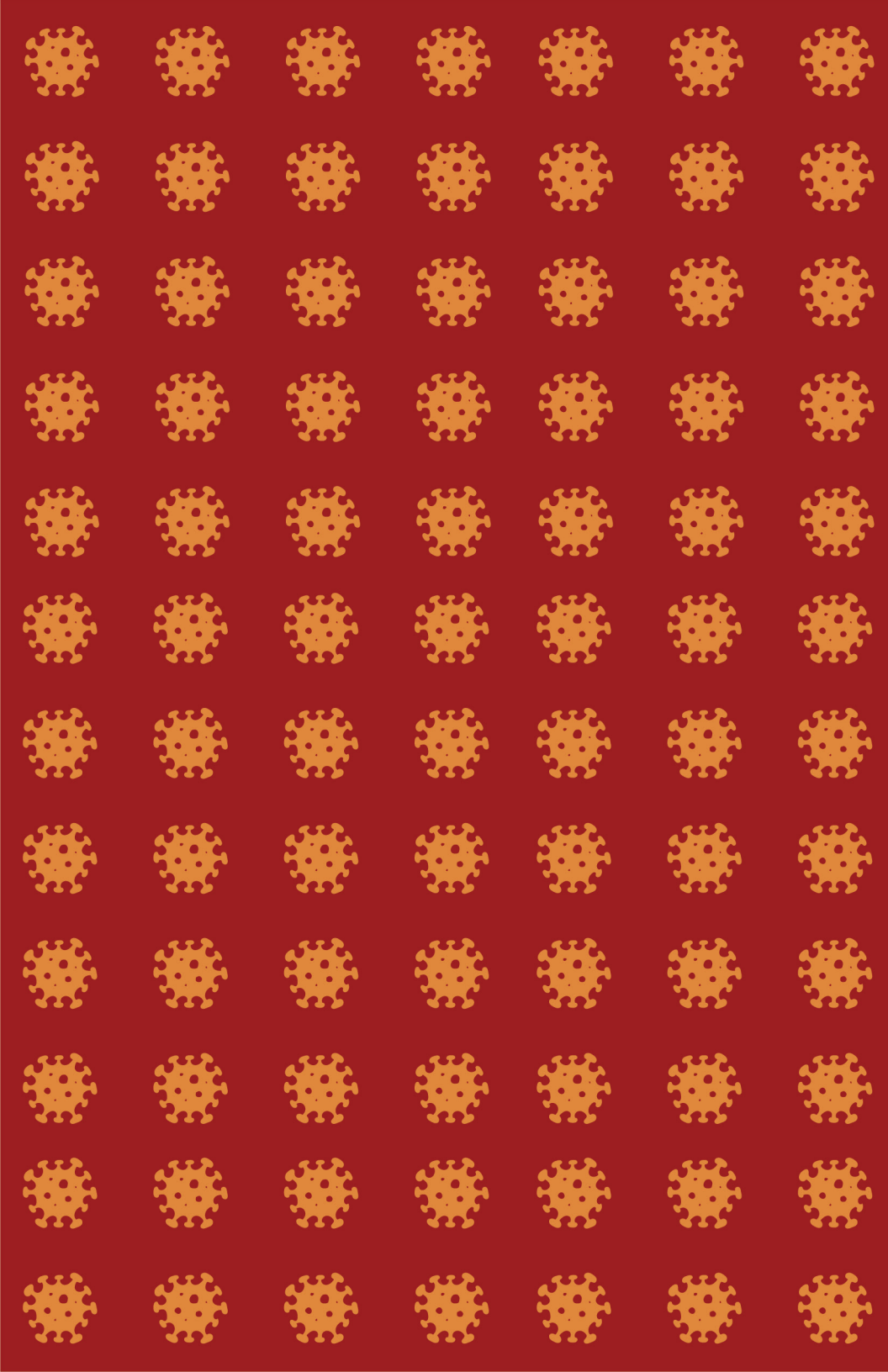
comics' incredible power to engage with the political climate with its visual inscriptions and cultivate diverse public opinions about the same.

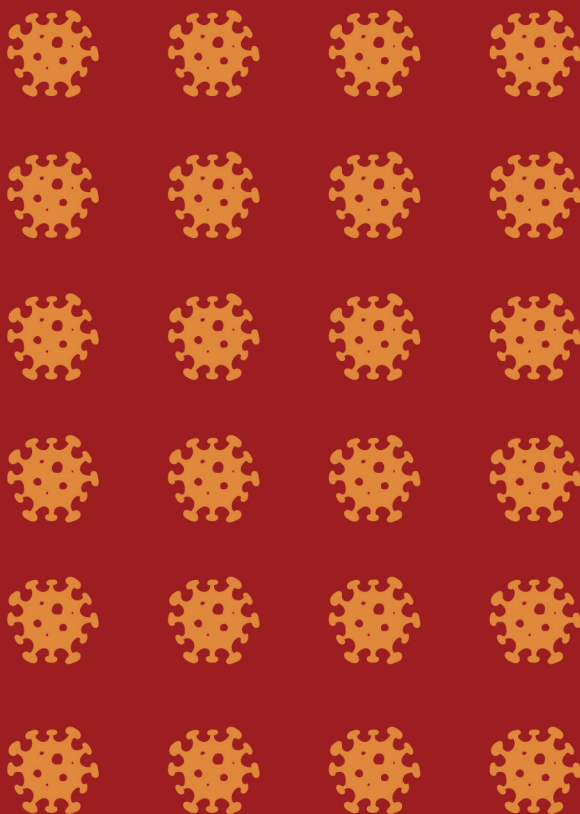
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AUTHOR INDEX

Chatterjee, Sharmistha.....	01
Waliokar, Ved and Remedios, Delwyn.....	18
Remedios, Delwyn and Roy, Ankita	29
Bose, Siddhartha and Singh, Pritpal	46
Yadav, Jaya.....	64
Dabi, Smita	77
Roy, Dwaipayan and Kaparwan, Shuchi.....	90
Abrol, Mohit	109
Nargis, Madhurima	120
Arora, Chhavi.....	134
Cheema, Gurleen Kaur	150
Solanki, Chaitanya and Mathew, Deepak John	163
Rout, Deblina.....	181
Wathare, Jaya	195
Tekwani, Karan	207
Sugathan, Anu	219





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