



5-6 December 2020

Online event

Organized by

Department of Design, IIT Delhi

What it is?

ComIN stands for **Comics in India**. As the name suggests, the discussions under this will be largely surrounded by primarily two themes: Comics+India. The need for such a space has been felt for a long time. A space that provides the scope of dialogues to researchers, practitioners, publishers, and fans of the medium.

International Conference on Indian Comics tries to bring that space.

The tradition of comics reading is nothing sort of new in India. The mythic figures, the kings with demons, flying superheroes in the local cities, the black and white detectives, and so many other characters have touched upon an Indian kid's life at some point in time. With the popularity of technology-driven entertainment, Indian comics have seen a transition in form and content.

The advent of technology can also be seen as a ground of opportunities for new stories, formats, and media. India has a rich legacy of graphic arts, visual narratives, and storytelling. Subsequently, contemporary formats of comics are also gradually evolving.

Gone are the days when the dhoti clad kings used to save a princess in distress. Gone are the days where a local hero used to fight the deadly dacoits. Gone are all those days when comics used to be a medium printed poorly on pulpy papers.

The new-age Indian reader has different expectations from the media they consume. They are better aware of cheap tricks and faulty storylines. They are the tech-savvy, hashtag

marching, black mirror generation who speaks loud. And speak sense certainly. With such an audience, *where does Indian comics stand now? Are we producing stories that can bring moments of silence or peace in troubled times? Are we doing enough to lead Indian comics across the Globe? What is the perception of Indian comics in general? Are we missing something?* With these prominent questions, we initiate a conference dedicated to the medium and its understanding in the context of India. Hence, the theme of the first edition of ComIN is **REFOCUSING INDIAN COMICS**.

REFOCUSING INDIAN COMICS

ComIN

ComIN
International Conference on
Indian Comics

SCHEDULE

5-6 December 2020
Online Conference

Organised by
Department of Design
IIT Delhi

Schedule

(All the timings mentioned are in IST)

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Date/Time	Title	Speaker/s
5 December 2020/ 1000-1100	<i>DRAWINGS THAT TALK: Comics, Cartoons, and Graphic narratives in India</i>	Manjula Padmanabhan
5 December 2020/ 1400-1500	<i>History and Evolution of Bangladeshi Comics</i>	Tahseen Salman Choudhury
6 December 2020/ 1030-1130	<i>If I Can, You Can</i>	Abid Surti
6 December 2020/ 1530-1630	<i>Eyes of a Comics Camera</i>	Sekhar Mukherjee

PANEL DISCUSSION

Date/Time	Title	Speaker/s
6 December 2020/ 1645-1745	<i>Panel Discussion</i>	Chair: Pinaki De Panellists: Manjula Padmanabhan, E. Dawson Varughese and Sekhar Mukherjee

ComIN20: International Conference on Indian Comics, 5-6 December | Online event

Schedule

(All the timings mentioned are in IST)

5 th December 2020, Saturday		
Time (24-hour format)	Activities	Speaker/s
0900-1000	Welcome and opening	
1000-1100	Keynote: <i>DRAWINGS THAT TALK: Comics, Cartoons, and Graphic narratives in India</i>	Manjula Padmanabhan
1100-1115	Break	
1115-1235	Plenary Session 1	Chair: Sudev Pratim Basu
	<i>Indian Comics and Graphic Novels: The New Medium for Cultural Awareness and Social Change</i>	Aibhi Biswas
	<i>Reading between and beyond the Panels: Analysing Stylistics and Narration in a few Graphic Novels</i>	Jaya Wathare
	<i>From Myths to Modernity: Adapting a Way Forward for the Indian Comic Book Industry</i>	Nivid Desai
	<i>The 'Aam Aadmi' in the Indian Graphic Novel: Reading Sarnath Banerjee's Corridor and All Quiet in Vikaspuri</i>	Jaya Yadav
1300-1400	Long Break	
1400-1500	Keynote: <i>History and Evolution of Bangladeshi Comics</i>	Tahseen Salman Choudhury
1500-1515	Break	
1515-1635	Plenary Session 2	Chair: Priyanka Tripathi
	<i>Multimodality and Critical Literacy: Graphic Narratives in the Classroom</i>	Amrita Singh
	<i>The Priya Series- Twenty First Century Comic Avatar</i>	Shipra Gupta
	<i>Art, Aesthetics, and Transition in Indian Comics</i>	Ritam Sarkar and Dr. Somdatta Bhattacharya
	<i>Exploring Comic Diary as a research method to study parent-child relationship</i>	Delwyn Jude Remedios
1635-1645	Break	
1645-1800	Workshop-Part A	Subir Dey
1800-1830	Socialising session	

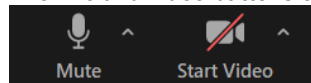
6 th December 2020, Sunday		
Time (24-hour format)	Activities	Speaker/s
0900-1020	Plenary Session 3	Chair: Snigdha Banerjee
	<i>Graphic in Health Care: Understand Graphic Narrative Approach to Represent and Communicate Health</i>	Rohit Kumar and Shatarupa Thakurta Roy
	<i>Visual Vocabulary and Visible Culture: How Exposure to Comics Informs the Practice of Young Design Students</i>	Jayasri Sridhar
	<i>Graphic Culture of India: From the Perspective of its Form, Themes, and User base</i>	Rohit Kumar and Shatarupa Thakurta Roy
	<i>Comic & Contextual characters as a new narrative between Indian Children & Stakeholders</i>	Mohit Goel and Richa Mehrotra
1020-1030	Break	
1030-1130	Keynote: <i>If I Can, You Can</i>	Abid Surti
1145-1300	Workshop-Part B	Subir Dey
1300-1400	Long Break	
1400-1520	Plenary Session 4	Chair: Debkumar Mitra
	<i>New Epoch of Anti-Comic Cartoons in India: Tracing the Role of Cartoonist O. V. Vijayan</i>	Basil Thomas and Dr. E. Krishnan Namboothiri
	<i>Stylistics of Indian Comic Series: A Select Study of Narayan Debnath's Comic Strips</i>	Rima Namhata
	<i>Rohan Chakravarty, India's Answer to Environmental Comics</i>	Thankam K Abraham
	<i>Thinking Narrative: A Critical Reading of Sarnath Banerjee's Corridor and The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers</i>	Amishal Modi
1520-1530	Break	
1530-1630	Keynote: <i>Eyes of a Comics Camera</i>	Sekhar Mukherjee
1630-1645	Break	
1645-1745	Panel Discussion	Chair: Pinaki De Panellists: Manjula Padmanabhan, E. Dawson Varughese and Sekhar Mukherjee
1745-1800	Closing and vote of thanks	

Attending the Conference

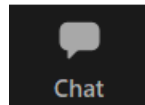
The ComIN20 will use Zoom as the online platform for the conference.

The link for joining the conference will be uploaded in the conference website with other details required for joining. Once you click the link you will be directed to the zoom conference portal. You might get a message saying, '*waiting for the host to admit*'. Our volunteers will try to admit you asap and, in any case, if it takes some time, please do not be worried. After joining, your microphone will be 'mute' by default. In case you need to speak, kindly enable the microphone, and then speak. Upon entry to the Zoom portal, your role will show as 'Participant'. You will also be able to use video and audio whenever required. Use the chat box to post your questions. The Host/co-host/chair will try to bring forward the questions in a sequential manner as far as possible. You may also ask questions directly to the speakers if you wish to.

The mic and video buttons can be turned on and off by clicking them:



Use the chat button to type in the chat box. You can use it to send your messages to everyone or to a specific person in private:



Use the share screen button to share your presentation. Unshare/Stop sharing when your presentation is done:



Humble Request

Online platforms have their own pros and cons during live sessions. It is our humble request to all the attendees/ speakers/presenters to maintain the sanctity of the discussions and a good conduct. Using offensive text/images/usernames/profile pics and other things during the conference might lead to your removal from the conference. If a participant is behaving inappropriately to you and causing distress, do inform the host or co-host in a private chat/message from the Zoom chat box. Necessary action will be taken. We are trying to bring a healthy and smooth online experience to all and wish for your co-operation.

**Lets get 'Comic-al'
Team ComIN
2020**

Conference Proceedings | 5- 6 December 2020

Subir Dey | Editor



ComIN

International Conference
on Indian Comics



Department of Design, IIT Delhi





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International Conference
on Indian Comics

Conference Proceedings

ComIN20: International Conference on Indian Comics
5-6 December 2020 | Online

www.comin20.com

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Sumer Singh, DoD IIT Delhi

Srinivasan Venkataraman, DoD IIT Delhi

Snigdha Banerjee, DoD SNU

Subhajit Chandra, DoD SNU

Cover Illustration and identity design

Subir Dey

Book Design

Sharmistha Poddar

Typeface

Raleway Initially designed by Matt McInerney as a single thin weight, it was expanded into a 9 weight family by Pablo Impallari and Rodrigo Fuenzalida in 2012 and iKerned by Igino Marini

ComIN20: International Conference on Indian Comics

Editor: Subir Dey

Published by: Prof. PVM Rao

Publisher 's address: Department of Design, IIT Delhi,
Hauz Khas, New Delhi-110016

Printer: Department of Design

Edition: First Edition

ISBN: 978-93-5419-740-6

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ABOUT DEPARTMENT OF DESIGN, IIT DELHI

IIT Delhi has started a new Department of Design which came into existence in the year 2017.

Department of Design has identified following area of interest for its academic activities:

Industrial Design, Product Design, Engineering Design, Creativity and Innovation, Design Theory & Methodology, Applied Ergonomics and Human Factors in Design, Universal and Inclusive Design, Design for UX/UI, HCI; Graphic Design, Communication Design, Computer Aided Design and Manufacturing, Design Automation and Design Optimization, Design Computing and Design Informatics, Materials & Design, Design for Product Life-Cycle, Art & Design, Product Aesthetics, Digital Media & Design, Social and Cultural aspects of Design, Design Policy, Design Strategy and Design Management.

The faculty of Department of Design are responsible for running two postgraduate programmes in the area of Design namely Master of Design (M.Des.) in Industrial Design and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.). Department has also started a minor area in Design for B.Tech. students to specialize in. Department is in the process of launching Bachelor of Design (B.Des.) and B.Tech. (Design) programmes.

PREFACE

Throughout our lives, we dream in numerous ways. Dreams make us act towards a sweet zone, that is sometimes called 'peace'. This first edition of ComlN: International Conference on Indian Comics is the manifestation of one such dream. Its seed was sown while I was writing my post-grad thesis on Indian graphic novels. It was nurtured through my doctorate days of deep diving in Indian comics traditions. They were nourished while participating in international comics conferences and comics studies discussions. Finally, the Department of Design at IIT Delhi provided the right ambience for this seed to grow and bloom and thus ComlN was born. ComlN encapsulates Comics+India as an inclusive movement. It is more encouraging to realize that ComlN is launched in a year, when the world is experiencing a historical turmoil. This turbulent year has tested humanity like never before and proves that human resilience is beyond words and thoughts. ComlN as a movement salutes and bows to the year 2020 to remember it as an ink mark on paper from where a comic book artist forwards her stories.

For the first edition of ComlN, we are thrilled to have comic book legends as our keynote speakers. The first keynote, Manjula Padmanabhan is an author, playwright, artist, and cartoonist. She is the creator of the iconic comic strip 'Suki'. She writes a weekly column and draws a weekly comic strip in Chennai's 'Business Line'. The next keynote we have is Aabid Surti, creator of India's first superhero 'Bahadur'. He is a national award winner and known for creating other popular comic characters like Inspector Vikram, Shuja, and Dabbuji among others. His activism towards saving water has generated a massive response from people and the media for bringing change.

Our next keynote speaker is Sekhar Mukherjee, director of NID Andhra Pradesh. He was a long time alumnus of NID Ahmedabad. He has contributed immensely to Indian cartooning, animation and comics traditions and continues to do so. His humor is as apt as his observatory cartoons. The final keynote speaker is Tahseen Salman Choudhury from Bangladesh. He is a comic enthusiast, researcher, reviewer, and the former host of the radio and YouTube-based weekly pop-culture show "Comicbaj". Even though the theme of ComlN is Refocusing Indian Comics, inviting a voice from Bangladesh didn't feel like a detour at all.

Tahseen is one of the proponents in this context who brings the evolution of Bagaledeshi comics to us. Their traditions are nothing less but inspiring for us and makes us think about the shared cultural and geographical elements.

For the panel discussion, we are excited to invite E.Dawson Varughese, senior fellow from Manipal University and the author of *Visuality and Identity in Post-millennial Indian Graphic Narratives* (Palgrave). Her work specializes in post-millennial Indian visual and literary cultures and is particularly interested in auspicious and dystopian ideas of Indianness. We have a wonderful and super-enthusiastic moderator for the panel discussion, Pinaki De, a multiple award-winning graphic illustrator-designer who juggles his creative work with academics as he has a day job as an Associate Professor at Raja Peary Mohan College, Uttarpara, Kolkata.

With people like these, we are sure to open the first edition of ComIN with absolute excitement. It is a pleasure to see that close to 40 submissions were received from different parts of the world and majorly from India. Gratitude goes to the review committee members for providing excellent feedback. The selection process was rigorous and aligned to achieve quality over quantity. Finally, 16 submissions were selected and presented during the 2 day conference. A heartfelt thanks goes to the authors whose rigor is evident through their submissions. Without them, this conference could not succeed. Extra big shout-out goes to the plenary session chairs, Snigdha Banerjee, Priyanka Tripathi, Sudev Pratim Basu and Dekumar Mitra for their selfless consent towards ComIN. I am immensely thankful to Prof. V. Ramgopal Rao, Director IIT Delhi And Prof. PVM Rao, Head, Department of Design, IIT Delhi for believing in my vision and providing space for Indian comics' discussions within an eminent technology institute.

Special thanks goes to the co-ordinators and the faculty from Department of Design, IIT Delhi for providing support and motivation. I would especially like to thank Prof. Srinivasan Venkatraman for providing suggestions regarding the conceptualisation and organizational aspects. Thanks goes to the student team, Ankita Das, Mohak Chhapparwal and Arnav Tripathy for the support during the conference. Special thanks to Agomoni for making many things possible. Also, thanks to the CEP IITD staff for handling the accounts and providing timely support.

Even though we utterly missed the laughs, uttered sounds, gestures and coffee breaks in a physical space that make us feel more connected, the first edition of ComIN nonetheless hooked us to a larger network of Indian scholars and comic creators through online mode. Thanks to technology for making this possible. With a hope to return soon and meet you all once again, I put my words to rest here.

Good vibes!

Subir Dey

Conference Chair

SPEAKERS



Manjula Padmanabhan

Author and cartoonist

Manjula Padmanabhan (b. 1953), is an author, playwright, artist, and cartoonist. She grew up in Europe and South Asia, returning to India as a teenager. Her plays include *Lights Out* and the *Mating Game Show GAME*. Her play *Harvest* won the first-ever Onassis Award for Theatre, in 1997, in Greece. She writes a weekly column and draws a weekly comic strip in Chennai's 'Business Line'. Her books include *Unprincess*, *Getting There*, and *The Island of Lost Girls*. She lives in the US, with a home in New Delhi.



Abid Surti

Author and comic book artist

Aabid Surti (b. 1935) is a painter, author, cartoonist, journalist, environmentalist, playwright and screenwriter from India. He was given a National Award by the Government of India in 1993 for writing a series of short stories called the "Teesri Aankh". As a cartoonist, he later created the lovable simpleton Dhabbuji. The original and popular cartoon strip has been one of the longest-running comic strips in India, running without a break for over 30 years. It was the weekly comic strip that first appeared in Hindi magazine *Dharmyug*. He also created another comic book character, *Bahadur*, which achieved a large fan following, when the comics started to be published in *Indrajal Comics* from 1978. He

also created other comic book characters like Inspector Azad, Inspector Vikram and a lady character named Shuja. The cartoon Dhabbuji and comics of Bahadur, Inspector Azad, Inspector Vikram and Shuja were all also published in English. Further, his famous comic strips Doctor Chinchoo Ke Chamatkar, which was published in the Hindi magazine Parag from 1963 to 1965 is being serialised by the National Book Trust as Doctor Chinchoo Ke Kaarnamein.



Sekhar Mukherjee

Director, NID Andhra Pradesh

An alumnus of NID, Prof. Sekhar Mukherjee- was a senior faculty of communication design with NID Ahmedabad from 2002 to 2018. After graduating in commerce, he decided to follow his passion as his profession, and started his career as a newspaper cartoonist, illustrator & info-graphics artist at Economic Times, Kolkata, before he joined NID to study Animation Film Design in 1992. In 2000, he trained the first 2D animation studio in Dhaka, Bangladesh, one of his cherished projects. In 2002, he joined his alma mater as a design educator. For the next 12 years, he headed the Animation Department. Under his mentorship, his students won much national & international recognition. He is also the NID Film Club Chairman and the Artistic Founder Director of the iconic Chitrakatha-A biennial International Student Animation Festival since 2007. Along with his student mentorship he also regularly contributes & practices cartoons, comics, illustrations, mural, graphic experiments, etc. He is often invited as a delegate, jury member, and expert to other design schools & various animation & comics festivals across the globe. In 2009 he received the Best Animation Teacher Award from CNBC-TV18 for "outstanding contribution to the cause of animation education in India". He celebrates design as a problem solving and opportunity creation tool in his 25 plus years of the professional journey. In 2018 end he took charge as Director of NID Andhra Pradesh, a baby design school of the same breed.



E. Dawson Varughese

Senior Fellow, Manipal University

E. Dawson Varughese is the author of *Visuality and Identity in Post-millennial Indian Graphic Narratives* (Palgrave). Her work specializes in post-millennial Indian visual and literary cultures and is particularly interested in auspicious and dystopian ideas of Indianness. She divides her time between the UK and India. She is a Senior Fellow at Manipal Centre for Humanities (MCH), Manipal, and has been a visiting fellow at the University of Delhi (Dept of English in 2017 and Department of Sociology in 2018).



Pinaki De

Designer, Comics scholar

Pinaki De is a multiple award-winning graphic illustrator-designer who regularly works for renowned publishers like Penguin Random House, Harper Collins, Hachette, Routledge, Primus, Oxford University Press, Singapore University Press (NUS), Bloomsbury, Orient Blackswan, Worldview, Pan Picador, Simon and Schuster, Permanent Black, Alchemy, Sage, Roli, Sahitya Academy, Rupa, and many others. He has designed almost 500 book covers to date. He is the winner of the PublishingNext prize for the best book cover design in India twice in 2017 and 2019. His book cover for "Kalkatta" by Kunal Basu won the prestigious Oxford Bookstore prize for the best cover design in India at Jaipur Literary Fest 2017. His layout design on Satyajit Ray's archival manuscripts has drawn accolades from all across the globe. A Charles Wallace Trust Fellow, his Ph.D. is on comics theory. Pinaki is one of the editors of the prestigious annual magazine "Longform" (Published from Harper Collins, 2018) which is generally regarded as the first global comics magazine from India. He

is the Indian comics advisor of Malaysia, the biggest ever exhibition on Asian Comics curated by Paul Gravett for the Barbican, London. His book-length comics on Partition is due next year. Pinaki juggles his creative work with academics as he has a day job as an Associate Professor at Raja Peary Mohan College, Uttarpara.



Tahseen Salman Choudhury

Comics scholar

Tahseen Salman Choudhury is a comic enthusiast, researcher, reviewer, and the former host of the radio and YouTube-based weekly pop-culture show "Comicbaj". He has presented his research work in several national and international conferences and also published in an international journal. He is also the first in Bangladesh to conduct university-level workshops on Teaching Business Ethics using Comics, Learning Nutrition with Comics, and Learning Social Etiquette with Comics hosted by the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). A marketing major, he has previously worked in a bank and an NGO. Currently, he is working as the Senior Research and Publication Officer at the Bangladesh Employers' Federation.

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Keywords:

*Comics for
Social Change,
Development
Communication,
Comics
Journalism,
Activism.*

Indian Comics and Graphic Novels: The New Medium for Cultural Awareness and Social Change

Aibhi Biswas

aibhibiswas10146@cuh.ac.in

Dept. of English and Foreign Languages Central University
of Haryana, India

ABSTRACT

The paper will discuss how certain comics and graphic novels are created by comics artists with a social agenda in mind. These creators are specifically addressing certain social issues, injustices, and loopholes in governmental policies and projects. They feel that comics is a medium through which they can make a large group of audience aware of the socio-political issues and through awareness and information they can bring about social change. These comic creators with like-minded people and activists have formed a collective or organisation whose purpose is the empowerment and awareness of socially disadvantaged groups using comics. This paper will explore comics as a developmental communication tool which can bring about effective communication between the side-lines and the mainstream. Comics bring to the fore sensitive often tabooed topics that the mainstream avoids talking about is silenced in media by pressure of dominant, powerful sections of the society. Such issues need to be discussed in the society and the common masses must be made aware of them. The public although educated are not completely aware

of certain events in the society, for example we are not aware of the workings human trafficking, insurgency, child sexual abuse. Comics is an interesting, engaging, and appealing way to discuss these issues and opens a platform for democratic debate and discussions for finding its solutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Comics speak a universal language that can cut across almost all kinds of barriers, a visual image is retained longer in one's mind than a written piece of information. Comics help simplify concepts which can then be easily understood by anyone regardless of their level of education, connecting people together, making issues relatable across the globe and initiating communications with each other to resolve issues. A simple comic can stand out from a heap of images and textual material. It can now be spread and distributed easily via the internet specially on social media platforms. Comics is an out of the box option to bring about social change by information, instructing and equipping their audience with the necessary tools or skills for social reform but in an engaging and enjoyable way. Critical topics and issues can be discussed via comics in a light, fun, satirical and non-threatening tone. So, it can have the same impact that a news report on acid attacks can have on people but in less direct and harsh way. Most people do not even watch news daily but when you come across an interesting comic you are compelled to read at least a few pages.

Navayana, Indian first anti caste publishing house was started by journalist turned publisher S. Anand and social activist and writer Ravikumar in 2003. S. Anand while working for the *Outlook Magazine* had read up on many Dalit writer, many books, and essays by Dr. B.R Ambedkar one of the pioneers of Dalit cause in India.

Influenced by these ideas S. Anand felt that there was a need for a publishing house which published works on the issue of caste, writings of great personalities on the stigma of caste that still exists in society. The mainstream media purposefully keeps away from reporting these matters. Mainstream publishers and books stores do not publish works of great thinker on the issue of caste specially in English language which is the language of the educated elite of the country. When the elite upper caste privilege individuals rose in society, they systematically altered these writings omitting anything that is directly harsh. The dominant hierarchy incriminating and oppressing the Dalits. The scriptures and the Varna system became a tool for the systematic oppression of the oppressed untouchables. Non-South Asians cannot understand the concept of Caste easily, though it is an open secret. Navyana published two graphic books on the lives of two pioneer Dalit activist, B.R Ambedkar and Jotiba Phule. The comics form renders the understanding of caste easier for outsiders. They are able to understand and empathise with the conditions of Dalits in India. Both the graphic novels chart the rise and systematic oppression by the Brahmins on the Dalit community while referencing to contemporary incidents of their oppression. Navyana aims to publish socially engaged writing in an innovative, creative form of graphic novels and comics in order to reach a different kind of audience, who can form a better future. The comics form helps reach a global readership and hopes to mobilise them on matters of inequality and social injustice. Navyana has taken up the cause to publish Dalit biographies, memoirs and writings that are too long and complex to understand in the comics medium. The harsh criticism that these books contain is mellowed down and simplified to be served to the future generation who can make a difference. For example, when in *Gulamgiri* Jotiba Phule argues that if the castes were born from the different body parts of brahma than *Brahma* must have vaginas all over his body and that he must have been menstruating four

times a month. This idea when read is preposterous but when illustrated in the graphic novel *A Gardener in the Wasteland*, is intriguing, appealing and raises questions in the readers mind. The privileged classes and castes in India have no guilt and no shame regarding the deed they have done, rather they feel entitled. These graphic books try to induce this sense of shame, guilt, and social responsibility within its readers- generally the educated, privileged, elite English-speaking population. The immense popularity of comics raising social issues in an developing country like India proves that there is need for such alternative medium like comics and more and more socialists, social organizations, collectives, educational institutions and individuals are investing and participating in them. The employment of this methodology has a bright future since a complex idea/ story can be simply shared with people globally with the use of simple illustrations and few words, in a few panels.

2. COMICS AS A DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION TOOL

Scholar Josephine Baba defines Development Communication as a communication that has a social conscience, which has the aim to resolve rural problems, urban problems and problems of the common man. It has two main purposes to fulfill, first transforming the society by utilizing the principal values of that society and second creating an environment of mutual understanding and creating innovative tools in order to bring about social change. This being said Development Communication cannot be successfully done without the corporation and collaboration of the governmental bodies and social institutions like the bureaucracy, the media professionals, educators, social workers and the common masses which are the illiterate, semi-literate and ignorant people who are to be informed and made aware of the various opportunities and facilities that they can utilize for their own upliftment , and by default the upliftment of the community itself.

Grassroots comics movement, a movement pioneered by social activist and political cartoonist Sharad Sharma in India, in the early 1990's. Sharma believes that grassroots comics has immense potential to make the common people aware of various social and political issue and empower them. He feels that grassroots comics gives voice to the marginalised sections of the population which are side-lined by the dominant educated strata and the government bodies. Grassroots comics provide illiterate, ignorant rural people the medium of comics which gives them an 'universal language' via which they can express themselves, tell their stories and be heard. Sharma recounts that there has been instances where an illiterate person while inking in the comics workshops organised by them had started recognising letter while inking them themselves and repeating the process over and over again made them eventually learn the alphabet. Sharma currently heads the *World Comics India* network, an organisation that uses the comics medium to spread awareness and empower depressed sections of the society. This is mostly done through grassroot comics where the team travels to interiors regions of the country, areas which are backward, remote and conflict regions etc and conduct comics workshops there. In the workshop's participant the local marginalised people are encouraged to tell their stories, experiences, and problems through visual storytelling method. Sharma advocates comics as an effective and efficient developmental communication and educational tool since these comics are regional comics, made by local people hence it is very relatable to the local people. Since these comics are drawn by the common people which reflects their social world and understanding. It also helps the social activists and local governmental organisations to understand the issues of the local people and leads to a campaigning of those issues and discussions regarding its solutions. These people are away from power centres unable to present their voices in the mainstream media, grassroots comics

helps them present their voices via publication of these comics by *World Comics India* (WCI). These social injustices and inequalities are present all over the world and the accommodating format of visual storytelling allows them to connect, understand and support each other globally. Thereby empowering the marginalised to be part of the larger discourse by reaching to a larger audience.

These common people are eager to learn and know about the opportunities and resources available to them but the main hinderance in in this their lack of resources and cost of social campaigning. Grassroots comics tackles these issues effectively. It easily cuts across barriers of language, caste, culture, class, religion, and the rural urban divide as well as the financial strain. It uses a simple comic book format to tell a complete story in four panels, done o A4 size sheets of paper with a pen resulting in black and white comics which can be easily photocopied and distributed. The art does not matter it is the message and story that reaches the reader. In these comics the text is secondary the cartoons itself should strike even an illiterate person. The next step of this is to paste it at public places where it will catch people's attention and be read, and the message will be dispersed into the larger audience. This aspect of grassroot comics makes it an excellent development communication tool. In Assam workshop resulted in comics which promote mushroom farming along with its why and its benefits. This caught the attention of many people who came to the market on the weekend. It became so popular that The Sonapur Marketing Community installed a comic notice board for comics to be produced and pasted on various issues in the future.

In this way grassroots comics as a development tool brings about social change where mainstream media and social activist groups fall short. The information material distributed by a certain social campaign or NGO can be hard for the local to understand and may

not relate to them directly. But the comics that these locals create themselves are close to their heart and depict their own experiences and even made in their own regional language making these comics more interest gathering and significant to them. A theatre performance conducted as a part of a social campaign can catch attention but it is limited to only those who are present at the performance but a comic can be retained, dispersed and appeal to a much larger group of people. Mainstream media does represent these regional social injustices and social issues and most remote or conflicted areas does not have access of mainstream media in the first place. hence tv, radio, newspapers the parts of mainstream media have no significance for these marginalised people.

Sharad Sharma advocates the comics methodology as a powerful learning and teaching tool. Education is the best way to improve the condition of marginalised sections. Comics plays a major role in making learning interesting, understandable, and accessible. Thereby transforming the society for the better and providing awareness and access to resources resulting in national development of the sustainable kind which is the aim of developmental communication. The main tenets of grassroot comics is awareness, immersion and activism of the participatory kind matching the conditions favourable for a successful developmental communication. In 2015, an extensive project was carried out by WCI with 100 teachers of government schoolteachers in three districts of Chhattisgarh India, with collaboration of UNICEF, NCERT, and *Sharva Shiksha Abhiyan*. These teachers were trained to use comics methodology in their daily teaching. They liked it so much that they started teaching during vacations as well. This methodology was included into DIET where lecturers are trained to use comics methodology. Grassroots comics plays different roles in different strata of education. For primary education and higher education they serve as an alternative and innovative medium of learning and democratic

debate for mass communication students its serves as a new unexplored area different from mainstream media and for development communication students it may serve as a research tool for gathering data and understanding the perspective of less privileged people and for advocacy of social reforms. WCI is an international organisation/collective of cartoonists, social activists, developmental journalists, artists and likeminded people who want to employ the medium of comics as a communication tool and believe that a comic can be made by anyone who wants to tell their story and are willing to draw it out. these comics cover social issues like girl child rights, domestic violence, migration issues, labour rights, even sensitive issues like diseases, hygiene, adolescent sex, and family planning. organisation believes in strengthening democratic processes and has conducted over 10,000 workshops in the country and globally and trained more than 50,000 participants.

Sharma realised grassroots comics power, potential and scope. In 2000 Sharma contacted the world comics network in Finland, a collective of cartoonists who made comics on social issues. This resulted in the establishment of WCI in 2002, this organisation used grassroots comics as tool to bring about social change and spread awareness in different parts of the country. Since then it has collaborated with various World Comics Networks across the globe. Some examples are world comics network Thailand 2012 where teachers and students workshop about environmental issues and held an exhibition of the created. World Comics Network Pakistan, led by social activist Nida Shams did workshops on women education, mobility etc, World Comics Network Nepal workshops on road safety corporal punishment, exploitation of children etc, World Comics Network Sri Lanka on issues of peace and harmony. The Department of social work, Don Bosco University Assam organises grassroots comics workshops since 2012, providing a platform for democratic discussion on the issues prevalent in

the North-East using the medium of comics. Social activist Devendra Ojha organised a workshop in the Khatima village in Uttarakhand; the comics created talked about issues of corporal punishment, school facilities and functioning, led to the dismissal of the schoolteacher who came drunk to class every day. The four panelled black and white comics posters are pasted on public places of gathering like roadside stalls, rickshaws, electric poles, bus stands, markets, stores, pawn shops. In 2011 a workshop in Muzaffarpur, Bihar came up with comics on the issues of participation in village government, girl child education, issuance of birth certificates, corporal punishment, alcoholism. Workshop conducted in Bagh region of Kashmir with help of the *Strengthening Participatory Organisation* which works towards adult education. In 2018 grassroots comics workshop in George Institute, Beijing resulted in talking about use of the medium in medical research and data collection.

Sharma explains that when he started his career as a political cartoonist he realised that art required a lot of effort and the outcome was impactful and amazing but there was no audience for it and is viewed and is available to a select few in private space. These were not for the public. He felt that there is a need for an organisation which use visual communication like comics to empower, and educate the poor, marginalised and illiterate communities. In 1992 when he started the grassroots comics movement as he felt there is a need to give voice to all citizens in media but unfortunately it's the educated, elite and rich who get heard and the common masses remain ignorant. Therefore there is a need for a type of powerful but simple media for the community which promotes local communication and community communication with the civic bodies to bring about social change. The medium of comics displays challenges, hardships and propose solutions of silenced issues like domestic violence, rape, migration of labour, plight

of farmers, insurgency, sexual exploitation, diseases all these sensitive issues when presented via the soft medium of comics does not seem that harsh and hard hitting. These may be comic and sarcastic but talk about serious issues which catch the attention of mainstream media thereby entering discussions for solutions without getting side-lined or red flagged by the mainstream. It is a platform for effective communication between local communities and the state/national government. There are certain issues that the mainstream society does not want to discuss ignore but once a comic is created on an issue and lead to social change is advocated by the community itself. The participation here becomes pivotal as it leads to a sense of achievement, ownership, and responsibility of their own work. The common people become more enthusiastic to resolve their problems by claiming all rights and opportunities they entitled to. The local community takes these comics seriously since they relate to their problems and their cultural context in their dialects which the mainstream media fails to do. Each individual and small group resolve their problems in their own way. The medium of comics can be used in high-tech. and low-tech. areas, it can be created quickly and easily by self and when photocopied distributed, can be easily converted into digital copies by scanning and shared on social media sites and mainstream media.

Grassroots comics used in a variety of fields and professions. It believes in open access and open source of knowledge to promote equality, human rights, and upliftment of minorities. Believes in sustainable development and global responsibility hence the collective runs on voluntary basis. Sharad Sharma believes in keeping the process going the workshops train participants and some stay back voluntary to become workshop trainers and organisers. The training manual is available on their WCI website free in a variety of languages, so that anyone can join the movement. WCI publishes

comics anthologies which feature comics stories and by their trainers who are amateur artist and receive compensation from the copyrights. The collective collaborates with government bodies, NGOS, social activist, institutions to produce exhibitions and social campaigns on ground level making grassroots comics a low technological, cost efficient development communication tool for small scale organisations. The idea of change in this case is by the people and for the people by inviting debate among people of different socio- economic backgrounds. The base idea of it is to make it all inclusive and participatory. Sometimes we need to penetrate deep inside a society to recognise the challenges that community faces and work alongside the community members to resolve those issues.

Comics are not to be confined to the comedy genre they can be sarcastic satirist to explain an event or fact, but simple drawings minimalistic panels amplify the message. WCI with collaboration with Communications for Development and Learning an organisation published the book *Devtoons* which are cartoons for development. Efficient effect low cost communication in a simple understandable way but these comics need to be locally created in reaction to the local cultural context. The visual storytelling in comics must be along the local perspective, engaging local artists and local social activist in order for it to be understood properly and disseminate information locally in a successful way. *Whose Development* (2008) is series of development comics series published in English and Hindi by WCI. It features comic book form stories by 15 artists from 15 different parts of the country discussing issues that are affecting their community and local society for example the story from Mizoram talks about the excessive deforestation and its effects on the community there. The book is an enquiry into what development really means to the local communities? is it really evolution, advancement of society? Development at what cost and if it is really

worth all the sacrifice done the common masses. Who benefits from this development? WCI collected comic strips on these questions from different parts of the country like Rajasthan Jharkhand, Assam, Kashmir, Mizoram, uniting all its readers together the common people and students activities etc. this grass root comics anthology gave voice to the masses and what development has given them through satirical humorous stores leading to a mutual understanding and social communication.

Parallel Lines is a sequel anthology to *Whose Development?* pushes the issues, the art, and the stories. The comic strips in these are longer and the book is thicker. All stories have different art style and narration style science the comic artists belong to different backgrounds, cultural contexts, region and sometimes even religion. Jharkhand has stories about Adivasis, big developmental projects and uranium mines radiation, Assam shows story about fisherman's harsh life, Goa stories about encroachment of big tourist companies. World Comic India advocates comics journalism, a comic journalist travelling to areas to collect stories, getting a first-hand account of events of a specific area, documenting information in a visual format. The use of comics medium to cover real life events for news publications or to convey information to the public. WCI provides a six-month certificate course in comics journalism and promotes the documentation of stories of local significance in South Asia. Guwahati University, Assam and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad provides this certificate course.

3. INDIAN COMICS/GRAPHIC NOVELS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Graphic novelist Orijit Sen one of the pioneers of the graphic novel form in India sees the universe made up of stories and , the people contain histories and cultures, the flora and fauna , the architecture of a place gives it character. Therefore, when he started work on his first graphic novel- *River of Stories*, he felt he must tell these stories after experiencing these places by meeting these people and by experiencing the landscape himself. He knew he wanted to tell the tale of the Narmada valley where the Narmada Bachao Andolan was happening but he had no idea how and what he was supposed to do, once he experienced the land the people the form of the graphic story

began to form. Being the son of a cartographer, he always had interests in maps. Since his father's job required them to shift to a variety of places, he got to experience different lands, meet a variety of people, and experience a range of culture. This inbred in him a sense of understanding of different cultures and people and was familiar with the feeling of not fitting in. "Perhaps developed in me an empathy for outsiders and people who did not fit" (Sen qtd. in Stoll). This helped him capturing the characters of people the sense of lived experience. His work has a sense of immersion and a kind of personal detail rather than a practical one. His graphic novel based on extensive research, he travelled to the places where the protests against the construction of the dam on the Narmada river was happening and travelled with the activists stayed at rest houses with Adivasis and their families, in remote ashrams. He attended the Baghria festivals fairs, feasts, religious ceremonies, political rallies. Along the journey he stacked and made notes converted people's stories into visual form. He tried to internalise the struggle of the people the life of the Narmada valley and not just show slice of life rather present a lived experience only then will he be able to do justice to this great moment in history. The result was a semi ethnographic mystical graphic novel which focuses on the environmental activists and the struggle of the Adivasis there and questioned the notion of social justice. The seamless weaving of the two narratives one of the urban educated class understanding the reality of development and the other of the rural Adivasis sustainable development, makes this work unique and attention grabbing. Sen in an interview with Jeremy Stoll says that his intention was to emanate a deep sense of place and worldview within the reader and connect his audience to understanding the nuances of the injustices that come in tow with any developmental project, for the marginalised population. The base of this graphic novel is extensive ground research work and a critical use of the comics storytelling format making this a

fine example of comics journalism. Although the book does not take any side, but it is insightful and urges the reader to envision a community focused model of development.

Orijit Sen seems to believe in cooperation, collaboration on an equal level. He advocates socially engaged creativity. He feels the traditional model of things is much more significant and sustainable than the mainstream industrial model. He believes the ones in a higher, privileged position should do their part to restore the rights of the underprivileged, suppressed sections which they originally were entitled to. Orijit and his wife Gurpreet Sidhu in 1990 opened the *People Tree* a design studio, collective, store which brings together designers, artists, comics creators, craftspeople of diverse media to create compelling works in comics and other mediums. It is an equitable collaborative platform where works range from textile, books publishing, comics, installations, murals, terracotta can be done. The contemporary model where the designer who is designated as the head worker gives orders to the craftsman who is designated as the aid worker is opposed by Sen. He advocated equal work and equal recognition of their own work to be given, in a way returning to the traditional values of Indian society. He feels that a comic artist has great political and social commitment and must portray their experiences and feelings honestly. Since the comics medium allows them to capture and retain even influence a large audience which form the base for the future, the educated thinkers, and the young adults of the country. Comics being a liberal and soft medium allows the creators to raise sensitive, complex issues in a playful satirical way which the government cannot easily ban. Visual narratives about social injustices, oppressed communities, dislocated communities aim to bring about social change. Sen claims that his work is part of the larger resistance. "Art that speaks about individuals and societies can be immensely powerful and lasting

but not necessarily measurable" (Sen qtd. Thakurta and Unnikrishnan). Its effect may not be immediate, but it is appealing and lasting.

Comics used for showing dissent and its dispersal through social media is a very effective method, which can appeal to and arouse a large audience and connect these comics artists with likeminded people to bring about a substantial change in society. "I am always excited to create a work that can make a connection with everyday people. I am interested in non-art world spaces, one that triggers people" (Sen qtd in Thakurta and Unnikrishnan). Sen explains that he is not fearless, sometimes his comic content is very critical and hard hitting and anti-government he fears that he may end up in jail but certain issues and events in society make him so aroused and angry that he has to create something and spread it out into the world for all to see. He gives the example of his Muslim carpenter who lives in fear of the rowdy activities of the RSS Shakhya members who frequent their Muslim neighbourhood in Kanpur, his hometown. Sen asks that who will speak up for these people who will fight for their cause. Since they cannot their mouths are shut with fear and insecurity. Sen feels that as an upper caste, elite, educated male it is his responsibility to speak up for them. He says, "at least I have connections and people will speak up for me if anything happens that why I continue to push the limits as much as I can" (Sen qtd. in with Thakurta and Unnikrishnan).

In 1994 Orijit Sen won a grant from *Kalpavriksha* a Delhi based NGO which led to the creation and publication of his first graphic novel river of stories which loosely documents the building of the Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada river and the protests by the tribal people of the Narmada valley who were being displaced due to the project. Sen was interested in the Narmada Bachao Andolan and he wanted to create something on the topic in the visual medium,

but which incorporated his on-ground experiences and data collection. Friends who understood his vision helped him gain a governmental grant for *Kalpavrishka*. They had no idea the result will be a graphic novel which was a new and unique format. The work which was created using a governmental grant had anti-government vibes. regardless the work was loved by his friends and people at *Kalpavrishka*. Due to financial constraints he had to publish the work in black and white, but he insisted to use a thick but semi glossy paper that lend a crispness to the black ink sketches. The lettering was done by Amrita Baviskar, wife of a fellow protestor and musician. Baviskar was a sociologist who was researching on the Bhilala tribal myths of the people of the Madhya Pradesh region. This led to the mystical aspect of river of stories which is lent by the myth of creation of the world and the origin of Rewa river sung by Malgu Gayan on his rangai. The narrative of the maid, Relku serves as bridge between the myth and the urban narrative of Vishnu the journalist.

Sen intricately weaves the experiences of the tribal there, their way of life, the land scape, and the ongoing protest with the indigenous lyrical myths of the Adivasis oral storytelling tradition. The book was published in English in 1994 and then translated and republished in Hindi in 1995." I still meet people who say that reading river of stories has changed the way they look at development , ecology and the right of indigenous people in India" (Sen qtd in Gravette). The graphic novel had no effect on the decision makers of the project, they did not read or know about it. The protest was a failure the dam was inaugurated by prime minister Narendra Modi in posh ceremony in 2017, while the displace Adivasi are nowhere near comfortably rehabilitation in other areas, they lost their land , their culture and their way of life. The reality of society is disillusioning but we must keep fighting for an ecologically sustainable society for the future generations and keep spreading ideas of humanity

and sustainability, at least that what he plans to do as a comic creator. But the graphic novel has been well received by many. Although the book is out of publication for a long period, but Sen has passed on may photocopies of river of stories to eager readers from his people tree studio. He has also scanned and uploaded it online for it to be available to a larger audience via the internet. The books though initially obscure has now gathered a cult following. *River of Stories* has helped introducing the environmental movements to a larger and newer audience, earlier were unaware of its consequences. Like the readers of Vishnu's article in the graphic novel fail to understand actual impact of developmental projects on rural communities. Its value remains relevant today as a visual document that documents this iconic moment in history that gathered environmental activists from all over the world. In the graphic novel Vishnu, the journalist covering the Andolan meets an environmental activist who came from japan to join the protests. On popular demand the graphic novel is to be republished in December 2020.

Orijit Sen is able to spread is ideas of dissent and social change though his comics via social media platforms to reach a larger audience. The fact that he understands his audience very well helps too because he is one of the middle class educated majority who ironically do not care about importance of freedom of expression and the providence of human rights to all. He says "there is a section of privileged class who have felt encumber by secular democratic projects" Sen in Samira Bose. There are people who feel that this is their land, and they are entitled enough to do anything, and the others are outsiders. He points out that contemporary society does a lot of self-censorship since the society today tends to stifle free voices of self-expression and it is becoming too oppressive; "hence it is becoming necessary for artists to speak for humanity and for those who do not have voices of their own in some

ways or the other." (Sen qtd. in Caitlin McCabe). But there is hope people are much more vocal today than they were three or four years back they are much more connected and aware of their rights that even the government cannot falsely restrain them. The work has a political and social aspect. The oral traditional narrative style, hand drawn art and incorporation of the stories, the landscape and the river pay homage to the protest and keeps the questions the protest raised relevant and alive. Ultimately it questions that if such a development is necessary which requires the wiping away of traditional land, resources, livelihood, and a sustainable way of life.

4. CONCLUSION

Comics and graphic novels such as *Priya's Shakti* series which includes have been created by the *Priya and The Lost Girls* and *Priya's Mirror*, Grassroots Comics Anthologies, *Devtoons*, *River Of Stories*, Navayana's *Bhimayana* and *Gardener in The Wasteland*, *Hush* by Manta Ray and many others. These Comics created with passion which they felt about a certain issue/ event which needs to be corrected in society. These comics are semi fictional tales whose base is a real event which has been extensively researched and experienced by their creators. Regardless of these comics contemporary outlook these stories are deeply embedded in the Indian culture and tradition, for instance *Bhimayana* uses traditional Gond art style and *River Of Stories* incorporate the Bhilala myth of the tribals of Madhya Pradesh whose lives changed due the displacement the community faces due to governmental development projects. Yet these stories need to be relevant in the contemporary lives of the public. It must resonate with the social-political milieu of India. These stories are a contemporary commentary on the political social rights of all citizens, but some sections are not even categorised as citizens, unfortunately. The comics medium provides opportunity to comment on aspects of society via a

universal language which people across the world can understand relate and react to, which incites in them an urge for social sustainable change. "for me comics and graphic novels are an art form that carries politics in their genes...art has always reflected our realities" (Sen qtd. in Vaisakh E. Hari). Pratheek Thomas co-founded Manta Ray with Dileep Cherian comics because he believed in the potential of comics in changing the society. They wanted to publish comics about real life not fantasy. The first publication of *Manta Ray* an indie comic publishing house was *Hush* a silent graphic novel on child sexual abuse, *Hush*. *Hush* is a one-shot graphic novel that dealt with the real issue of child sexual abuse and its implications in the Indian society. The black and white simplistic drawings amplify the significance of the content and more people can relate with it. The targeted audience is young adults and parents although anyone can read it. Topics like euthanasia, dowry deaths, marital rape, teen pregnancy, capital punishment, child sexual abuse etc which are veiled in secrecy can be creatively portrayed in comics and can impact the readers immensely. These complex topics can be easily understood through comics resulting in a socio- cultural change. The biggest recognition of *Hush* was by the people working in this field who appreciate it, the work is being read beyond the realms of a comic book as a tool to spread awareness. Thomas endeavours to make realistic comics which are relatable and significant to the larger society. *Hush* deals with a tabooed topic purposefully not talked about in Indian society and silenced in mainstream media. Thomas felt that such stories need to be told. Being a silent graphic novel, it has almost no text which makes the story even more impactful. The forced silence of the victim, highlighted in the panels where the fear, abuse and exploitation are implicitly shown via bold black and white sketches which outline deep emotions like, fear frustration, threat, authority etc. Thomas heard about this event from his older brother who wanted to make a film on it

but Thomas felt that a graphic novel rendering of it will be a better way to handle and inform the educated masses of such evils in society. While researching he found out the fact that Indian legal system does not have any specific law against child sexual abuse, its stacked under sexual abuse. Such information can be transmitted to the public in intriguing visual narration via comics medium.

When talking about social evils especially about the ones directed at women, rape, acid attacks and human trafficking is one of the most frequent ones and the ones that are rarely understood and falsely misinterpreted. Documentary filmmaker Ram Devineni became so disgusted and triggered by the Delhi gang rape case in 2012. More than the disgusting incident the reactions surrounding the aftermath horrified him. He was part of the protests that followed the incident. A certain comment by a policeman regulating the protest, indicating that it was the behaviour of the girl that resulted in a disastrous consequence, enraged him and made him take on the creation of a comic book on rape survivors right to claim justice and live a dignified life. "We want people to be comfortable with rape survivors...our main audience is teenagers, and the comic is free in India" (Devineni qtd in Goldapple). *Priya's Shakti* was followed by 2 other comic books which extended Priya's story. *Priya's Mirror* and *Priya and The Lost Girls*, tells the story of Priya supporting and empowering acid attack victims and recovering victims of human trafficking, respectively. Ram Devineni and his team partnered with NGO'S which worked on these issues, specially *Stop Acid Attacks* organisation where *Priya's Mirror* was launched. The comic book tries to reflect the burden of shame the society and even the relatives of the victims of these crimes are placed with. It creates an empathy, understanding and identification with these victims and highlights the fact that the impurity lies with the perpetrators of these crimes not with the victims. The patriarchal society tries to hide these crimes,

discouraging women to fightback. These comics had over 50,000 downloads worldwide and was honoured with *The Gender Equality Champion* title by the U.N for its contribution to the fight against gender-based violence. Devineni works with NGO *Apne Aap Women Worldwide* to get these comic books to schools. Engaging and informing the youth of the deep misogyny in the society that needs to be changed.

All these examples discussed earlier have demonstrated how comics medium is powerful tool for change in education, development communication, journalism, and campaigning for social change. Comics along with exhibitions, workshops, campaigns, performances etc can make an impact on society which endeavours to reform social norms and change in cultural mentality. These comics utilise the artwork, framework of Indian culture to portray stories of contemporary issues and try to find real time solutions to them. Since these comics are familiar yet different, they intrigue their audiences and tickles their thinking to ask bigger questions and ultimately try to reform society. The advent of internet and the distribution and discussion of these comics for social change has led to formation of collectives with the same aims in mind. A group effort certainly puts a dent in the dominant norms and behaviours which are unjust and biased. Discussions are starting on topics which earlier were side lined in the mainstream. The changes can certainly be seen. Comics creators believe that everybody has a story to tell but do not have a means to tell it; comics can be that means for everyone to bring out voices that were kept silent.

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Reading between and beyond the Panels: Analyzing Stylistics and Narration in a few Graphic Novels

Keywords:
 narratology,
 semiotics,
 stylistics, graphic
 novels

Jaya Wathare

jayawathare08@gmail.com

University of Mumbai, Department of English

ABSTRACT

In the postmodern literary landscape, as high culture and pop culture, tragedy and comedy, reality and fiction continue to stay in a state of flux, the emergence of a literary medium that combines visual and verbal narrative graphic novel, is a form worth exploring. The plurality and fluidity of this particular form has not received the academic acknowledgement that it deserves. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to explore the problematics and potentialities of narration in graphic novels. Besides, examining the irregularities in graphic morphology, this study addresses the question of how narratorial authority is mediated in this form.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'graphic novel' is an outcome of years of trials and tribulations wherein publishers and graphic artists argued that this new literary form too had a serious subject quite contrary to the common

perception of comic books as sites of frivolous teenage adventures with an irrepressible fluid format and unruly profligacy of its pictures. Comics, funnies, manga, sequential art, bande dessinée, picture novella, and illustories this non-exhaustive list of nomenclature only hints at the problem of the multiple origin stories of this genre. The only common feature of all these literary forms was that they had flourished as popular forms of entertainment and were considered lowly in spite of being formally and geographically hybrid.

The term graphic novel gained popularity in 1978 with the publication of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God*. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 was the watershed moment in the history of graphic novels. With this literary recognition, graphic novels legitimized their status in the academia. Furthermore, in the wake of events such as "...the publication of the MLA's Teaching the Graphic Novel (2009) and even in the new layout of the undergraduate library at Yale University: when it reopened in 2007 after extensive renovations, classic and contemporary American, European, and Japanese comics were given pride of place in a "Graphic Novel" section." (Labio,125) However, many critics and theorists later decried this 'imperial' attempt to homogenize the various forms and sanitize it one garb of graphic novels.

2. METHODOLOGY

For a very long time, narratological analysis of graphic narratives had been restricted to the verbal narrative outrightly overlooking "... the code, grammar, and syntax of the graphic narrative is precisely the semiotic complex that binds the graphic narrative to its semiotic medium, that negotiates the conventions of its visual language, and that displays the graphic narrative's unmistakably conventional status as a narrative text..." (Yates 11)

The present paper explores the relationship between the visual as well as the verbal narratives and aims to highlight the problematics as well as potentialities of narration in a select few classic graphic narratives of the Western as well as the Indian canon. Apart from the close reading of a few episodes from the graphic novels, an attempt is made to explore the visual grammar employed in those texts and how culture plays an important role especially in the Indian scenario.

3. THE VERBAL VISUAL ACCORD IN A FEW CLASSIC GRAPHIC NOVELS FROM THE WEST

Post the second world war, graphic novels have provided an outlet to traumatic experiences of survivors and they continue to do so even today. To begin with, *Maus* (1991) is an atypical Holocaust memoir, wherein Art Spiegelman sketches the harrowing experiences of his father, Vladek. The Iranian writer Marjane Satrapi recounts her experiences of growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution and war with Iraq in her memoir *Persepolis* (2000). In the aftermath of 9/11, writers such as Alissa Torres the author of *American Widow* (2008), which deals with her husband's death in the World Trade Center, has commented on the visual nature of 9/11: "We were constantly bombarded by the same images over and over: the burning towers. And I was bombarding myself with images of my husband. That's all I had . . . 9/11 was such a graphic event. Just writing about it wasn't enough. I needed to take control of the images." (Torres Interview, USA Today) Apart from memoirs, this graphic wave took a new turn with Joe Sacco, a Maltese-American cartoonist and journalist, creating *Palestine* (1993) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), both of these graphic novels were about his unique journalistic ventures investigating Israeli-Palestinian relations. This led to the birth of comic journalism-reportage in the form of a graphic novel. There is a

gaping void that one encounters when one thinks of the literary framework to locate these works in. Moreover, the iconoclastic form wherein the word and the image, the writer and the illustrator, history and narration, local and global, individual and society are in juxtaposition, it would be interesting to look at the kind of tensions that one is exposed to in the presence of the other.

3.1. MAUS: ARTIE'S RETELLING

The space in a graphic novel is a contested one as words and images do not simply correspond with each other to aid the reader; they simultaneously

obliterate as well as take over each other's roles. In a paper on reading the visual narrative in *Maus*, Jeanne C. Ewert shows with the help of the following figure (See Fig. 1), a dinner scene, the verbal narrative in these panels show Vladek Spiegelman, the artist's father, who has just returned from forced military service in the Polish army and a stint in a German POW camp, is learning about the strict rationing of food in the Jewish district and the black market. (Ewert 88)



Fig. 1 Artie's retelling from *Maus* Vol. 1 by ©Art Spiegelman, Penguin publishers. PP.77

However, another story is played out parallel to the adults' conversation, in the images of the four panels. Vladek's son, Richieu, misbehaves at the table, is reprimanded, bursts into tears, and finally comforted by his mother, while his father appears does not notice what is going on. The discerning reader is invited to deduce that Richieu craves his father's attention after such a long absence, but is unable to find an appropriate way to attract it.

A similar reading can be done in case of the following figure (See Fig. 2), for instance, the right panel of the



Fig. 2. A Jew or a German from Maus Vol. 2 by ©Art Spiegelman, Penguin publishers, pp.210

pair poses a fundamental problematic that exists in multimodal narratives between the focalizer and the narrator, as Vladek's inmate's assimilated identity of a German Jew is brought into focus by Artie.

A. David Lewis in his paper on comics avers, 'It is the dreadfully boring and narrow comic that has the visual and verbal reflect exactly the same thing in each and every panel. There would be no point and, ultimately, no reason for doing this narrative in comic form. Since the visual and the verbal narratives may be telling different parts of the same fabula simultaneously, it stands to reason that there may also be two different narrators for a given panel as well.' (Lewis 71) This distinction, therefore, needs to be taken advantage of.

3.2. SATRAPI'S PERSEPOLIS : *LIGNE PEU CLAIRE*

Marjane Satrapi seems to be veering away from Hergé's signature style *ligne claire* at least in spirit if not in technique as can be seen in these set of panels from *Persepolis* (See Fig. 3), one can observe that the expression on the dead body of an old man's face and the inconsistent visual gestures in contrast with those of the protestors that are carrying him, convey more than the words or the caption of the panel.

In the essay titled 'The Photographic Message', Barthes calls this relation between the image and



Fig. 3: A dead old man or a martyr from *Persepolis Part 1* by © Marjane Satrapi, Vintage Books, pp35,36

the word as 'a historical reversal' but in the case of photography. He avers, "The image no longer illustrates the words, it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image...it is now the image that comes to elucidate or realize the text." (Barthes 204)

The same logic can be applied in the illustrations above as the verbal text seems to emit a secondary vibration in comparison to the visual. Barthes further argued, "Formerly, the image illustrated the text (made it clearer); today, the text loads the image burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination." (Barthes 205)

The anatomy of expressions penned by the graphic novelist suggests more than the verbal expressions thereby leaving substantial scope for the reader's intervention. McCloud highlights the role of the reader as he stated, "...comic drawings only sketch selected phases and that readers are required to fill the gaps with their creative phantasy." (McCloud 70) Therefore, the leap from one panel across the gutter to the other requires 'closure' the ability to understand the 'whole' based on one's perception of parts.

3.3. SACCO'S PROJECT PALESTINE

In Figure 4, the visual narrative more or less seems to correspond with the verbal narrative as Joe Sacco tries to capture photographs of wounded Palestinian

As a comic journalist, Joe Sacco strives to adopt an objective approach towards the plight of Palestinians though ostensibly he lends his Palestinian hosts a shoulder to cry on as that kind of social posturing gives his journalistic oeuvre substantial leverage. Therefore, he, too, is 'striking a pose' like the wounded girl in these panels, not willing to acknowledge the fact that probably conflict-ridden zones deprive children of their innocence.

India has a glorious history of visual culture which went hand in hand with oral literary tradition. The Indian folk traditions abound in several forms of sequential pictorial narratives which were used as aids

for oral narratives with rare accompaniment of written text. "Sequential art in India never really got to a point where text was used together with images on a large-scale (with rare exceptions), and as oral narratives began to die out, visual narratives also became marginalized. Thus, when comics appeared in India, in the mid-20th century, they had no native precedent to fall back on, and were essentially reprints of comics from abroad." (Singanapalli 11)

In spite of having a long history of visual story-telling, Indian comics were the product or a deliberate effect of the introduction of American and European Comics to the Indian readership in the 1960s, when the Times of India Bennett & Coleman publisher launched Indrajal Comics. With a surge in demand for the readership of this new medium, it was only in 1967, when *Amar Chitra Katha* (Immortal Comic Stories) was founded, India got its first indigenous comics which, perhaps, was the only one that endured the technological onslaught by changing with the times, and is still a renowned publisher of comics. With the launch of satellite television in India, most of the local comics publishers, albeit popular players, such as *Raj Comics* and *Diamond Comics*, gave up on this venture.

4.1. BHIMAYANA : THE GRAPHIC INDIGENEITY

The Indian folk culture is replete with instances of visual story-telling from the carvings on the temples or monuments to the paintings on the walls of houses of tribespeople living in different parts of India. *Bhimayana* is one of a kind of Indian graphic novel that employs elements of the tribal folk art, the Pardhan Gond Art, to illustrate the vignettes from the biographical journey of Dr. Bhim Ramji Ambedkar, who despite being hailed as the Father of the Indian Constitution, the foremost Indian jurist as well as economist, had to bear the brunt of untouchability. The book charts important events from Ambedkar's daily life as "... recounted in the essay *Waiting for the*

Visa or even the famous Mahad Satyagraha story, the Gandhi- Ambedkar confrontation at the Round Table conference in 1931-32, the drafting of the Constitution and Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism." (Vyam, et al.103) The Gond artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, who have beautifully rendered it in the visual form, though tribals, were able to completely internalize the trials and tribulations of a Mahar, a Dalit, as their lives too reverberated with similar experience of discrimination and denigration.

As per the convention, the events of a plot in a graphic novel are contained within a series of panels separated from each other by a 'gutter' with speech balloons and caption boxes within the panels. However, the Gond artists propounded their own radical theory of comic art and used the indigenous *digna* as the visual lexicon which is generally used by the people of the tribe to paint their walls and floors to invoke good fortune. The fluidity of Gond art does not have space for panels as the Vyams proposed, "We shall not force our characters into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is *khulla* where there is space for all to breathe." (Vyam, et al.100) Traditionally, motifs used in this artform are derived from the local flora and fauna drawn with help of dots and lines in earthy colours, needless to say, that this artform is organic in its approach; thus, there are no gutters but objects branching out into other objects or characters and *dignas* binding the whole narrative together. (See Figs.5,6 and 7) Owing to denial of access to drinking water, at many places in the story, Ambedkar has been ironically portrayed with fish as an integral part of his body. (See Fig.5) The

speech bubbles too are adapted to suggest the verbal narrative that is steeped in caste politics. The speech bubble in the shape of a bird is used to



Fig. 5. (left) A fish out of water Fig. 6(right) A deserted dweller from Bhimayana, Art by Durgabai and Subhash Vyam, Text: Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand, ©Navayana, pp.19,65



Fig.7. Unshackling water from Bhimayana, Art by Durgabai and Subhash Vyam, Text: Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand, ©Navayana, pp. 48

enunciate the suppressed or faint voice of the victims; the scorpion-tailed speech bubble is used to represent the call of the dominant caste resonating the venomous speech or touch of the upper caste; the speech bubble with eyes to share those thoughts that can only be perceived and not worded.

Furthermore, the colour palette too mimics the caste disparities as in the second book when he reaches Baroda, the otherwise lush green fields and parks turn into different hues of the sand from parched yellow, to orange and dirty green resonating the fact that he is not only denied access to water but also, he is all alone in an otherwise bustling city of Baroda. It is during the Mahad Satyagraha and the Round Table conference episodes that one witnesses how the multi-layered verbal narrative coalesces smoothly with the visual one, when he addressed the gathering at Mahad to mobilise people to drink the water from the Chavadar tank in Mahad, his words are depicted as droplets of water pouring out from the loudspeakers that are depicted as sprinklers, thus heightening the symbolic effect. This in a way is also remarkable as in the parallel narrative, the dialogic exchange between the caste conscious man and the caste critical woman, the defensive discourse of the man is disrupted as he wonders why this was never a part of formal historical texts. (See Fig. 7) This parallel discourse frames and focalizes the biographical vistas of Dr. Ambedkar's life. There is a clear demarcation between the focalizer

Fig.8 An axe to grind from Bhimayana, Art by Durgabai and Subhash Vyam, Text: Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand, ©Navayana, pp. 90,91



and the narrator as the metanarrative is tailored to spread awareness and educate the masses about the fact that caste still is a pertinent issue.

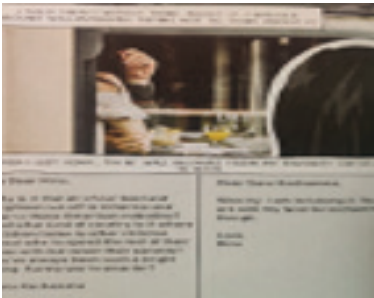
Although in the Round-Table Conference episode, the verbal-visual dissonance is quite stark as the seemingly non-violent stance of Gandhi to go for fast unto death in case the demand for separate electorate for the Depressed Classes by Ambedkar were met, has been quite boldly yet discordantly shown as Gandhi wielding an axe against the oppressed. (See Fig. 8)

4.2 GOOD TALK: A MEMORABLE MONTAGE

Published in 2018, *Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations* by Mira Jacob is a postmodern rendering of a graphic novel, a genre that is already a hybrid form, is further reformulated as a compendium of mixed media. This hybrid nature of the genre allows the author to use her creative license as generously as possible by incorporating a range of literary conventions such as epistolary which includes several correspondences via emails that she has with her extended family in India as well as journalistic which includes excerpts from interviews and speeches or newspaper clippings. (See Fig. 9)

The characters in the memoir are depicted as black and white sketched cut-outs superimposed upon colourful backdrops most of which are photographs of urban landscapes, public as well as private spaces.

Fig. 9. (left)
India Calling
Fig. 10. (right)
Arranging a
Marriage from
Good Talk ©Mira
Jacob, Bloomsbury
publishers, pp.128, 141



there is high degree of narratorial authority with zero focalization." Nothing on a comics page can be taken for granted, not even the space behind characters and between panels (as discussed by Pascal Lefèvre) nor the wide range of sounds found in manga (as examined by Robert S. Petersen)." (Heer and Worcester 103) As a result, this consistency with respect to the role of the background, breaks when there are panoramic shots of the New Mexico city or private spaces like that of the bedroom with only speech balloons mounted on them, thereby generalizing the plight of the Indo-Americans or people of mixed race. The questions raised by Z or her mother do not simply belong to them but lurk in every coloured citizen's mind, thus the writer's decision to use dialogues that could resonate with a segment of the population is a unique rendering of the otherwise silent scenery panels. These photographs do not just serve the purpose of establishing shot but imbue collective memory with sentimental strain.

4.3. MELANCHOLIA AND MEANING IN MUNNU

Another instance of representation of territorial dispute occurs in Malik Sajjad's work, *Munnu*, *A Boy from Kashmir*, a künstlerroman tracing the coming of age of an artist. Munnu is certainly an artist's novel as the illustration technique reflects the intricate wood work employed by the Kashmiri artisans, his father also happened to be one of them. However, the style though poignant in keeping the cultural connect intact happens to be limiting to a certain extent as the rigid wooden figures cannot exhibit emotions of a particular character, and like a skilful artist, the author uses 'emanata', 'motion lines', 'eyelines' or other such visual

Fig. 12. *City Speaks*
from *Good Talk*
©Mira Jacob,
Bloomsbury
publishers, pp.15



Fig. 13. Emanating relief Fig. 14. Follow the eyeline for exit From *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* ©Malik Sajad, Fourth Estate, pp.183,185



morphemes to manifest the internal turmoil of the characters. (See Figs. 13, 14).

Ostensibly, this text seems to have emulated Spiegelman's *Maus*' anthropomorphic characters but there is a slight difference as only 'the Kashmiris' are represented as *Hangul*, an endangered species of deer and also the animal of the state. The decision about the representation of the other characters, though tangentially addressed is rarely executed. At the outset, narrative structure is linear as it progresses from a regular day in Munnu's life at Batamaloo where Munnu's family stays, to his school life, and finally his early yearnings to etch. The narration seems to be externally focalized by a homodiegetic narrator, so unlike other memoirs it is difficult to categorize this as fiction or non-fiction. Consequently, the question of focalization and narration are further confounding. The narrator distances himself from the character Munnu by attributing him this moniker and talks about him in third person, albeit this remains Munnu's story, thereby mostly focalized by him in which case the narrative can said to be internally focalized. However, since the narrator invariably knows more than the character and chooses such an endearing appellation, Munnu,(a variation of *munna* literally meaning a little boy) implies that this could be a coming of age story of any boy from Kashmir who channelizes his never lasting melancholia into art and goes on to become Malik Sajad, the artist who is torn between his younger and his present self, he acquiesces to the fact that he has grown old but he resists growing up, he wants to keep that creative spirit alive in him. Thus, the focalization

keeps vacillating between zero and internal. (See Fig.15)

Munnu, who suffers constant pangs of melancholia as a child, often having nightmares about his brother being buried in the graveyard in turn wishing that he would never want to be inside the grave as it was dark and suffocating towards the end confronts absolute darkness as he walks into the dreary wilderness away from the hustle and bustle of the city only growing stronger in his resolve to talk, draw and demand liberation from injustice that his life was embroiled in. Munnu suffers both a conscious loss of a secure childhood with the loss of a safe abode, proper schooling let alone healthcare and other resources in general, as well as a subconscious loss of a life of freedom, aspirations and dignity. As a result, he suffers from melancholia as well as mourning (Freud 244), a relevant instance of this is seen when Munnu was mercilessly beaten by a headmaster of the Crescent School at Batamaloo and was forcefully shorn off his hair, he is overcome by shame and isolates himself for several days. This incident did not only result in loss of his pleasing appearance (stylish hairdo) but also deeply scarred his self-esteem. Nevertheless, quite contrary to what Freud has theorized in 'Mourning and Melancholia', this period of mourning does not lead to any pathological disorder such as obsessional

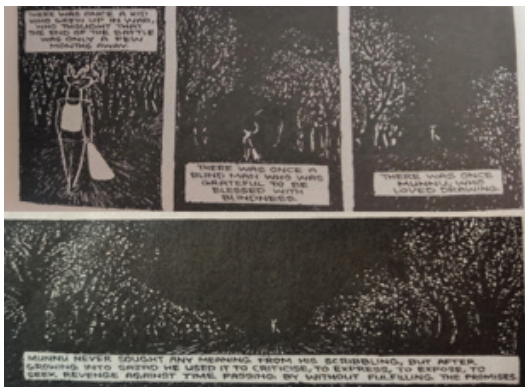


Fig. 15. *Becoming an
Artist from Munnu:
A Boy from Kashmir*
©Malik Sajad, Fourth
Estate, pp.345,346

neurosis or depression. (Freud 251) In fact, he discovers his creative inclination, and takes to drawing, etching and carving for hours on end, which in Benjamin's words is transference from the realm of mourning to the realm of meaning. (Jukić 257) The self that was once maimed and mangled is now infused with purpose, direction and voice.

5 CONCLUSION

The popularity of manga and graphic novels such as Alan Moore's *The Watchmen*, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing* has been growing amongst young adult readers worldwide and in India too. Of late, graphic novels have been able to create spur in the Indian market. Orijit Sen, the creator of India's first graphic novel, *River of Stories* (1994), Sarnath Banerjee co-founder of Phantomville, Amruta Patil with Kari (2008) can be counted as the pioneers of this literary form in India and several graphic novelists are joining their bandwagon every year. The fact that classics such as Kafka's *The Trial* (Chantal Montellier and David Zane Mairowitz, 2008), Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (Stanislas Brezet, 2003), Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (Nancy Butler and Hugo Petrus, 2009), or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (Renee Nault, 2019) have been creatively re-envisioned in graphic novel form augur that graphic novels are here to stay and a study based on this style of storytelling could yield crucial insight into how the act of reading is evolving in the twenty-first century.

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From Myths to Modernity: Adapting a Way Forward for the Indian Comic Book Industry

Keywords:

Comics, India,
America, Mythos,
Marvel, DC
Comics, Amar
Chitra Katha.

03

Nivid Desai

nividdesai@yahoo.in

St Xavier's College (Autonomous), Ahmedabad, Department of
English, India

ABSTRACT

An inquiry into the Indian and American approaches to myths and their adaptation in storytelling demonstrates the ways in which they can be contrasted. Hence, this paper examines how the Indian and American comic books adopt the former's traditionally inherited myths and the latter's modern manufactured myths. It reads Amar Chitra Katha, a comic book series from India that features mythological stories, and builds upon the existing body of research about its contribution to India's identity in the global canon of comic books so far. Furthermore, it reads the comic book universes of Marvel and Detective Comics, both American comic book publications that frequently employ elements of Western mythology in their storylines and also practise manufacturing modern-day myths to project the American identity. Through this analysis, the paper attempts to theorise a way forward for the Indian comic book industry, considering the elements of generative myths that it can adapt from the successful creative choices of American publications. It contemplates the dynamics of creating original, relatable and engaging narratives for the present-day Indian audience.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Greek pantheon of philosophy aptly identifies the two prominent ways in which one can approach, examine and analyse the world: mythos and logos. The former facilitates the flow of the intuitive narrative of life while the latter drives one's cerebral perception towards reasonable deliberation. While logos is what contributes to the rational advancement of thought, mythos is what lays the foundation of cultural and affective identity for a populace. From logos comes logic; from mythos comes myth.

These myths manifest themselves into the belief system of the people to whom they belong. In the terminology of 20th-century Russian formalists, the 'signifiers' of mythology contribute heavily to the 'signifieds' of what Frantz Fanon calls "national culture". These coded narratives of myth unfurl their layers as they are realised in people's behaviour, outlook and sense of self, defining their cultural identity in the global discourse.

For India, one of the countries in question for this study, its central myths are not restricted to providing a narrative of the past. In the ideological heritage of India, myths were seen as providing a framework from which the truths of the world could be made more accessible. In doing so, this perception served quite the same purpose as the duality of mythos and logos. Their contemporary socio-cultural identity is established, sustained and reinstated time and again through these myths.

A peculiar contrast can be found in the United States of America, the other country in question for this study. The country was founded by English immigrants. Due to the economic and political priorities of its leaders in the early years, America has not been home to any inherent myths. Although interestingly enough,

the American intention has always been to establish a kind of 'superculture' with its own identity at the centre. Due to the lack of a traditional backdrop to lay its foundational myths on, the American model efficiently manufactures its contemporary myths through the popular narratives it produces for the mass market. These stories also feature accessible and modernised versions of Greek, Roman and Norse mythologies. Through these mass-produced pop culture phenomena, the American myth is established effectively and with unparalleled influence on contemporary discourse.

In these terms, the two cases of America and India differ remarkably. One establishes its current sense of self on the basis of the inherent myths of the land, while the other produces new myths to project its sense of self. And one of the means to do this in both cultures is through comic books. Although India, with all its cultural richness, is struggling to keep up with its modern-day narratives in comic books to catch up with the standards of the global market; while the US, with its efficient production, market reach and outpouring creativity, has managed to redefine the way comics are consumed across the world. For the Indian comic book industry, this serves as a moment of contentious reflection.

This paper conducts an inquiry into the parallel ways in which Indian and American comic books define, interpret and utilise myths - both traditional and modern. It reads *Amar Chitra Katha*, a comic book series from India that significantly features mythological tales in its roster, and builds upon the existing body of research about its contribution to India's identity in the global canon of comic books so far. Furthermore, it reads the comic book universes of Marvel and DC Comics, both American comic book publications that frequently employ elements of Western mythology in their storylines and also practise manufacturing modern-day myths to project

the American identity. Through this analysis, the paper attempts to theorise a way forward for the Indian comic book industry, considering the elements that it can adapt from the successful creative choices of American publications. It contemplates the dynamics of generating original, relatable and engaging narratives for the present-day Indian audience.

2 AMAR CHITRA KATHA, INDIA: HARBOURING THE HERITAGE

As Anne Rubenstein states, "Comic books are not a global medium; they have very different niches in the cultural ecologies of every region where they are found, and they rarely translate well." [1] This stands true for the way in which the Indian comic book industry has employed and utilised the country's cultural ecology while telling mythological stories through the medium. The pioneering example in this reference is *Amar Chitra Katha*, an Indian publisher of comic books which began as a mythological comic book series, and continues to publish mythological tales as the maximum share of its roster to date. Since its foundation in 1967, *Amar Chitra Katha* has established itself as one of the foremost publishers of comic books in India. The founding note of the publication set the tone for its curation of stories. As the founder Anant Pai notes in one of his public addresses, the following is his anecdotal narration of the reason he felt driven to publish mythology in comic books:

I have great reverence for India's heritage and culture and I am deeply rooted in its rich tradition. Once while working for The Times of India, I had the opportunity to witness a quiz contest on Doordarshan. There I saw that the participants could answer questions on Greek mythology but could not tell the name of Lord Ram's mother. I was baffled and it is then that the seed was sown. Now my aim was to acquaint Indian children with their heritage. [2]

Pai's emotional response to the predicament of the participant lacking knowledge about Indian mythology is not misgiven. It resonates with India's national culture at large. As the popular proverb goes, an Indian never hears the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* for the first time. One is born with these stories. The oral tradition of these epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* precede the written tradition by many centuries. As a result, the stories of these epics have integrated themselves within the social fabric of the Indian consciousness. To this date, the composite identity of being Indian consists of narrative properties derived from the epic tradition of the Indian subcontinent. By associating the contemporary conditions of the Indian society with the narratives offered by these epics, authors and poets across generations have kept retelling and reinventing the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. This practice aptly depicts the way Indian culture utilises its preoccupation with the mythos. Resorting to the inherent mythos of the land substantiates the contemporary cultural identity of being Indian. Therefore, an extrapolation of this temperament is observed in the fact that Amar Chitra Katha has produced 43 titles related to the *Mahabharata* and 36 titles related to the *Ramayana*. In her doctoral thesis, Karlina McLain proposes that *Amar Chitra Katha* ought to be perceived as "public culture" and a "zone of cultural debate". She comments on the consumption of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books as part of what she considers to be India's "strong tradition of narrative liberalism". Elaborating upon the ways in which the Indian national culture facilitates *Amar Chitra Katha's* dependency on Indian mythos, she writes

This narrative liberalism, which discounts the concept of an Ur-text, allows for great freedom in the emplotment of mythological and historical figures. Indeed, it highlights the fact that the concept of "originality" can have different meanings

in different places. In the South Asian context, originality often involves building upon known traditions in novel ways, rather than the creation of entirely new narratives, characters, or concepts. [3]

Furthermore, issues published by *Amar Chitra Katha* themselves also endorse the practice of tracing truth within descriptions of epic proportions found in the Indian mythos. Consider, for example, this statement from the introduction of *Ganga*, an issue published as an extension of the *Mahabharata* series: "Mythology is not all fact, we know, but yet, in its vast poetic exaggerations, one can always trace an outline of the truth." [4] This practice indicates that the retrospective approach towards generating meaning and "tracing an outline of the truth" is inherently derived from the Indian tradition by *Amar Chitra Katha*. Furthermore, even their motto - "the route to your roots" - is an indication of a benediction towards the past, a call-to-action for materialising one's sense of self and Indianness based on one's heritage. The counterintuitive results of the same have also been discussed by the body of criticism that exists about the *Amar Chitra Katha*. For example, Jeremy Stoll, a critic who believes that the overwhelming scholarly focus on the books from this series has been detrimental to the larger understanding of Indian comics, storytelling and visual cultures, discusses the scope and reach of the comic series and how its incorporation of the India mythos can influence its audience:

Pai would then turn to the *Amar Chitra Katha* series and develop it into one of the most important publishers in Indian comics culture. Despite later criticism of the ACK series, Pai expertly argued for its stories as educational and helped to incorporate them into school curricula. [5]

Pai's campaign to incorporate his series into the syllabi of schools across the nation gives ample ground for

the possibility of abusing the Indian mythos to further a biased and ideologically skewed national identity. Critics such as McLain have suggested that such malpractice is indeed at the centre of the early-day expansion of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books. In the titular question of her thesis, *Whose Immortal Picture Stories?*, McLain asserts that the narratives curated by the editorial decisions of the publisher establish a politically and ideologically motivated narrative of the "Indianness" one must adhere to as their cultural identity. Consider McLain's stance in this passage:

When Dr. Joshi, India's Union Human Resource Development Minister ... endorsed the use of these mythological and historical comic books in Indian schools in order to teach the future generation of Indian citizens the "country's rich heritage and culture," he endorsed not only the comic book medium as a pedagogical tool, but also the particular vision of "Indianness" that is constructed in this comic book series ... this concept of "Indianness" – which aligns with the hegemonic Hindu nationalist conception of Indian identity in that it entails the marginalization of Muslims and other religious and cultural "outsiders" from the national past, the recasting of women in so-called "traditional" roles, and the privileging of middle-class, upper-caste Hindu culture – does not just exist passively, but has instead been actively created amidst ongoing debate.

Therefore, it may be asserted that despite India's potential mythological prowess and the idealistic notion of furthering a national culture of holistic Indianness through them, when a publication like *Amar Chitra Katha* attempts to do that, it contaminates the central mythos of India's cultural heritage, and modifies it to arrive on an ideologically concocted logos. This process, in turn, jeopardises both the pedagogical practice of effectively contextualising Indian mythology into young learners' pedagogy and

the commercial and critical scope of comic books in India.

The postcolonial ideological framework of India in the first few decades after independence demonstrates the temperament to revisit its precolonial past and heritage to establish a national culture. However, in a pluralistic culture such as India, resorting to a hegemonic notion of cultural identity by deliberately convoluting the mythos of the land results in a greater polarisation of public culture.

In an attempt to draw parallels with the comic book industry of the United States of America, the following arguments explore how the American comic book publishers Marvel and DC Comics employ elements of Western mythology and also manufacture modern-day myths to substantiate the national identity of the country through their themes and characters. Deriving from the body of scholarly work on the same, the paper attempts to extrapolate a trajectory that the Indian comic book industry can follow to generate engaging, mythos-driven narratives without desecrating the existing canon of the traditional Indian cultural heritage.

3 MARVEL AND DC COMICS, USA: MANUFACTURING AND MARKETING MYTHS

The American approach to a nation's cultural identity and its relationship with the nation's central mythical narrative is remarkably different from the Indian approach discussed above. The United States of America does not have a mythos associated with its historical traditional heritage. Therefore, in its function as a creative production unit, the American comic book industry practises a methodology that is inverse to the Indian approach. Instead of going back to the mythos of the country to arrive at a logos, the American approach is to utilise the logos to manufacture and market a commercial and contemporary mythos. Two of the American comic

book publishers that this paper explores, Marvel and DC Comics, employ this approach effectively through their superhero characters. Describing these superhero comics as "an American mythology that is forever adjusting to meet society's needs", Jeffrey K. Johnson writes

One area that strongly needs to be addressed is comic book superheroes and their changing roles and influences in American society. Since Superman debuted in 1938 as a Great Depression hero, comic book superheroes have been linked to American hopes, desires, fears, needs, and social norms. Because superhero comic books have always been a form of popular literature, the narratives have closely mirrored and molded American social trends and changes. This means that superhero stories are excellent primary sources for studying changes in American society ... They are an American mythology that is forever adjusting to meet society's needs. Superheroes are not merely comic book characters; rather they are social mirrors and molders that serve as barometers of the place and time in which they reside. Their stories help us to comprehend our world and allow us to better understand ourselves. [6]

This approach differs from the Indian practice in several fundamental ways. For starters, as discussed in the criticism offered about *Amar Chitra Katha*, the Indian creators' overt association with the land's inherent cultural mythos results in them approaching those narratives by default. Remarkably enough, this phenomenon is not limited only to the Indian comic book industry but has also been noticed in the market trends around other media inventories such as novels and movies. Albeit this temperament leads to a surge in content which reaffirms and reinterprets the Indian mythos with the passing time, but it occurs directly at the opportunity cost of investing creative capacities in the production of original, modern-day narratives. As

against that, the American approach of utilising the logos of the current times to produce a manufactured mythos which is tailor-made for the American audience results in a higher relatability factor, a broader scope of creative output and increased participation of comic books in the national social-cultural discourse. Although, it is important to mention that the cultural compromise on both sides is open to subjective cultural priorities as the aforementioned approach of the American comic book industry stems not from an autonomous creative choice but due to the absence of a central mythos belonging to its traditional cultural heritage.

One of the most critically analysed examples of this practice is the character of Captain America published by Marvel comics, which this paper examines as an illustration of the American approach to manufacturing and marketing mythology. Created by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, and first appearing in *Captain America Comics #1* (1941), Captain America's story revolves around the sickly weak soldier Steve Rogers who, after an experimental dose of a super-serum, transforms into a super-soldier and gains superhuman qualities. He is re-established as Captain America, the nation's heroic wartime icon who, in the later decades, goes on to define the tenets of being American. Due to his overt symbolic association with the larger narrative of American nationhood, critics have conducted inquiries into Captain America's role in defining and substantiating the standards of masculinity, heroism and loyalty to the nation. Elements ranging from his visual appearance in a star-spangled suit that stands as a motif for the American flag to his decisions as a character in various situations of conflict have been subject to evaluation by critics. In his critical text *Captain America: Masculinity, Violence and the Evolution of a National Icon*, J. Richard Stevens approaches the character and his mythos from the wide array of "messages varying from ultranationalist jingoism to a critique of the role of nationalism in the propagation of

racism and terrorism". In his critique of the character's contribution in manufacturing an American mythology, he writes

Historians and historiographers have noted such adjustments as consistent with the manner in which Americans consider their own history. Because so many Americans arrived in their new country to escape their past conditions, history has long been a fluid concept for most of them, wherein the ability to reconstruct and reinvent origins serves as a central component of American mythology. In this sense, Captain America represents the ultimate American story: permanent enough to survive more than seventy years of continuity but with a history hazy enough to be constantly reinterpreted to meet the needs of the contemporary culture through which he walks from decade to decade. [7]

He derives his framework from Umberto Eco's deconstruction of how the writers of Superman attempted to make the character contemporary. Superman, a character first published by DC Comics in 1938, is analogous to Captain America in its image as an American icon of patriotism and heroism. Eco considers Superman to be "an iconic text, consistently a single text throughout its existence". This notion of a consistent single text arises from the existence of what John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett call "the American monomyth", a peculiar singular approach to producing mythology which is conventional to the characters arcs of characters projecting American heroism which is not seen in other civilisations' cultural artefacts. [8] Building upon this notion, Christopher Knowles, in his book *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, argues for the secularisation of religious signifiers through superheroes, giving rise to a "secularised civic religion", a mythology that is created and claimed by the producers and consumers of comic books. He comments that Captain America represents the

secularisation of the Abrahamic Messiah myth. [9] According to Stevens, the narratives offered by comic book superheroes "show us how we construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the meanings of events and, as a result, how we build myth in our society." This claim can also be tested against other characters who appear on the roster of Marvel and DC Comics. Iron Man, published by Marvel, is the story of Tony Stark, a genius billionaire scientist who engineers his own identity as a superhero through his technology. It represents America's hope in its pursuit of capitalism, portraying wealth as a means to virtue. While on the same spectrum, Batman, published by DC Comics, symbolises America's struggle with the vices of organised crime, poverty, systemic disenfranchisement and economic disparity. Among these problems, another billionaire, Bruce Wayne, emerges as a saviour. When comic books aim to produce the myth of hope and ambition in the American teens, they democratise the chances of having superpowers by letting a radioactive spider randomly bite a high-school student Peter Parker, resulting in Marvel's Spider-Man. In all these metonymical narratives, America's fate lies in the hands of characters that autonomously create and champion the mythos that America is in most need of in the face of the given socio-political logos. In doing so, the American comic book industry can successfully manufacture a customised mythology which aides the reception of these comic books in an audience which receives compelling narratives based in real-time circumstances. This manoeuvre results in the industry succeeding in propagating a multibillion-dollar super culture which spans across forms, timelines, nations and cultures.

4 CONCLUSION: ADAPTING A WAY FORWARD FOR THE INDIAN COMIC BOOK INDUSTRY

The Indian comic book industry, as is the case with the larger domain of other creative industries in the

country, often demonstrates a largely performative affiliation with the mythology of the land. Content based on the traditional mythology of India projects and preserves its exotic image in the first world and hence that superficial reinforcement keeps encouraging more content of such nature. This loop ends up costing the possibility of new, original and creative narratives in Indian comic books. Therefore, based on the approaches discussed in this paper, a new trajectory can be inferred for the development of fresh content in the Indian comic book industry.

As the paper acknowledges above, the cases of both nations in this study are temperamentally different, almost to the verge of mirroring each other's approaches in exactly opposite directions. Hence, it is counterintuitive to suggest that one should adopt the methodology of the other completely. But if the Indian comic book industry is to progress towards more original content, its inherent proclivity towards mythology can, in fact, be its ally. India's logos has occasionally found its voice in its comics, R. K. Laxman's *The Common Man* being a renowned example of the same. But a larger paradigm shift is needed to establish a new narrative tradition in Indian comic books; one in which the content in Indian comic books finds its relevance not by retelling the traditional mythos but by transcreating the contemporary mythos. India's traditional mythology has had a close transactional relationship with its unconventional narrative traditions; in the same manner, India's contemporary mythology can also benefit from a close transactional relationship with the narratives conveyed by the commercial format of comic books.

Establishing a new paradigm would require a contentious time of churn in the Indian comic book industry, but this shift of tone in its creativity will aid the way in which comic books can be made part of the ongoing contemporary socio-cultural discourse at the national level. In turn, the sales of the comic books

would benefit from this amplified relevance as this cultural presence of comic books in India becomes a self-sustaining mechanism of its own. Albeit, in the face of rising global capitalism and ease of access to international comics, the Indian comic book industry would have to virtuously remember that with great power, comes great responsibility.

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The 'Aam Aadmi' in the Indian Graphic Novel: Reading Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*

Keywords:
Graphic novel,
reality, dystopia,
migrants.

Jaya Yadav

jayayadav689@gmail.com

University of Delhi, Department of English, India

ABSTRACT

*In my paper, I shall be looking at the (re)creation of the figure of the common man, the 'Aam Aadmi', through a close critical analysis of Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*. The two texts offer a plurality of perspective in reading, understanding and decoding the city, namely Delhi and Calcutta. The (extra)ordinariness of the everyday, the domestic and the familiar is rendered both unfamiliar and yet oddly close and 'real' to the reader. I argue that unlike Maus¹, Footnotes on Gaza², Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir³, or such other narratives, recording memory and history, which make violence explicit, drawing upon the atrocities of the Nazi regime, Indian graphic novels turn to look at the everyday muted violence located within. Moreover, the collective memory of a city is chronicled in Banerjee's texts. The dystopian reality of Delhi in *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*, fuelled*

¹ Written by Art Spiegelman, published in the form of a book in 1986, as a metaphorical narrative on Nazi Germany.

² Written by Joe Sacco, as a seminal account on Palestine and the violence that occurred in the Intifadas in the region.

³ Malik Sajad's first graphic novel captures the onslaught on human life in Kashmir.

upon classist binaries between the residents of the city preempts a portrayal of Delhi, which today in terms of climate change, pollution levels and frequent water crises, seems more 'real.' The city and its residents engage in different forms of violence upon one another. Moreover, the altering landscape of the city is noticeable through this act of creating textual evidence in the form of the graphic novel, capturing the human violence committed upon natural resources as well as human relations. The inflections of the anthropocene⁴, intertwined with capitalism weave the narrative highlighting various themes that recur in the novel. The everyday, the domestic and the familiar is rendered both unfamiliar and yet oddly close and 'real' to the reader.

INTRODUCTION

The medium of the Graphic novel is a site with contestations, contradictions through which several themes of both fiction and non-fiction can be explored. Blurring the binaries between these two overarching modes of writing, Sarnath Banerjee's work, *Corridor* (2004) [1] and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015) [2] capture the margins of the city of Delhi. It delineates in a circular manner, the trajectory of characters who are symbolic of the common, everyman, or the 'Aam Aadmi.' In this paper, I argue that Banerjee uses the interdisciplinary aspect of the Graphic novel, to defy genrefiction. *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* has been categorised under 'dystopian' fiction, ecocritical writing, whilst *Corridor* is often read as a chronicle of urban city life. Both texts build upon the margins of society both literally and metaphorically, and portray the cartography of India as a nation whose evolution from a seemingly Socialist one, has now evolved into the post liberation Capitalist

⁴ The term is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment"

one, dependent on its common people. The narratives of the personal and political combine, in a form which uses both text and image, to engage the reader to delve further than simply reading between the lines. The (extra)ordinariness of the everyday, the domestic and the familiar is rendered both unfamiliar and yet oddly close and 'real' to the reader. Moreover, the collective memory of a city is chronicled in Banerjee's texts through this mode of historiographical writing emerging from the voices of people, who often do not lie at the centre of such narratives.

PAPER PRESENTATION

The text and image production in both *Corridor* and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* move through neat square shaped panels. However, it is interesting to note that the trajectory of time appears to be cyclical. In the former, the reader is taken through both a first person's perspective textually, whilst a third person's alternating gaze is maintained through a journey in and out of Connaught Place in New Delhi undertaken by the collector Brighu Sen, a young Bengali man who "on good days feels he is Ibn Battuta."⁽⁶⁾ This reference to the historical traveller is a theme which will recur in the latter text, uses the interplay of myth and reality to invoke satire. In *Corridor*, the spatial landscape of Delhi, namely central Delhi is likened to that of the universe (14). Metaphorical language uses comparisons to bring different aspects of the city comparing this image to that of "onions having layers and layers" through the character of Jehangir Rangoonwala, who is a bookseller. The mix of the variety of eccentric characters range from the narrator Brighu, to Digital Dutta, who mostly lives inside an imaginative realm in his subconscious and is torn between his Marxist values and the need to gain an H1B visa. The bookworm and socially awkward Dutta is provoked by a bunch of goons when he is with his girlfriend Dolly. In his mind he is plagued by the almost 'real' appearance of famous figures such as

Che Guevara. The reader is invited to this eclectic mix of human beings, who symbolise the heterogeneous cultural element of the city's inhabitants. Shintu is a newly married man who struggles with sex and reads *Cosmo* for tips. He travels across the city to meet with hakim who might be able to help him solve his issues. This motley of characters informs the reader of the multiple layers of Delhi, and the tension beneath the surface of the characters and their seemingly 'regular lives.'

Banerjee highlights these crevices between fiction and reality, text and life through shifting scenes from lanes in Delhi, to Brighu's home in Calcutta. The reader is carried onto a not so adventurous journey into the daily lives of the people who reside in these cities. To borrow from Hayden White's notion of 'Historiophoty' which is defined as the "representation of history and its relation to visual images and filmic discourse [3], the reader finds that instead, the interplay of the combination of both these terms is used in the context of Banerjee's work. This leads to a reading of his rewriting process and recording of the everyday, as equally important markers of the process of historiography through the invocation of historiophoty. Moreover, it is an inversion of such a reading of pivotal moments in the history of the world, as Banerjee chooses to shed light on 'regular' lives, underlying what may seem mundane.

In contrast to the trope of Western comics ascent into the genre of superhero comics, urban Indian comics have been experimental in terms of themes. From the advent of the popular *Amar Chitra Kala*⁵, to now texts working on social issues, such as Priya's *Shakti*, and others combining comics with myth and folklore, such as *Devi* and *Nagraj*, the sphere of the Indian comic and Graphic novel refuses to be limited to monolithic

⁵Amar Chitra Kala founded in 1967 reinvented the visual form of narratives bringing them to the Indian audience.

understandings. Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* is an interjection in the Indian Graphic novel arena which centres the narrative on themes of the anthropocene and its altering relation to climate change and capitalism. It also functions as a satire of several aspects of everyday life in India, such as the slow bureaucracy, 'jugaad', migration from towns to cities, 'struggles' of the upper class which is far removed from the harsh daily realities of the working class.

The opening page of the graphic novel draws upon an average day in the lives of people from various classes. They are portrayed sharing a public space primarily due to the reason that they are waiting in line at the Regional Passport Office. There is "a general cross-class bonhomie in the air" (2) where suddenly an upper class class man, illustrated almost like a newspaper caricature, expresses his belief that the passport office should privatise, since he doesn't want to wait. His disregard for the existing system is explicit in his ignorance of the people around him. Banerjee writes wryly, "A percentage of the Indian middle class thinks that corporates are benevolent philanthropic organisations who, in their hearts, desire the betterment of their fellow humans" (3).

The text colour and image gradient in the novel is plain, lacking colour. Only at certain moments does colour appear on the page, arguably to signify the appearance of the elusive availability of water as a dying resource. One may also say that the lack in colour is representative of the common man's life. An 'aam aadmi's' work does not fill the glossy pages of magazines, nor does it appear in large letters in history books. The chronicling of this mega project to 'discover' the mythical river, Saraswati is a social commentary on the hollow mode of politics and false promises, capturing the process behind the systems of failure and subsequent facade by institutions, and the apparent meaningless struggle for life and livelihood. Banerjee inscribes on the margins of the

text, writing "isn't it heartbreaking when people at the margins still believe in the legal system? His ironic statement sets the tone for the rest of the narrative.

Sukanya Gupta, in her essay, 'Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* as Text/ Image Activism and Cli-Fi' [4] emphasises on an ecocritical reading. She writes:

Banerjee blends the cli-fi genre with the medium of the graphic novel to illustrate "slow violence" that is perpetrated on nature in the name of *vikas* or progress. Through his text/ image activism, Banerjee depicts India's water wars at the community level, a corrupt political system, the shortsighted policies in politics and business, the detrimental effects of privatizing basic resources, the media's lack of coverage of environmental issues, the paradoxical nature of the relationship that Hindus have with nature, and the inaction or silence that the average Indian maintains towards environmental concerns. These factors are forms of "slow violence." Since there is no actual "violence" involved in any of these factors, the threat is difficult to translate.

All Quiet in Vikaspuri also (re)defines the meaning of the term, 'short termism', which alludes to the concerns of slow violence by translating it indigenously within the cultural atmosphere of India. Short-termism is identified in the novel as a disease that is "when industries take over agricultural land and dams drown entire villages and destroy settled communities to produce unjustifiably low amounts of electricity" (56). This way of being and seeing amidst the citizens of India, represent the Orwellian notion of "are all equal, but some are more equal than others." Similar to *Corridor*, *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* follows the journey of Girish, a talented plumber, who once lived in Tambapur, "an almost pastoral copper town," till

privatisation by the government leaves it in ruins. From once being a place with systemic functions and welfare, after the arrival of a "financial wizard," Varun Bhalla (8) whose interest lies solely with the shareholder's profits, life for the residents and workers drastically decimates into disintegration. People like Girish are now left jobless, and have no avenue of income. This lack of choice and agency over their own life, prompts him, and in real India, millions of others to migrate to larger cities. The disconnect of wealth and inequality are more stark in the city.

The novel not only highlights Girish's issues, but also portrays an array of other characters and offers insights into their lives. Girish is led water diviner as he sets out on an epic quest to find the digging spot for the river, earning the nickname "Psychic Plumber" from the media. Varun Bhalla reappears as a person living in the cemented and disjointed suburb of Gurgaon, overlooking a golf course, haunted by his actions. In his dreams he is visited by a journalist who asks him pertinent questions.

Hillary Chute, in 'Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative,'⁶ [5] focuses on the rupture between the text and the visual in order to show that though a comic maybe "a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially," it "doesn't blend the visual and the verbal—or use one simply to illustrate the other—but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously" (452). This element of non synchronous is a characteristic that helps unpack Banerjee's work. Instead of simply "producing an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 9) [6], the lack of conventional art and colour decode the world around the reader, rendering the unfamiliar greyer than it appears to be in the three dimensional world. The two dimensional world of the graphic novel,

⁶Hillary Chute, 'Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative,' PMLA, vol. 132, no. 2, 2008, pp. 452-465.

however, bring forward the 'ordinary' simultaneously as the 'extraordinary' as it becomes a testament to real issues and people, centring the trajectory around several 'aam aadmis'. This plurality in identity, region, and livelihood posits a critique of the hegemonic discourse of power and knowledge which continually pushes the common people to the margins of the city, struggling for resources and a means to life. In the demarcation between Girish's old life, and new, the sub title is called, 'The Water Wars of Delhi'. The mapping out of India's capital exposes its hollow structures of the policy makers, government and the uber rich. The virtual blind spots of the people partaking and benefitting from these wars over a vital resource is captured through the narrator's excerpt on Gurgaon, "For instance, when Gurgaon residents are asked where their water and electricity comes from, they respond, the building! They speak of their buildings as if they are self contained ecosystems in the Amazon." (49). The dark humour of these bitter realities are not lost on the reader. The linking of this metaphorical and literal blindness to the harsh systems of water scarcity and its theft in Delhi, to the belief system adopted by the residents in terms of acceptance of myths in a Barthesian sense "appear as natural, as they implicitly undertake the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification or 'making contingency appear eternal' "(1973, 155) [7]. The reiteration by the characters on (mis)placing their faith in the river Saraswati, is symbolic of the larger issue of the public being co opted by the discourse of religion to counter the rationale of a clear lack of resources as well as misuse of power through governmental shareholders, such as the Municipal Corporation of Delhi.

Another theme prevalent in the novel is that of the idea of 'vikas'. The thoughtless policies adopted by the politicians in the name of progress are constantly undercut through various examples. Climatic disintegration is never even a point of false alarm. Banerjee asserts that a major issue is evidently the

lack of thorough planning, or even any planning. He writes that in their desire for quick success and profit, big corporations "have embraced the Usain Bolt model", but "somewhere inside, Varun is still a fan of long-distance running."

Another critique of the city is exemplified through the figure of Jagat Ram, an employee of the Delhi Jal Board. His main occupation is working with owners of private tanker companies in order to divert water from the main supply lines, so that only 37% of the water pumped into Delhi reaches the consumer (22–26). This self-induced deficit is hidden from the public who then is coerced into buying water at exorbitant rates from private owned tankers which flock the city. Tanker Rajan is one such owner of a private tanker company, who excels in stealing water from the government supply and then directing it to five-star hotels as well as luxury apartments, which run entirely on tankers (25). He pays the police so that he can continue to prosper on the basis of his illegal business without interference. The novel also highlights that water thieves are not only such people. The rich too are not afraid in Delhi, and frequently steal water. One such person is Mrs. Carrey Jones, the wife of a foreign ambassador, who has her swimming pool emptied by her staff, every time her child happens to urinate in it. Another affluent thief is a colonel, Gambhir, who steals from a neighbour's water tank on the roof in the middle of the night. A third character Aswathy, is also identified as a thief who ironically is a senior Municipal Corporation official who has trees cut down and designs in order to create manmade gardens full of water fountains, to which the narrator comments are, "the sort South Delhi's affluent class adores but barely visits" (2015, 34). The tone of the narrator throughout such statements in the novel testifies to the hypocrisy of the upper classes.

In terms of language, *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* speaks directly to an Indian middle class which faces similar

concerns in their daily life, while navigating their day to day activities. On the panels following the 'Water Wars of Delhi,' Banerjee depicts a routine affair of millions of Delhiites. Every morning, "one adult member from every family is assigned the role, everyday he has to fulfil his duty...with shivering hands they switch on the booster pump and return an hour later to switch it off." (15) This description of the water pump being used to fuel the requirement of water becomes a moment of identification for the reader, in a form of collective memory. The use of Delhi slang, and mixed language, create a linguistic variety of Hindi, English, Punjabi reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of the city's inhabitants.

The concerns of the dystopian genre run throughout the novel. However, instead of merely defining itself by the limitations of the boundaries of this genre, the novel pushes them. Banerjee unveils the reality of the lives of the 'aam aadmi' through these changing paradigms of polity cloaked in social welfare, (mis) trust and (mis)management. The novel deconstructs the narrative of national economic progress through exemplifying the case of Tambapur, and its subsequent fall from grace after privatisation. The issue of migrants moving from the town to the city for employment, parallel the new labour class brought in from other states, for lower wages, lesser agency and overall profit. The new migrants who arrive are not a threat for the foreign employers, as they cannot form any union, nor organise any protests. The slow eradication of India's unique Public Sector Enterprises such as the fictional Bharat Copper Limited, also a cross reference to Hindustan Limited, foregrounds issues that have come to light in today's time. The attack on government sector banks and the privatisation of educational institutions may at one moment in time seemed like a far fetched reality, but today they grow into strong holders of civil society.

It is important to note that the invisibility or almost a complete absence of women in both novels is a matter of concern. On one hand, Banerjee's texts raise questions of accessibility and human rights, on the other, they further perpetuate voices which are predominantly male and patriarchal. Women are pushed further and further past the margin, even though the men occupying these liminal spaces are given agency to an extent. Overall, the novels offer a counter hegemonic space to articulate and discuss the process behind policies and their implementation as well as their implications on the present and future.

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Keywords:

*multimodality,
critical literacy,
Indian comics,
graphic narratives,
pedagogy*

Multimodality and Critical Literacy: Graphic Narratives in the Classroom

Amrita Singh

amritasingh1885@gmail.com

University of Delhi, Department of English, India

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that syllabi and pedagogical practices across curricula and different levels of education in India may incorporate comics and graphic narratives to enhance learner capabilities. A multimodality and critical literacy approach would enable the reader to link personal experiences with socio-historical and institutional power relations, use other texts on contemporary historical realities to reflect on issues of otherness, and develop a critical attentiveness toward how visual images are constructed with the aim of influencing and manipulating consumers of such images. Visual literacy is the ability to interpret, negotiate and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image as well as to produce visual messages, and multimodality brings an awareness of the reading process. Storytelling brings active and constructive reading, while the art and artistic processes employed in graphic narratives teach critical thinking and evaluation. Comics and graphic narratives are designed to urge readers to engage with visual and verbal literacies simultaneously, preparing students and teachers to engage deeply in conversations about form, representation, perspective, power, voice, bias, identity

and so on. This paper presents three instances of such an approach at work, where graphic narratives are engaged with in literature and language-based undergraduate classrooms, with positive curricular and critical literacy outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills Framework, recognized multimodality and critical literacy as twenty-first century skills, to be developed in learning programmes at all levels [5]. It refers to learning and innovation skills that include creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration, as well as information, media and technology skills. As Maureen Bakis has argued, this is important for "understanding both how and why media messages are constructed, and for what purposes, and examining how individuals interpret messages differently, how values and points of view are included or excluded, and how media can influence beliefs and behaviors" [1, p. 53]. Comics and graphic narratives are designed to urge readers to engage with visual and verbal literacies simultaneously, preparing students and teachers to engage deeply in conversations about form, representation, perspective, power, voice, bias, identity and so on. Critical literacy enables readers to move beyond a surface-level comprehension and delve into deeper understanding of texts and contexts by identifying underlying ideologies or belief systems inherent in any medium of words and images.

Paying heed to these changes in teaching methodologies, this paper proposes that syllabi and pedagogical practices across curricula and different levels of education in India may incorporate comics and graphic narratives to enhance learner capabilities and be commensurate with global practices. Such a

practice would also fall within the purview outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes the holistic development of learners with 21st century skills. The introduction of comics and graphic narratives would appeal to the NEP's demands for a reduction in curriculum content to enhance essential learning and critical thinking, the application of storytelling-based pedagogy, and of art-integration as a "cross-curricular pedagogical approach that utilizes various aspects and forms of art and culture as the basis for learning of concepts across subjects" [12, p. 12]. This paper presents three instances of the use of graphic narratives from India in three literature-and-language-based classrooms, and discusses how such a pedagogical approach has been effective in fulfilling the aims and objectives of the course being taught.

2 PEDAGOGY OF MULTILITERACIES

Students in the 21st century classroom are already engaged in multimodal practices of meaning making via social media, online games, text messaging, to but name a few, so a pedagogy of multiliteracies would seek to incorporate these important resources to construct knowledge in diverse classrooms. That is to suggest that it would enter into terrain already familiar, but also add to their negotiation of that terrain by giving them analytical tools to assess not only texts within the classroom but also the other practices they engage with beyond the classroom. By foregrounding in the classroom substantive topics that can be related to students' own experiences, multiliteracies pedagogy works to promote learning that recognizes students' own knowledge resources, which in turn affirms students' identities as learners and thinkers [3, p. 145]. Abundance of media messages (both image-based and verbal) in the home and community suggest that there is an urgent need to help students learn how to evaluate such messages for their social, political, economic and aesthetic contents [16, p. 1].

They would then be able to create "visualizations [that are] related in many ways to their own real-life experiences, and sometimes [build] on them" [3, p. 147]. As Michael Boatright has pointed out, "critical literacy, by its very nature, cannot be reduced into a formulaic method, because it values the plurality and openness of meanings" [2, p. 470]. Critical literacy is a site of contestation and finds its most productive uses as "locally negotiated practices" [2, p. 470]. Readers become agents of their own reading experiences, and may be invited to take up, refuse, or contest an author's message, which disrupts the power relations in the author–reader binary. Moreover, a critical literacy approach examines the assumptions authors make about their readers, who gets to speak for whom, and whose voice or point of view is ignored [2, p. 470].

The critical literacy approach may be strengthened by transaction between text and reader, privileging neither, and requiring both in the production of meaning. It takes into account the reader's accumulated knowledge, present condition and mood as factors that influence the reading (and viewing) of the text [15]. The reader is encouraged to let go of an efferent approach, whereby they're only looking for information (e.g. in the verbal), towards an aesthetic approach where they're focusing on how the information is being given (e.g. how the verbal and the visual are coming together, certain image choices, visual choices and the affect they're hoping to achieve.) When aesthetic response is anchored in critical response, it can overcome problems of transaction that include reinforcing stereotypical perceptions, biases and prejudices instead of "opening up" the text to plurivalent ideas. In any case, emphasis on the reader empowers the text – gives it visibility and meaning – and generates critical literacy.

The more productive question, however, is to ask *how* critical literacy works *in use* than to focus on what critical literacy is. This paper's critical framework

is built on Morgan and Ramanathan's four points that constitute an "abbreviated sense of a critical literacy 'tool-kit' in action" [10, p. 156]: first, the "use of narratives/autobiographies to link personal experiences with socio-historical and institutional power relations" [10, p. 156]; second, by juxtaposing texts "in ways that question and subvert received disciplinary knowledge" [10, p. 157], teachers can problematize issues and discourses that may not always be foregrounded in the classroom; third, instead of reading (or attempting to read) "official" versions or documents with passive acceptance or indifference, students' intellects and imaginations are challenged and activated by contact with multimodal texts that present alternative representations, to especially question and examine their own prejudices or complicity in reinforcing them; and fourth, develop a critical attentiveness toward how visual images are constructed with the aim of influencing and manipulating consumers of such images. The texts chosen for the three classrooms checked all these points, and enabled me to teach both concepts and skills to the requirements of the respective courses. Combining such a toolkit in action along with assessment on multimodality and critical literacy in teaching of comics and graphic narratives, I was able to adapt some of the suggested methodologies to my three classrooms at the university level comprising of undergraduate third semester students: one, English honours students who compulsorily study the graphic biography, *Bhimayana* (2011), as part of their core course on popular literature; second, an elective course for students from mixed disciplines (other than English), 'Contemporary India: Women and Empowerment', for which I used four stories from *Drawing the Line* (2015); and third, English language fluency group with lower intermediate language proficiency, to whom I designated one story from *This Side, That Side* (2013).

3 CLASSROOM STUDY

The texts chosen for the selected classrooms were specifically Indian narratives, such that they may be closer to the students' contextual environment and help them to reflect upon their contemporary lives. Prior to the teaching of the graphic texts, students in all the three classrooms were surveyed, which confirmed that a large number of them (63%) were already comfortable in reading multimodal texts. Picture books, comic books, cartoon strips, web comics, graphic novels emerged as some of their familiar texts (e.g. *Calvin & Hobbes*, *Archie Comics*, *Marvel and DC Comics*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, *Chacha Choudhury*, *Adventures of Tintin*). They did not require instruction before being given the texts to read and were found to be competent in discerning the ideas along the verbal-visual paradigm with relatively little input from the teacher.

3.1 BHIMAYANA IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM

Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability is the biography of Dr BR Ambedkar in the graphic medium, connecting historical, autobiographical and contemporary representations of caste in India. In the literature classroom, students' immediate response to the graphic narrative was as a literary text, focusing on the complexity of its theme, the subtlety of its characterizations, the visual metaphors expressed through its compositions and its seriousness of purpose. Since this text was taught over a semester (around 16 lecture hours) a much deeper engagement with it was possible. The text generates a multiliteracies engagement, as it responds to the "multiplicity of communication channels and media" and "the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity" [3, p. 145]. The text extends visually by adapting and innovating the comics format through the medium of the folk form of Gond art, and the verbal language uses a contemporary idiom removed

from the high diction of literary texts. It also includes excerpts from Ambedkar's speeches and writings, which collaborate with the visual narrative strategies to make caste issues both visible and important in contemporary India.

Before launching into teaching *Bhimayana*, students were taken through common concepts and vocabulary associated with reading graphic narratives – such as panel, boxes, captions, transitions, gutter, frame, gaze, colour, speech bubbles, page layout – and taught to employ it to discuss characters, plot and theme. The first five pages of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* were discussed as an example. This exercise proved to be important and useful as the students needed to understand how *Bhimayana* is different from conventional comics, or graphic novels that use the comics mode. They needed to bring in informed and transformed ideas of heroism, iconism and activism into their reading of this text. They were also expected to understand what constitutes popular literature, how comics and graphic novels are now qualifying as texts of popular literature, and therefore how *Bhimayana* did or did not fit in to its expanding paradigm. The humour, irreverence, pain and verbal exposition contributed to the deepening familiarity and complexities of the issues depicted in the text.

In terms of Morgan and Ramanathan's tool-kit, *Bhimayana* checks all the four boxes: it uses BR Ambedkar's autobiographical work to tell the story of Ambedkar's experiences with untouchability, linking his personal experiences with the larger socio-historical and institutional power relations. The visual-verbal juxtaposition visibilizes the gaps and prejudices in the assumptions and received knowledge about caste in India, allowing caste to be discussed and debated in the contemporary classroom. The multimodal text requires the active participation of the reader in the meaning-making process, preventing them from passively accepting

"official" or sanitized history of Ambedkar or caste issues by presenting alternative representations (such as newspaper reports). The target reader is, as Pramod Nayar argues, produced by the text, who is expected to become alert "to the position she takes vis-à-vis not just the text but the social domains represented in it... [critical literacy] refuses to see the reader-text relation as that of subject (reader) and object (text), but sees all subjects as subjects-in-process" [13, p. 4]. Nayar goes on to claim that "*Bhimayana* is a significant text due to the critical literacy it calls for towards modernity and postcolonial India's continuing negotiations with caste when it takes a pernicious social issue (caste) into a new medium, even as it offers a whole new visual and verbal experience of the medium (the graphic novel)"; and that it "contributes to a postcolonial critical literacy that can help young people in contemporary India engage with social issues such as caste" [13, p. 4].

3.2 DRAWING THE LINE IN THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY CLASSROOM

Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back is an anthology of work by women, the result of a German-Indian collaboration, which brought women artists from diverse parts of the country and diverse backgrounds together to produce short pieces on representing contemporary women through comic art. Four stories were extracted from the book to talk about women's experiences in the public domain. The first story, "An Ideal Girl" by Soumya Menon is a visual retort to the "Ideal Boy" posters propagated in the public domain to present an idealized, sanitized, regimented and conservative idea of the "good" or "perfect" boy (or girl) who would one day also become the ideal citizen. The ideal girl of the story is disciplined, well-behaved and abiding, till she feels her rights and freedoms are being unjustly curtailed (such as being prevented from enrolling in higher education so that her brother may study), and one day decides to ride her bicycle away in to the

world as a challenge to the systems that bind her. The second story, "Ladies Please Excuse" by Angela Ferrao details the struggles of a young woman trying to get a job, whose only disqualification seems to be her gender. The third story, "Basic Space" by Kaveri Gopalakrishnan – the one the students enjoyed the most – is a humorous and witty take on how women navigate, negotiate and strategize in public spaces. It represents a wide gamut of women from different social strata and communities, who are united in their struggle to live life on their own terms. The students related to the experience depicted therein; for example, of many of the women are depicted using handbags, umbrellas, elbows as weapons, or wearing scarves and dupattas over their clothes, walking with their heads down, not making eye contact, or others who are brusque, wear risqué outfits, smoke in public, drive bikes, stay out late and take autorickshaws etc. The fourth story, "The Poet, Sharmila" by Ita Mehrotra traces the life and activism of Irom Sharmila of Manipur, and how she is an inspiration and icon of revolutionary women in contemporary India. Using this story, it enabled the class to add to their study of the history of women's movement and women's protests in post-Independent India. Sharmila's struggles, politics, her persona, her strength in face of an adverse opposition like the nation-state rendered in the comic form not only helped the readers get involved with her story but they were able to link it with larger important issues as well.

In the multidisciplinary classroom, the graphic texts chosen were looked at as an extension of the social media universe, akin to memes and cartoons, especially those that were commonly found online. Only a few students responded to terms such as character construct, plot etc (though these were short sketches and not full-length narratives so they were perhaps disinclined to think of them as literary texts). Since their primary course was on the socio-political, economic, legal and literary history of the women's

movement, especially in contemporary India, these four stories connected with their apprehension of the content of the course, as well as resonated with their own experiences. The texts were given to the students without explaining the context or the form. In the post-reading exercise, 88% of the students responded to the texts affectively, echoing the sentiments depicted in the short narratives. They expressed the ease and speed with which they were able to read the texts and grasp the ideas and issues represented therein. They were introduced to the specific vocabulary of comics such as panel, image, speech bubble, which they incorporated in their discussions of the texts. Their main focus, however, was on bringing their experiential as well as discipline-related knowledge to the reading of these stories.

These stories connected with the concepts and ideas of the course, especially in conjunction with readings such as V Geetha's *Gender* and *Patriarchy* or Shilpa Phadke's *Why Loiter*. The visuals proved to be stimulating, activating the readers' sensorious perception, enabling them to move beyond seeing discussions around gender and patriarchy as merely theoretical but to visualize and apply them in the real world outside. Like with *Bhimayana*, the teachable skills with these narratives were to understand the value of collaboration and solidarity, like between authors and artists to produce these texts, within the textual domain, and as a transaction with the readers. Even where the images were controversial – such as of experience or of the body – they developed sensitivity, openness and metacognitive reflection among the students. Critical literacy pushed the readers again to link personal experiences with socio-historical and institutional power relations, and evoked other texts on contemporary historical realities to reflect on issues of othering. At the end of the sessions, students felt motivated to produce their own comic or visualization as a response or reflection to what they had read, a fruitful transaction between text and reader.

3.3 COMICS AND THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

For the class with lower intermediate English fluency, I chose the narrative "Milne Do" by Beena Sarwar and Prasanna Dhandarpale from Vishwajyoti Ghosh's edited anthology on South Asian Partition graphic narratives, *This Side, That Side*. The story is about the meeting of two journalists, one from Pakistan and one from India, who debunk some of the common stereotypes and misinformation circulated in both the countries about each other. The motive of the narrative is to underline the need for interaction and intermingling between people of the two nations, such that "good things happen" [8, p. 315]. The students read the text individually, and then discussed it as a group. Here too they were able to identify that the narrative "looked like a *Tinkle* comic or *Amar Chitra Katha* story" or "a box from a newspaper cartoon". Although they were given the vocabulary of the elements of a comics page, they preferred to focus on what the visuals contained and what the verbal text indicated. Some of them demonstrated pre-knowledge of the 1947 Partition, of other texts (films, TV shows or stories) where they would have encountered the historical context, and some came up with family stories they had heard. Scaffolding the historical context helped them think about the ideas of nation, citizenship, borders, and how travelling to some parts of the world (even if they were driving distance away) may be restricted by political and other factors. They tried to connect contemporary incidents around migration and refugees, and the humanitarian crisis that emerge out of devastating events like the Partition.

It is in this language classroom where I found the most effective use of the multimodal comic form, where I was able to foreground both language literacy and critical literacy. The English language is both seen as desirable for mobility and progress, and yet there is also a fear associated with its correct usage. The use of a graphic narrative reduced the text

and cognitive load for the students, along with the anxieties related to print-based reading. It developed in them a comfort in engaging with the language without being intimidated by verbal text. They were more willing to visualise and conceptualise different ways to build comfort with language using visuals, and felt encouraged as readers of the language and more confident later to deal with verbal-only textual material. The verbal and visual vocabulary of the text was complementary and straightforward; words like neighbour, harmony, peace, interaction encouraged positive contact between India and Pakistan, and others such as visa, religion, cricket connected with the socio-political reality of their contact. Many of the students also enthusiastically translated the title of the story from Hindi in to English ("Let us meet", "Let them meet", "We should meet"), gaining confidence in their ability to move between two literacies. As Chun points out, "oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence", and "teaching how language works can result in critical language awareness, which is crucial in a democratic society" [3, p. 148].

"Milne Do" took the pressure out of reading, with only four pages with pictures and words so they felt it was more interesting. They found it easier to imagine characters and spaces closer to their lived experience as they were not bogged down by comprehending verbal-only vocabulary and imagining the story at the same time. They were able to accurately respond to a reading comprehension quiz (74%), and the skills to be taught in this unit were affective and persuasive writing, both of which were achieved successfully.

4 CONCLUSION

While the focus of this study was on reading English language texts from India in English language and literature-based classrooms, the scope of a multiliteracy and critical literacy approach may be extended to classrooms as diverse as language learning, history,

sociology, civics, political science, philosophy, physics, mathematics and so on. Visual literacy via films, art history and appreciation, photography may already be found in contemporary syllabi, and graphic narratives can add to the expanding territory of visually informed teaching materials. A greater push would be to include them in their own right as texts, but as companion pieces they can be integrated in to even traditional pedagogical practices. In fact, depending upon the needs of the discipline, the texts used may not be limited to Indian narratives, but be wide-ranging and inclusive of those from other languages and regions of the world. (For instance, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* has been widely used in classrooms at different levels to generate critical literacy around the Second World War and genocide, examine how racism is institutionalized, mass migration, and changing demographics of the world.) As Chun has noted, compelling narratives aid students in reading the word and the world.

However, adopting such an approach is not without its challenges. For instance, educators and parents need to be urged to shed the prejudices against the reading of comics and graphic narratives as "low" art or literature. The need would be to not just include such material in the classroom but also to train educators in using multimodal texts. A renewed focus on pedagogy would be required as very often the incorporation of digital tools and multimodal texts into classroom programmes is through traditional pedagogies [4]. Limited pedagogical choices can fail to engage students actively in ways that foreground agency and enhance learning through maximising the affordances of the digital tools and texts. While my proposal is limited to texts produced in the English language (and to their use in literature and language based classrooms), but I do intend that my proposed shifts in pedagogy may be adaptable to non-English speaking texts and classrooms as well.

Thus, visual literacy is the ability to interpret, negotiate and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image as well as to produce visual messages, and multimodality brings an awareness of the reading process. Storytelling brings active and constructive reading, while the art and artistic processes employed in graphic narratives teach critical thinking and evaluation. The study of graphic narratives in the classroom fulfilled the four-pronged multiliteracy and critical literacy instructional frameworks: the narratives represented a situated practice, drawing in part from students' own life experiences to link with those of others; specific emphasis was paid on introducing the students to verbal-visual language to enable them to deconstruct the myriad and multimodal ways in which meaning is constructed; critical framing of the cultural and social context in which meaning is disseminated and understood; and transformed practice that aims to re-situate all of these meaning-making practices to other cultural sites or contexts [3, p. 145].

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The Priya Series: Twenty First Century Comic Avatar

Shipra Gupta

shipjin83@yahoo.co.in

Delhi University, English, India

Keywords:

Graphic novels,
Priya's Shakti,
Priya's Mirror,
Priya and the Lost
Girls, Augmented
Reality, Interactive
comics, Modern
Indian Comics

ABSTRACT

The Indian comic culture is a hybrid form of story-telling that has borrowed from a rich source of literary elements evolving through centuries. Beginning with the visual art of cave paintings that depicted the lifestyle of hunter gatherers during the stone age to the classical bardic oral tradition of storytelling that handed down to us a multilayered culture of appropriated, ever-evolving stories resonating with the then contemporary socio-cultural influences, the Indian comics is a much recent twentieth century phenomenon that has roots going way back in history. With its exciting amalgamation of the visual art form- of symbolic, iconic, imagistic drawings- and the evocation of a sense of orality through the insertion of the ingenious speech balloon element, it makes the reader travel into a world of frame/panel dominated story-telling through a spatial narrative. The recent development of the genre of the graphic novel has added another feather in the cap to this thrilling form exploring the darker and somber themes of depression and existentialism. One such interesting series of graphic novels is the Priya Series with three chapters. The attempt in this paper will be to analyze how this series adds to the rich Indian comic tradition by enhancing the already existing elements of visuality and creating a literary form that not only

caters to the growing demands of the techno-savvy Generation Z but also explores the possibility of how a visual-oral-literary narrative can be made even more widely accessible to the masses through the use of interactive augmented reality. The paper will discuss how this medium has been used to educate the masses about the social evils plaguing Indian society thus reflecting the realities of the new generation through a language of technology that resonates with them. This is indeed a massive step in the direction of modernizing the Indian graphic narratives with a view to overcome the ideological shortcomings of the Indian socio-cultural set-up that still reeks of institutionalized patriarchal oppression. This modern form surely redefines the way future storytellers would perceive, conceptualize and render their stories in a revolutionized manner.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Peter Parker principle "With great power comes great responsibility" seems to have resonated quite effectively with the comic book trend in India over the last century as this genre has undertaken the role of entertainer, chronicler, educator, social movements documenter and dispenser of information all rolled into one. Scott Mc Cloud in his book *Understanding Comics: An Invisible Art* admits that he "realized that comic books were usually crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare" (his highlights) but he refutes it by saying that "they don't have to be". One must refrain from defining the term "too narrowly" and "show that the potential of comics is limitless and exciting. [1] This very claim highlights the universal appeal of the graphic narratives. The child picks it up for visual attraction of images, the young adult for the visual-literary juxtaposition and the adult for the multilayered meaning-making potential. Thus, one must not fall into the trap of mistaking it as a literary genre only for the perusal

of preliterate children. Instead the oft-repeated cliché of "entertainment with a purpose" holds true for this literary genre that comes power-packed with an exploration of all the possible human emotions of jubilation, hope, greed, envy, jealousy, sacrifice and motivation, enticing children with its seemingly childish exterior and visual appeal but nevertheless playing the role of an elderly grandparent instructing one in possibly everything from human values, ethics and knowledge to informing one about socio-economic, cultural and political scenarios.

The Indian comic culture is a hybrid form of story-telling that has borrowed from a rich source of literary elements that have evolved through centuries. Beginning with the visual art of the *Bhimbetka* cave paintings that depicted the lifestyle of hunter gatherers during the stone age, the temple inscriptions depicting religious beliefs and customs, to the classical Indian epics and other forms like *akhyaana*, *itihasa*, *purana*, *katha* which primarily belonged to the bardic oral tradition of storytelling that handed down to us a multilayered culture of appropriated, ever-evolving stories resonating with the then contemporary socio-cultural influences, the Indian comics is a much recent twentieth century phenomenon that has roots going way back in history. The story-telling through recitation, chanting and performance to please the deity or the patron king highlights "the categorization of Sanskrit literature into *drishya* (visual) and the *shravya* (audial)" [2]. With its exciting amalgamation of the visual art form- of symbolic, iconic, imagistic drawings- and the evocation of a sense of orality through the insertion of the ingenious speech balloon element, it makes the reader travel into a world of frame dominated story-telling through a spatial narrative.

2 CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDIAN COMICS

Beginning with the *Chandamama* monthly magazine in the late 1940s to the syndicated international comic strips of Mandrake, Phantom and the likes, Indrajal Comics, Amar Chitra Katha, Pran's *Chacha Chaudhary* and Diamond comics in the 1970s, the Indian Comic book industry saw

a wide range of topics, themes being dealt with. The age-old oral culture of story-telling, a part of the classical literary tradition, combined with the attractive visual imagery made for one of its kind graphic narrative that became a fad in the late twentieth century. Scott Mc Cloud's definition of the comics hits the nail on the head. He calls it "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer." [3] Coupled with this was the idea of social and political satire, much like the poetic license that was the prerogative of the *Vidushaka* in classical Sanskrit drama or the Shakespearean fool of Elizabethan stage, that made the comic books an active agent in the socio-political framework of the Indian society. The role that it played in commenting upon the contemporary issues in a subtle yet indicative manner concretized its position as an entity that was to make its mark on the literary map of the country and was here to stay. The Amul girl advertisements with their tongue-in-cheek punchlines subtly yet critically commenting upon the current themes of Indian society can be seen as modern-day versions of the witty clown figure. The fact that they were displayed on billboards and transmitted as animation on television are a case in point highlighting the mass coverage they got and the instant message they conveyed by virtue of being visually appealing. As a 1980s kid, one was familiar with the constant urge to just rush down the Delhi by-lanes and pick up the latest "Chacha Chaudhary", "Pinki" or "Archies" whenever one was granted the meager pocket-money. What made it even better was the rent-a-comic-culture that caught on with renting one book for as low as 25 to 50 paise, depending upon the wear and tear of the copy and the digest versions with multiple stories could be rented out for a day for Rs. 1-2 but the twinkle in the eye that it generated when a whole new world was unraveled was indeed priceless. The gen-next, on the other hand, is more privileged having been born in the kindle- age with every book

served to them on a digital platter that leads to the inevitable dwindling of the sales of the hard copies. The personal experience felt through the fingering and flipping of the pages oozing out a familiar musty smell gradually lost to the technological advancements and the overflowing animated versions of cartoons on myriad 24-hour television channels.

3 GRAPHIC NARRATIVES AND AUGMENTED REALITY

The advent of new technology came as a boon giving rise to the emergence of graphic novels in the late 1990s. Graphic artists and illustrators were still struggling to make their mark in the comic book industry when a relatively more successful attempt was seen in the publication of Amruta Patil's graphic novel *Kari*,^[4] a dark and intense novel about a city girl trapped in her own world of inner thoughts and psychological turmoil which was heightened by her relationship with a soul-sister figure with whom she attempted suicide. This opened up new avenues for exploration of such new themes of mental illness, psychological alienation amidst an active social life that needed to be addressed with the growing population of working women and hence such forms of graphic art resonated with the city readers a lot. Another popular graphic novel *Bhimayana* ^[5] that brings the life of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar alive through the images of gond artists Durgabai and Subhash Vyam depicts how the use of folk art like gond painting by tribal artists infuses an earthy and natural essence into the modern art form. The animal and nature inspired images blend the abstract divisions of the frames that seem to freely flow onto the pages creating a distinct and recognizable pattern.

Paralleling this new-found exploration of the subconscious and chronicling the life of a celebrated individual came the upsurge in the use of the comic book medium to bring about social awareness and use it as a platform to fight social stigmas. A

revolutionary trendsetter in this context was the launch of the "technologically innovative and wildly popular interactive comic book *Priya's Shakti* (MSNBC) that relates the story of "a gang-rape survivor-turned-superhero (who) demonstrates strength, courage and womanhood". The official website of the comic book www.priyashakti.com displays, on its welcome page, the review of Reuters that has called it "the first Indian comic book of its kind- not only confronting teenagers with a sensitive issue of sexual violence, but also engaging young people through its innovative use of augmented reality technology". Nina Sabnani's comment comes to mind here who says that "While the essence of story remains the same, the way of telling stories has been influenced by the kind of tools and technology of the times" [6]. What makes any form interesting and appealing to its audience is not just what is being said but also how it is being told. And the Priya series does just that. The opening of the book takes us to a south Indian village where Priya, a young woman is gangraped, faces social stigma, is disowned by her own family members for the fear of ostracization and she, as an ardent devotee of Goddess Parvati sees no way out. Her staunch devotion and despicably pathetic plight reach Parvati who enters her body and thus is born a superwoman riding a tiger who becomes the spokesperson and the savior of all oppressed, sexually exploited women in India. The use of the mythical figure of goddess Parvati and Lord Shiva as the *deus ex machina* or the divine intervention that helps redeem the human figure shows how incapable the modern-day society is even now in protecting its women. The powerless female who is seen as an easy prey and victim, forever exploited by the sexual male predators displays the institutionalized oppressive patriarchy of twenty first century India. The fact that after her rape Priya feels a sense of shame instead of thinking about justice shows the internalization of this sense of being a

"fallen woman" even when a crime is committed against her.

M.M. Vinodini's *A Parable of the Lost Daughter* [7] shows this very internalization of inferiority in a gender- caste perspective where the protagonist Suvarthawani is shown to be in awe of her brahmin friend Gayathri who patronizes her. Suvarthawani dislikes her own harijan community taunting her parents and feeling ashamed of them. She is in for a rude shock when the supposedly refined, egalitarian writer father of her friend turns out to be an abusive husband and the respectable son-in-law proves to be a molester who brands harijan women as "loose" and "free" women, readily available for sexual encounters when otherwise they have been considered as untouchables. Many Dalit women writers also come to mind with their war cries of equality and fight against the double subjugation that they suffer at the ends of Brahmanical as well as Dalit patriarchy. The figure of Shakti- the uber power of creation and destruction rolled into one follows the classic comic-hero narrative motif where the hapless victim metamorphoses into a super power figure. Shakti infused Priya seeks justice not just for herself but demands collective social rehabilitation of all rape victims throughout the country. The massive figure of goddess Parvati looming large over the rapist who dares to defile her mistaking her for any other village girl [8] shows that for an Indian woman the only way to attain respect is by being deified or apotheosized. These are seen as cultural shortcomings of our Indian society where females are always seen as peripheral beings who are objectified and forced into silence. Javed Akhtar claims something similar in an interview with Atika Ahmad Farooqui "a society where a mother is worshipped as a *devi* can never respect all its women as all other women like wives, daughters and sisters fall short of that exaggerated image. When a community cannot

give the basic form of respect or allow dignity of life, a basic human right, to its women then raising her to the pedestal of a goddess is a self-defeating act." [9]

The Priya Series then is seen to herald the future of the modern Indian comic book with its amalgamation of digital art, painting, graphic design, collage and photography, all intermeshed to create a visual language for the book. The cherry on the cake is the interactive interface of the comic book with its illustrations not being restricted only to the pages but also painted on the streets of all major cities in India. The creators attempt to heighten the reading experience by creating digital pop-outs that one can get on scanning both the pages and the street wall art through a free app called Blippar. Dan Goldman, the illustrator of Priya's Shakti has brought to life the story conceptualized by Ram Devineni and Vikas K. Menon. In an interview with NDTV, Goldman relates his experience of sitting in Brooklyn and experiencing all things Indian, through his distance research methodologies, from studying Indian clothes, music, movie posters and comic books to even food and incense he adopted method illustration to put his heart and soul into understanding India that helped him illustrate the true essence of the story. The creators attempted to unearth the patriarchal reality of the world at large and *Priya's Shakti* was just the beginning in their endeavor to bring about social change through awareness. What makes it even more widely accessible is the fact that the three books are easily downloadable from the official Priya's shakti website, a practically free of charge option considering the large upsurge in the use of internet services by the masses made available at extremely competent and nominal rates by unlimited data service providers. The attractive multilayered and variant frames of each page of the comic book are experimental and different from the standard balloon dialogues and fixed panels of the traditional comic book. But they clearly fulfill the prerequisite to any comic form of having a "sequential"

pattern as is highlighted by Will Eisner, the celebrated author on comic art. The subject matter intermingling the divine and the human lends a universal appeal to the themes, making it contemporary at the same time. Will Eisner claims that "The artist, to be successful on this non-verbal level, must take into consideration both the commonality of human experience and the phenomenon of our perception of it, which seems to consist of frames or episodes." [10] And all the three books *Priya's Shakti*, *Priya's Mirror* and *Priya and the Lost Girls* follow this principle. Priya, on becoming a social outcaste for no fault of hers, reminds us of the plight of many of the nineteenth and twentieth century women writers who related similar accounts of gender discrimination and patriarchal bias through their autobiographical accounts. Women's struggles through suffragist movements, pre-independence and post-independence conflicts for equality have all found mention in this proactive book that paves way for the conception of a brighter and more socially aware avatar of the modern comic book. The ecological disturbance and Shiva's fury manifested in the form of snatching away of procreative powers from humans leads to utter global chaos. Parvati's pleas to resolve the situation by showing faith in humanity reminds us of the modern scientific processes of overpowering nature to promote capitalistic ideologies and the feminine principle that is inherently nurturing providing a solution in the form of using both its kali like powers of vengeance blended with motherly nature to bring about a balance in the world are presented in the book beautifully. One can also draw parallels with the works of famous environmentalist, activist Vandana Shiva,[11] who talks about retaining/ maintaining the natural order through organic methods of farming without patenting of the "Seed" - the source of life in this comic book, when we see the forest providing a protective and supportive habitat to Priya after she is declared a pariah. Vandana Shiva's assertion of modern scientific methods of reductionism being a patriarchal and masculine

project resonate with the attack on patriarchy that this comic book series makes.

Priya's Mirror (2016) [12] and *Priya and The Lost Girls* (2019) [13], sequels to *Priya's Shakti* (2014) must also be analyzed and understood to deliberate on how this series adds on and heralds the new age of the Indian comic book genre visually as well as thematically. Priya's fight is far from over when she continues, through *Priya's Mirror*, to uphold a mirror to society and in a didactic attempt warn it of the despicable images that they have created of themselves. She becomes a spokesperson of all the acid attack survivors who had lost the will to live and follow their dreams having lived huddled together in isolation in the palace of the evil "Ahankar". The demonic presence is a metaphoric parallel to show a mirror to the egoistic patriarchal world to mend its ways before it's too late. In an interview with its creators Ram Devineni and Paromita Vohra, Ranjani Rajendra [14] of "The Hindu" discusses about the process of "educating while entertaining" the audience. The last part of *Priya's Mirror* displays the social rehabilitation of the acid attack victims who gather the courage to overcome the shame of their physical appearance and turn it into their biggest strength. Many are shown to have started their career in law, opened up an art center while others built a café called "Mirror of Love Café" [15]. This chapter clearly spreads the message of love that transcends all forms of social evils. Real life acid attack survivors Sonia from Ghaziabad, Laxmi from Delhi and Monica Singh who has relocated to the US are all given mention at the end of this book to show how they have become big names, the world over, in establishing foundations that not only work for acid attack victims but have also moved the courts and helped regulate the sale of acid ensuring that similar incidents do not mar the life of any more young girls. The augmented reality interactive street art that has been painted on the streets of Connaught Place in Delhi and Dharavi in Mumbai ensures that not only women who are

empathetic to these causes but also men who are the perpetrators of this violence engage with the readily available comic art, scan and read it and educate themselves about the need for change.

Priya and the Lost Girls picks up another theme of major concern of sex- trafficking and deals with social upheaval in an allegorical manner. Male sexual predators are symbolically presented in the figure of Rahu, the keeper and unleasher of fire who spews it around to destroy all the female council members of the female led land *Pataal*. Priya sets out to rescue not just her sister Lakshmi but all the women captives and is instructed by the former queen *Manidhari* on how to defeat Rahu. "Rahu is the evil energy of greed, jealousy and lust. That can only be defeated with the pure energy of courage, kindness and love." [16] Unfortunately, this love and kindness is not to be expected from the family members of the rescued women who are shamed, abused, stoned and called names by their own kind. They all merge into and find solace in the heart of Priya who walks away from the village, warning the inmates that unless there is a world of equal opportunities for both males and females the girls will not come back. A visible change in the visual representation of the third chapter is the use of geometrical quadrilaterals as sequential panels and the use of relatively pastel shades of colors. The unique appeal of the earlier two Priya chapters lay in their riot of bold colors that gripped the reader and immersed one in the beauty of it all. The last chapter's dull color tone is probably a reminder to the world to mend its ways otherwise it will lose out on its shining aspect that is quite clearly its women.

The new graphic narrative form interspersed with augmented reality interactive elements used in the Priya series definitely makes us foresee a promising future for the upcoming graphic novels and other comic art forms. But one is left with a bitter aftertaste, after having read the three chapters, wondering

whether the only way to attain Priya like freedom for every woman is by becoming a "devi"! Hopefully the upcoming chapters shall address this issue more constructively or rather one may hope for a better social setup that may generate scope for an ideologically evil-free society. The Wall Street Journal aptly reviews the series "There is a new weapon in the battle to prevent violence against women in India- a comic book". [17]

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Keywords:

Comics, India,
Transition.

Art, Aesthetics, and Transition in Indian Comics

Ritam Sarkar¹ and Dr. Somdatta Bhattacharya²

ritamsarkar48@gmail.com

somdatta@hss.iitkgp.ac.in

IIT Kharagpur, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,
India^{1,2}

ABSTRACT

Despite being a country of rich visual culture, Indian comics is still in a nascent stage, due to the commonly labeled accusations associated with the form such as easy readability, childish temperament etc. Though the various regional visual art forms attest to India's mastery in sequential narrative, the medium in general has not received much attention from critics and scholars. In the 21st century, the format has shifted from India's largest selling serialized comic books of Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) to the much acclaimed literary 'graphic novels' with major publishing houses such as Penguin, HarperCollins, and Campfire coming into play. Along with the format, the shifts in the content and their treatment in contemporary comics have been a radical one. No more the Gods and devils of the ACK series or the native superheroes characterize the medium but the turn is towards incorporating serious socio-cultural issues. This paper will primarily focus on how the so called 'graphic novel' made entry into and impacted the Indian literary market and the public reception as well. The graphic novel's formal experimentation with paneling, regional art forms, journalistic ethos, sequential grammar to build up an idiom of Indian sequential narrative, will be

taken into consideration. While works such as *Bhimayana* (2011) and *Sita's Ramayana* (2011) experimented with Gond and patachitra respectively, Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994) is one of the first experiments in comics journalism, even before Joe Sacco. Mostly independently produced, Indian comics is in a transitional phase that allows a lot of space for innovations with the sequential grammar. This paper will focus, following Paul Gravett, on how Indian comics has become a part of the 'graphic novels' movement in terms of its art and aesthetic and the academic attention it is receiving, using select examples to come to any conclusions.

1 INTRODUCTION

There is no denying the fact that pictures preceded words in the history of human civilization and the discovery of the cave paintings around different parts of the world bear well testimony to the importance of pictures and drawings even in the pre-modern times. Words and pictures gradually began to move away and the entire canon of a logocentric Western literature ensured the legitimacy and priority of words over pictures. For instance, the Gospel of John reads, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" [1]. The binary and hegemonic relationship between words and pictures remained unchallenged until the advent of comics in the late 18th century where images occupied more space than words. The South Asian and particularly Indian perspective on the issue, interestingly, has remained in contrast to the Western one with the visual seen as something sacred and auspicious. E. Dawson Varughese in "*Visuality and Identity in Post-millennial Indian Graphic Narratives*" (2018) shows how 'visuality' has always been a sacred notion across Indian cultures. Commenting upon the issue Christel R. Devadawson in the foreword of Varughese's book writes,

The worshipper seeks *darshan*, the assurance that the deity looks upon one in recognition of the intense gaze of devotion. The anxious parent may fear the casting of the evil eye, the *nazar*, perhaps, on a child who is ill. The lover's glance or *nigaaah* falls passionately upon the beloved, and then suddenly withdraws itself. South Asia in general, and India in particular, tend to set their own agenda, so that modes of visual engagement become modes of intellectual and emotional engagement as well. The language of South Asia is primarily a visual language, and the book speaks it". [2]

For the purpose of the present discussion, this paper will take new-historicist approach towards appropriating the dynamics of the transitional nature of Indian comics in its socio-cultural context. The aesthetics related to the regional visual art forms as well as their background, context, and symbolic references will be utilized to understand the influence these art forms exert on modern comics. The Western theories of comics studies propounded by the scholars such as Scott McCloud, Thierry Groensteen will also be taken into account to trace the evolving nature of comics in India.

2 INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

The visual though, has enjoyed cultural significance in India, but the use of terminology in relation to sequential narrative is problematic and should be addressed. The tendency to label works of long form sequential narratives as 'graphic novels' in India amounts to double hypocrisy for the term 'graphic novel' itself is the outcome of marketing strategy and is exploited for cultural as well as academic legitimization in India and around the world in general. And 'graphic novel' is absolutely an alien phenomenon for India since the country has no long tradition of newspaper strips that was instrumental in leading

to the emergence of 'graphic novels' in America. Catherine Labio remarks that the use of 'graphic novel' as an umbrella term privileges the textual over visual, eliminates many cartoonists, and promulgates the distinction between high and low culture. She writes, "'Graphic novel' sanitizes comics; strengthens the distinction between high and low, major and minor; and reinforces the ongoing ghettoization of works deemed unworthy of critical attention. . . ." [3]. Hence the rest of the paper will use the terms conceptualized by Charles Hatfield in *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (2005); "short-form comics" and "long-form comics", to mean works of sequential visual narrative [4].

The art form of sequential visual narrative in India has gone through a series of transformations over time from incorporating the regional visual art forms as well as borrowing from the western counterpart to build an idiom of indigenous sequential narrative. The retellings of the Indian epics such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* through the form of comics came to the mainstream in 1967 with Anant Pai's introduction of the iconic *Amar Chitra Katha (ACK)* series. The *ACK* series has been severely criticized over time by the critics and scholars, and in the process of exposing the inherent ideological problems implied in those early comic books, and the resulting emergence of a counter narrative have become strengthening forces for the Indian comics artists. The emergence of 'graphic novel' as paradigm shift is in terms of market economy, youth culture as well as the reader reception of the form in India. The sophistication provided to the form by the term 'graphic novel' convinced the global publishing giants such as Penguin, HarperCollins as well as many regional and national publishing houses to emerge and endorse creative talents across the country thereby concentrating on the country's flourishing industry.

Comics has been historically treated as something fit for childhood imagination, cheap, easily readable with more pictures than words, and as throwaway

material as opposed to traditional books. This was the case both globally and in India. The 'novel' of the term 'graphic novel', popularized by Will Eisner in the second edition of his book of four interconnected stories *A Contract With God* (1978), was an epiphany for the publishing industry that pushed it in every work of long form comics. Comics gained novelistic grandeur, complexity, sophistication, and academic attention when Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986) was published as a graphic novel in the hardcover format and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Ironically *Maus* initially appeared as a serialized story in *RAW*, a comics anthology edited by Art Spiegelman and his wife Françoise Mouly, before being marketed as a graphic novel. *Maus*'s success as a global literary phenomenon reached India and opened up a new promising market for such works. E. Dawson Varughese argues for the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s as a significant marker that made global publishing and distributing giants concentrate on the Indian domestic market. The market demand for more indigenous stories rather than foreign material led to the emergence of regional as well as national publishing houses to endorse the medium such as Navayana, Campfire, and Tara Books. The organization of first Comic Con India in New Delhi in 2011 and subsequently in cities such as Mumbai, Bangalore, and Hyderabad, Varughese notes, further fostered the form in securing inroads into the country's traditional literary market [5].

2.1 REGIONAL AESTHETICS

Though still in its nascent stage, comics in India is developing through innovations and experimentations that allow space for the emergence of new talents and the form is taking up risks in the creative process. The style of the *ACK* series conforms to the clear line or *ligne claire* of western comics, popularized by Hergé. The art work of the *ACK* series embraces strong, simplified colors, cartoony characters against

realistic background and everything that represents the ethos of *linge claire* to achieve what Scott McCloud in his seminal work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993) called the "masking effect" to "enter a sensually simulating world" [6]. But the focus on the complexity of the indigenous is what appealed more to the Indian mature audience as opposed to the simplicity of the *linge claire*. On the importance of the regional visual art forms as the predecessor of contemporary sequential narrative, Jerry Pinto remarked:

Sequential art is not a cutting-edge medium; it's been with us since the first *patachitras* were drawn and then explained in villages, since that time the Sanchi stupa told the story of the Buddha in icons; but the graphic novel is a bleeding-edge medium. It seems rich with bodily fluids; it represents another way of looking; with a 'fine disregard'. [7]

The non-fiction long form comics *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar* (2011) by S.

Natarajan, S. Anand, Durgabai Vyam, and Subhash Vyam testifies and truly affirms Pinto's claim.

Bhimayana showcases Indian comics' immense potential of re-contextualizing the regional visual art form in an indigenous way. Drawn in *gond* art, (the art of a tribal group of people residing in central India) instead of the panel to panel sequence, the work forms a whole new aesthetic of comics. *Bhimayana* can be read on multiple levels. It departs from the Western style of comics leaving the opportunity for abundant creativity. The Vyams have created several new visual devices throughout the book with their roots ingrained in the *gond* tradition. The scorpion's sting and inverted bird shaped speech balloons, the use of *digna*, cross-hatching, *goli* or *bundi*, and the different animals are all stylistic innovations by the artists to evoke visual as well mental landscape. S. Anand recalls how the defining Western styles such as photorealism, cinematic shots, and three-dimensionality were rejected for the artists



Fig. 1 Inventive Use of Digna as gutter (Bhimayana 48). Used by permission of the publisher

The formal innovations at the level of page layout in *Bhimayana* are intriguing and resist any easy reading. Varughese, following Thierry Groensteen's *Comics and Narration* (2013), notes how *digna* functions so that "... the drawn or painted surface ceases to be simply a tabular surface and becomes a comic page" [10]. The polysemic function of *digna* pattern as gutter, decorative device, and separating tool is visible at several occasions in the text.

In *The System of Comics* (2007) Thierry Groensteen remarked that the gutter functions not by a filling-in a gap, but by a forming of logical narrative connections between parts, whether successive or not. The page layout from *Bhimayana* shows how the gutter separates the textual and visual spaces, functions as pipes through which Ambedkar's fiery speech against caste reaches to his followers as sprinkling water,

remarked, "We'd like to state one thing very clearly at the outset. We shall not force our characters into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is *khulla* (open) where there's space for all to breathe" [8]. The desire for *khulla* or open/ democratic space in art is typically an Indian aesthetic. The challenge to sort out the issue of sequentiality; that is at the heart of comics, in such a tribal art form was met by the innovation of *digna* ("... the traditional auspicious design patterns applied to walls and floors in Gond homes...") that was inspired by creepers [9].

and separates the present from the past as well by keeping the two interacting figures at the bottom of the page. This is the aesthetic and "polysyntactic" function of the gutter where "meaning is produced through dialectic interaction and with the reader's active participation" [11]. *Bhimayana* abounds in such symbols and metaphors, rooted in the *gond* cosmology, mythology and natural world that are essentially important in developing the mental landscape, emotion and implying the realism.

2.2 THE TRIBAL WRITES BACK

Sirish Rao and Gita Wolf in Bhajju Shyam's *The London Jungle Book* (2004) write, "Gond art is not concerned with realism, perspective, light or three-dimensionality. It signifies rather than represents, deriving its energy from flowing lines, intricate geometric patterns and the symbols that connect human beings and workings of the cosmos"[12]. Bhajju Shyam's work belongs to the genre of visual travel narrative where the artist recalls his experiences of visiting London. Jyotindra Jain, Professor of arts and aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, remarks that Shyam "... returns- after a century- Kilping's gaze, with an equal sense of wonder, adventure, humour and directness of expression." Much like *Bhimayana*, Shyam's title is an ironic reference to Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894). Shyam begins with the pain of leaving his home behind for London and every experience, every emotion evoked in this journey is communicated via enriched visuals. The underground railway appears as criss-crossing snakes with earthworms and spider

Fig. 2. (left) The Big Ben as a rooster, Fig. 3. (right) London bus as loyal Dog (The Jungle Book), Used by permission of the publisher



web like stations, double decker buses there are akin to faithful, loyal dogs that always come on time, the airport is like an "eagle that swallows humans who line up to be let inside like insects outside a termite hill", the London people are like bats who become spirited in the evening [13].

This is how a *gond* artist responds to the Big Ben by combining his sense of time with London's. Shyam titles this phenomenon "When Two Times Meet" and writes, "I have turned the dial of Big Ben into the eye of the rooster, because it seemed to me that Big Ben is like a big eye, forever watching over London, reminding people of the time" [14]. The artistic aesthetic of the tribal *gond* art to communicate a thought provoking and complex phenomenon into simple shared form of expression is essentially an Indian perspective from the artistic point of view. This is aptly summed up by Shyam himself when he said, "I want them to have the essence of what I felt. There is no need to show everything. I would like you to write little, but say a lot" [15].

2.3 EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH

Another interesting work of somewhat this nature that typically represents Indian aesthetics using regional visual art form is Samhita Arni's and Moyna Chitrakar's *Sita's Ramayana* (2011), an alternative/ feminist retelling of the epic Mahabharata from Sita's perspective, retold through Bengal's ancient *patachitra* style. The *patachitra* scroll is unfolded before the audience with songs corresponding to the visuals, performed by wandering artists known as the *patuas*. Being a regional visual art form, *patachitra* is also heavily influenced by local nature and depends both on minimalism and exaggeration for the desired effects. Dr. Lopamudra Maitra Bajpai shows how the natural world provided almost all the materials such as colours, brushes, and the palm leaves necessary by the *patuas* [16]. The illustrator Moyna Chitrakar uses



Fig. 4. The arbitrariness of the page layout (Sita's Ramayana 16-17). Used by permission of the publisher

emphatic natural aesthetics, strong colours such as red with black background, exaggerates the depiction of the demons, and sometimes depicts the entire sea with just a few simple lines. The fact that the storytelling technique in *patachitra* corresponds, to a great extent, to the modern graphic novel is remarked on in a section titled "Patua Graphics" at the end of the book; "... the unfolding of the sequence of images in a Patua scroll - the manner in which the images are 'read', one after the other - was more than halfway towards the structure of a modern graphic narrative" [17].

The scroll like version of Moyna's *patachitra* was adapted into the format of a graphic novel with inclusion of text and division of panels, thereby complying with the formal approach of Western sequential narrative. Here, unlike *Bhimayana*, comes into play a professional designer that turns the liveliness, grandeur of the *patachitra* narrative into arbitrariness. The idiosyncrasies at the level of page layout such as the irregular typeface, inattentive panel division are at times disturbing and seem disjointed. The page depicting Lakshmana's confrontation with Ravana's sister Surpanaka is a highly charged event in the narrative but the layout seems to pay little attention

to the seriousness of the event. With the use of jolted capital and small typeface, mechanical panel size and shape, and inconsistent location of the narrative texts, the depiction of the event loses force. The free flowing style of the *patachitra* appears to be hindered and regulated by the technical imposition of the designer. Nonetheless, such attempts and experiments to adapt alternative stories through traditional art forms by engaging marginalized regional visual folk artists are a significant move and they should be appreciated for their contribution towards an evolving aesthetic of the modern Indian graphic novel.

2.4 INDIVIDUAL/PERSONAL APPROACH

Along with breaking Western stereotypes, modern Indian comics also skillfully borrow from the same. In terms of formal and stylistic properties, artists such as Malik Sajad, Orijit Sen, Amruta Patil admit of their varied artistic inspirations and the same is visible in their works. Bharat Murthy makes a brief critical survey on the aesthetic and artistic strategies Indian comics has appropriated and along with the inspirations of figurative art, Indian modernist art; he points to the recent transnational approach of the artists towards incorporating a form that is neither native nor non-native. He writes,

Yet another approach in Indian graphic novels is informed by alternative comics movements in the US, Europe and to some extent in Japan. The most diversity is to be seen in this broad grouping. What distinguishes these works from others appropriating traditional art forms is their personal art styles that do not directly refer to traditional forms. Rather, they celebrate their deliberately idiosyncratic techniques that borrow from everywhere while not staying committed to any particular idiom. In the context of the aesthetics of modern art, some of these works might share characteristics with

The "deliberately idiosyncratic techniques" that Murthy talked about are evident in Malik Sajad's autobiographical long form comics *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (2015) that follows Art Spiegelman's strategy of black and white anthropomorphic approach; Orijit Sen's work of comics journalism *The River of Stories* (1994) that shows the sketchy influence of the underground cartoonist Robert Crumb, along with an influence of tribal art; Amruta Patil's works that takes artistic inspirations from "Indian temple art, Mughal Miniatures, Japanese Silkscreen prints, Egyptian funerary art, Mahayana Buddhist imagery, Iconic art from Medieval Europe. . . ." [19]. The art form thus has become of the nature of mixed media; capable of embracing different kinds of experimentations. This is aptly summed up by Scott McCloud when he said, "No schools of art are banished by our definition, no philosophies, no movements, no ways of seeing are out of bounds!" [20]

3 INDIA'S ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION IN THE FIELD

Few have noticed India's original contribution in the field that was later popularized by and consequently credited to Joe Sacco. Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994) a work of comics journalism on the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* was published as a book length long form comics before all the nine issues of Sacco's *Palestine* were serialized from 1993 to 1995 as comic books. *Palestine* was published in two part collections by Fantagraphics in 1996 and in single hardcover edition as 'graphic novel' in 2001. The publication chronology then unquestionably favours Sen as the original pioneer of the comics journalism form. When asked by Paul Gravett whether he was influenced by Sacco's style, Sen replied, "No. In fact, you ought to ask Joe Sacco the reverse question, because his *Palestine* (which as far as I'm aware was his first major work of cartoon journalism) came out several years



Fig. 5. Use of the Warli tribal art (*The River of Stories* 12). Used by permission of the artist

after *River of Stories*!"[21]. Sen here definitely had in mind the single hardcover edition of *Palestine* which "came out several years after"; seven years after his full length work. This unique Indian contribution in the field of comics is often overshadowed by critics and scholars. This is also the first work of its kind which joins environmental concern with the comics form and affirms the Indian comics' general tendency towards the aesthetics of genre diversification.

Sen shows brilliant mastery in the narrative register of the work by weaving a successful marriage between Warli tribal art and modern alternative comics movement, mythology and facts. Back then, people had little understanding of what Sen was actually doing as he himself recalled, "Most people, including friends and activists in Delhi, did not quite understand what I was doing. This was several years before the publication of Joe Sacco's *Palestine* planted the first seeds of journalism through graphic novels" [22]. The little or no knowledge at all of the form's all

The juxtaposition of the Warli art, the art of a tribal group of people living in the Maharashtra and Gujarat border, along with the omniscient narrator like presence of the tribal legend singer Malgu Gayan is what 'Indianizes' the story. The simplicity of the lines, shapes, dots of Warli art

Amber hunt the water

I am Malgou gayann. God give e window. On my lap I have the oyster green to me by Relukabadi, a woodcutter. I shall sing to you a song of Rewa, the river of stories, listen well. When the hanger started to play, its music went all over the wld. The tigers and bears turned back eir ears in alarm. Rewa and Vijoli lealed dancing and set off in different irections to meet Dada Hamad, the sea.

Rev. Raju pious a man called from th'

also characterize the minimality of tribal lives and their understanding of and relationship with the natural world. The cosmology of the Warli tribe is conveyed in few words and shapes with Mother Nature taking the centre space.

Hillary L. Chute in *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (2016) shows how the format of sequential narrative goes hand in hand with narratives witnessing war, violence, trauma, resistance etc and recording them as well. She writes:

The essential form of comics— its collection of frames—is relevant to its inclination to document *Documentary* (as an adjective and a noun) is about the presentation of evidence. In its succession of replete frames, comics calls attention to itself, specifically, as evidence. Comics makes a reader access the unfolding of evidence in the movement of its basic grammar, by aggregating and accumulating frames of information. [23]

If "*documentary*" is all about "the presentation of evidence" as Chute remarks, Sen's comics then presents enough of it to register how tribal lives and environmental ecosystem are threatened by the building of a dam on a river that sustains the people surrounding it. Sen does so with full page illustrations, cartographical maps, newspaper reports and so on.

The page here aptly captures the documentary aspect of Sen's comics with the full page background illustration showing the origin and route of the river Rewa through Ballanpur and how it contributes to sustain the animals as well as the irrigation system of the area on one hand and shows Vishnu, a reporter, interviewing people protesting against the dam building on the other hand. The page fuses different temporal and spatial zones with the mythological tribal bard Malgu Gayan creating a rhythm with his

rangai. Sen offers a page not just to be seen but to be 'listened' to as well. The verbal and visual on the page get intensified with the rhythmic vibration of the bard's song. The documentary aspect is further evident later in Vishnu's published newspaper report based on these interviews. Sen here takes care of Western formalities, but does not forget to 'Indianize' them through weaving the county's representative aesthetics.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Despite the challenges posed by television and then social media, comics in India has always shown a promising market potential, due to the interest of the country's youth in this unique form. And while undergraduate and post-graduate syllabi in many Indian colleges and universities have recently incorporated works of comics, the form is yet to be academically worked upon extensively. Again, anthologies of amateurs, who lack the backing of reputed publishing houses, are being independently created and produced to contribute to the process of an Indian canon formation. Select bookstores are linked to these, to reach the material to the readers, with online marketing on Instagram and comic fests in major Indian cities proving to be game changers. On the future of Indian comics, Paul Gravett, following Eddie Campbell, writes, "Instead, Campbell in his 2006 manifesto prefers to see it as an international creative movement striving towards enlarging the medium's narrative techniques and themes. In that sense, India is now part of this movement" [24].

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Keywords:

illustration, comic diary, parent-child relationship, social media

Exploring Comic Diary as a research method to study parent-child relationship

Delwyn Jude Remedios

delwyn@des.iith.ac.in

Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad, Department of Design, India

ABSTRACT

Sketching and Illustration are emerging research areas as they offer new perspectives to a subject. A parent-child relationship is considered as one of the most meaningful relationships in human life. Observational approaches in studying parent-child relationship have limitations due to the influence of a specialist observer or the environment in which the subjects are studied. A diary is effective as a social research method as it allows access to knowledge in areas that are considered difficult to investigate. Social media represents a modern-day diary. Studies on social media suggest that short comics represented on social media networks provide scope for user interactivity. This study adopts practice-led approach to explore Comic Diary as a method to generate a unique perspective on a parent-child relationship.

1 INTRODUCTION

Visual Communication research methods such as photography, videography, sketching and illustration have been emerging as alternative and versatile approaches to understand real world expressions [1]. This leads to the possibility to explore how these methods can be used to contribute to various domains of research

Parent-child relationship is considered as one of the most significant relationships of human life. Technological changes such as social media and social changes such as differing parenting practices are currently transforming the parent-child relationship. Therefore, researchers continue to study and understand the complexities of these relationships [2]. Observational research in understanding parent-child relationships are discussed to have limitations of the observer's presence as an outsider; as well as the environment of the study, which may not be the subject's home environment [3].

A diary as a social research method has an advantage to access knowledge of a phenomena, processes and groups that are considered difficult to investigate. This leads to interpretations in relation to personal matters such as love, spirituality, legality, illness, failure, success, drama, relationships, events, inner-life, emotions, feelings and so on. A diary as a documentation tool is discussed to reduce memory errors, as the events reported have occurred close to the time of occurrence [4]. Social Media has been described to play the role of a modern-day diary. While there are any studies on the harmful effects of social media, it is argued that social media contributes to bringing people close together, expand networks

and helps to create sharable histories [5]. This leads to the possibility of exploring social media as a modern-day diary to understand the parent-child relationship.

An alternative method of representing an individual's thoughts, ideas, and emotions, is found in the process of Visual journaling. Visual journaling is described to be a practice that has a long history among artists [6]. The display of visual images with accompanying text portrayed in *The Red Book* (2009) by Carl Gustav Jung is considered an example of visual journaling [6]. Another example can be found in Leonardo Da Vinci's sketchbooks, which effectively use visual journaling to record questions and daily observations visually and verbally. The method of Visual journaling can be effectively used as a source of ideas, research, reflection, exploration of new ideas and media [7].

While Visual journaling need not focus on narrative, comic art uses images and words to form a sequential narrative. The term 'Comics' can be defined as an artform that conveys meaning through the combination of text and images and through the juxtaposition of those image-texts in sequence [8]. Digital comics include comic strips or comic books produced and distributed digitally. Web comics refer to a genre of digital comics which are posted serially on a regular schedule [8]. It is discussed that Short comics that are published on social media platforms provide the users with the ability to react or comment. This makes web comics an interactive medium [9]. Therefore, there is a possibility to explore comic art published as a social media diary, with the intention to document a parent-child relationship.

The above literature gives rise to the following questions with reference to studying parent-child relationship: -

1. *Could the advantages of illustration and sketching found in a Comic Diary, be used to address the complexities of the parent-child*

relationship [1][2]?

2. *Could a Comic Diary as a research method address the limitations of observational research, by transferring the role of an external observer to an internal observer [3]?*
3. *Could Comic Diary as a research method transform the laboratory environment in Observational research, to the home environment of the subject [3]?*
4. *Could a Comic Diary as a research method validate the reduction in memory error [5]?*
5. *Do web comics on social media provide scope for the author and the audience to effectively interact [9]?*

A recent study on Comics Based research suggest that comics have been the focus for scholarly inquiry for a long time. However, this interest has taken a methodological turn, as comic creations are increasingly been integrated in the research processes [10]. It further explains that comics offer researchers across disciplines with characteristics such as multimodality, blending of sequential and simultaneous communication and emphasis on the creator voice [10].

Another study on 'Teacher's storying themselves into Teaching', also highlights the potential of Comics as an emergent and relational form of research. It explores two comics that were produced in a province-wide teacher mentorship initiative in British Columbia, Canada. Both comics are not limited to end products, but instead encourage deeper reflection among other teachers who have read their stories. This suggests how comics as a research method, offers new ways of activating research knowledge [11].

Therefore, this study aims to explore the potential of Comic Diary as a research method. The author attempts to address the questions stated above using a practice-led research approach.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts practice-led methodology in which the research leads to new knowledge about the practice [12]. Practice-led methodology includes practice as an integral part of its method, while the

results are described in text form [12]. In this study, Comic Diary is used as the method of practice and the results are reported through reflections and observations in relation to the Diary.

'*Shayne's World*' is a Comic Diary which is illustrated by the author and the father, who reports the events that shapes the relationship between the parent and the child. The author observes, reflects, and narrates his perspective of the parent-child relationship through these series. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have been used to publish these comics. The dates of the events are depicted as per the published dates on social media.

Fig. 1. *Shayne's World*, The discovery channel, May 18, 2016

3 SHAYNE'S WORLD – A COMIC DIARY

3.1 BACKGROUND

The subject of the Comic Diary '*Shayne's World*' is a child named Shayne. The events illustrated are the daily experiences of the child in his early years, as observed by his father. The first sketch of the series includes one of initial activities of the child as shown in Figure 1. For this study, the illustrations of the diary have been categorized year wise, as year 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.



3.2 YEAR 1

Year 1 illustrations consists of events of an infant Shayne, as witnessed, and experienced by his father. Figure 2 includes the sleeping position of the child in his cot. Figure 3 shares an incident when the child was unwell with a 103-degree fever. While the illustration narrates the incident, the illustrator shares background of the incident through a note that accompanies the image. This note is not part of the image and is written as the image description, when shared on social media. (The note for Figure 3 is revealed below the image).

Fig. 2. (left) Sleeping pose, Fig. 3. (right) Fever, Shayne's World, Year 1, 2015-2016

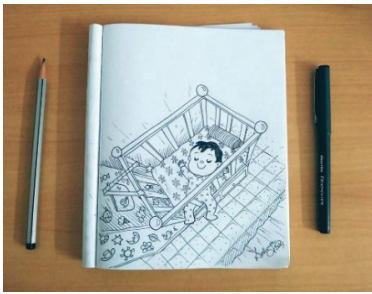


Fig. 3. Note: Last year Shayne had a fever of 103 and it was not coming down. On the same evening, our electricity fuse went off. We sat the whole night putting a cold cloth over his head and feet. Then rushed him to the hospital at around 3am. By then, his temperature had come down. As we returned home, he was fast asleep. We realized we were hungry and had our Sunday dinner at 5am.

3.3 YEAR 2

Year 2 illustrations include interactions between the child and the parents. These sketches began including written text in some of them, as the infant was seen performing clear actions. Therefore, the illustrator used text to represent his thoughts as part of the sketches. Figure 4 depicts one such interaction where the parents are spending time with their infant.



Figure 5 portrays the boy child playing with a doll. The sketch book is photographed with Shayne playing with doll. The father observes Shayne treating the doll like a child. The father incorporates text into his sketch while assuming his thoughts as exhibited through action.

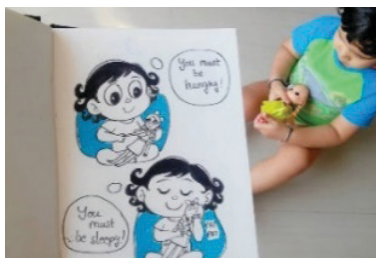


Fig. 4. Note: Hello! Hello! Hello! A couple of nights back, we had a conference call. Note to myself: Keep my phone away and enjoy these moments with my family.

*Fig. 4.(top)
Conference Call,
June 3, 2016 Fig. 5.
(bottom) Playing with
a doll, December
17, 2016. Shayne's
World, Year 2,*

3.4 YEAR 3

The illustrations for Year 3 began incorporating words as exchanged between the toddler and his parents. The nature of these illustrations also evolved to interact with the audience. One such example is represented by Figure 6, where incomplete illustrations were presented as teasers and the audience were asked to guess what the child was trying to articulate. It was observed that the audience actively participated with these illustrations; however, could not guess the correct word. The correct words were revealed through completed illustrations, as shown in Figure 7.

*Fig. 6. Pronunciation
Teaser, July 22-
28, 2017 Fig. 7.
Pronunciation, July
22-28, 2017 Shayne's
World, Year 3,*



3.5 YEAR 4

Year 4 includes illustrations of dialogues exchanged between the toddler and his parents. They also include the toddler interacting with his social environment, as witnessed by the parents. Figure 8 displays the talkative and curious nature of the toddler at the time of sleep. The father attempts to depict the mischievous effort of the toddler from going to sleep, while the father is exhausted at the end of the day. Figure 9 represents a reunion of child and father after the day's work.

3.6 YEAR 5

The illustrations represented in Year 5 intensify in terms of content and interaction. This nature of change is corresponding to the pace of development and awareness of the child. Figure 10 represents a conversation between the mother and the child with reference to nail polish. The illustrator aims to address the importance of the role of parents in informing their children about gender roles and stereotypes from an early age. Figure 11 visualizes a nightmare that occurred in the child's dream. While he was observed to be wondering about the sound from the mysterious new washing machine. His curiosity and imagination led him to this nightmare. As the child woke up with a fright, he narrated this event to his father.

3.7 YEAR 6

Building on the complexities of the child's early year developments, the illustrator depicts some of these episodes in the year 6 of the Comic Diary. Year 6 addresses the challenges faced during the pandemic COVID'19 on the child's personal and social development. Figure 12 illustrates the child requesting for more play time with his father, while the father is occupied with daily home chores. Figure 13 represents the challenges of work from home during the pandemic. This illustration shows the child attempting to seek attention of his father while in a meeting, while other members in the meeting are amused at this

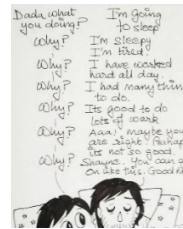


Fig. 8. Questions, August 19, 2018 Fig. 9. Charging, September 9, 2018. Shayne's World, Year 4.

Fig. 10. Nail Polish, July 21, 2019. Fig. 11. Nightmare, December 9, 2019. Shayne's World, Year 5.





Fig. 12. Shayne's World, Year 5, Complaints, July 12-14, 2020

event. Figure 14 shows the struggle of working parents in balancing school, office, and housework.

4 OBSERVATION, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of '*Shayne's World*' is to explore how the combination of images and text can be used to illustrate experiences and report them using the research method of a Comic Diary. Therefore, this research answers the questions that were raised from the literature study.

Could the advantages of illustration and sketching found in a Comic Diary, be used to address the complexities of the parent-child relationship [1][2]?

While the comics are mostly posted as daily events, they contribute towards a larger narrative. In the larger narrative, the child as well as parents show growth and changes in behavior, emotion, bonds, speech, and activities as they keep learning from each other. This addresses the dynamics of the parent-child relationship. The comics have also contributed to visualizing and exploring areas such as a child's dreams and nightmares as shown in Figure 11, which are considered difficult to represent using other research methods.

Could a Comic Diary as a research method address the limitations of observational research, by transferring the role of an external observer to an internal observer [3]?

The father playing the role of an internal observer has an advantage of access to the child and events around the child during most times of the child's developing years.

Could Comic Diary as a research method transform the laboratory environment in Observational research, to the home environment of the subject [3]?

Most of the events are reported within the child's home or school environment. Therefore, this offers the child the freedom to perform his role without the concern of being observed.

Could a Comic Diary as a research method validate the reduction in memory error [5]?

The dates can be observed along with each comic. The published dates on social media also contribute to the recording of dates. Though some illustrations are based on memories of distant events, the description of each comic enables mapping of the events to the approximate timeline of the occurrence. Therefore, it is understood that the Comic Diary can contribute to reducing memory error.



Fig. 13. Shayne's World, Year 5, Work from Home, August 29, 2020

Fig. 14. Shayne's World, Year 5, Online exams, August 30, 2020

Do web comics on social media provide scope for the author and the audience to effectively interact [9]?

Figures 6 and 7 illustrate how the author and the audience of the Comic Diary are interacting with each other as the audience attempts to guess the child's pronunciation. Therefore, it can be validated that webcomics are an effective interactive medium.

From this study, it is evident that Comic Diary can be effectively used as a research method to study parent-child relationship. The future scope lies in exploring comic diary as a research method across various domains.

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Graphic in Health Care: Understanding Graphic Narrative Approach to Represent and Communicate Health

Keywords:

Graphic medicine;
Graphic
narratives; Health
communication;
Health behavior

Rohit Kumar¹ and Shatarupa Thakurta Roy¹

rohitkr@iitk.ac.in

stroy@iitk.ac.in

¹ Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, Design Programme, India
rohitkr@iitk.ac.in

ABSTRACT

Communication between doctors and patients is many a time not effective. Problems such as technical terms, complex messages, amount of information, etc., comes into the picture. Given these problems, healthcare providers and practitioners are now using graphic medicine and graphic narratives as a source of health communication. The term 'Graphic medicine' is coined by an allied group of artists, researchers, and health practitioners. Graphic medicine refers to graphics and visual narratives to represent health information specific to a health topic. Graphics/illustrations along with text to compliment the illustrations are used to represent health message. This visual medium can be used to educate, inform, entertain, and re-frame an individual experience about health care and medicine. Health practitioners have used graphics and visual narrative(comics) to communicate health information to people for over decades; these health information ranges from cancer, AIDS/HIV, smoking, mental health,

and other health-related information for the public good. Overall, medical research and relevant public health focus on this medium's utility to communicate (a) health information specific to certain content, (b) the health experience of an individual. Narrative is one of the basic modes of acquiring information. In the field of health communication, narrative as a health communication approaches is emerging to bring health-behavior changes. This paper aims to (a) describe graphic medicine and graphic narrative, (b) the effect of graphic narrative/narrative in health communication, (c) recommend for potential application of graphic narrative as a health communication approach.

1 INTRODUCTION

Graphic medicine and graphic narratives are the forms of health communication medium and have emerged over the past few decades. With more work on graphic health information coming every year, this field is expanding its health contents. Many of these graphic health contents were illustrated and framed in narration by both skilled and unskilled artists. These artists illustrate and narrate their personal experiences with specific health conditions or caring for loved ones with specific health conditions. These authors are quite successful in expressing their health experiences to their audiences in a narrative way that is more engaging. The narrative is one of the basic modes of acquiring information. In the field of health communication, narrative as a health communication approaches are emerging to bring health-behavior changes.

This paper aims to (a) describe graphic medicine and graphic narrative, (b) the effect of graphic narrative/narrative in health communication, (c) recommend for potential application of graphic narrative as a health communication approach.

2 DEFINING THE TERM GRAPHIC MEDICINE AND GRAPHIC NARRATIVE

The term Graphic medicine, as Czerwicc defines, an intersecting space between comic medium and health information, used along with the principle of narrative and comic elements to represent an emotional/physical condition [1]. Graphic medicine requires a skillful representation of picture and text, arranged sequentially to represent a particular health information/experience [2].

The graphic narrative is defined in many ways by different researchers and has no universally accepted definition. This is evident from the studies which includes 'narrative' as a subject. Lack of understanding of the term 'graphic narrative/narrative' can create difficulties in further research in the context of graphic narrative as an approach for persuasive health communication. Taking references from studies describing similar themes and concepts on narratives [3,4,5,6], we attempt to define Graphic narrative as "A Graphic narrative is a plot of the coherent story represented through series of illustration-text combination incorporating characters and events to create a beginning, middle and end of a story to provide information about events, characters, unresolved conflicts, resolution and raises unanswered questions".

Use and application of graphic narrative to create health awareness and bring health-behaviour change can be viewed in many forms. Schank (2002), in his study, mention five different story/narrative types, each used under different context and purpose, first-hand stories- telling experience of an individual, secondhand stories- retelling someone else story, invented stories- stories with fictional characters and events, cultural stories- stories of cultural events handed down generation to generation, official stories- also fictional and created to communicate the specific event to an individual or a group. A graphic narrative/narrative could belong to any of these categories while using it as a communication medium [7].

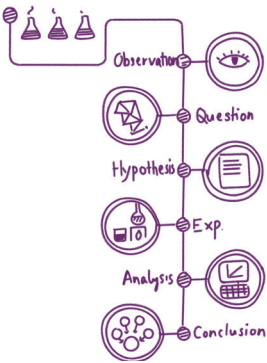
3 WHY USE GRAPHIC NARRATIVE/NARRATIVE APPROACHES IN HEALTH AWARENESS AND HEALTH-BEHAVIOUR CHANGE.

In our everyday life, we often communicate and share our experiences with others with narratives and stories. The use of narrative for communicating health awareness and health-behavior change seems promising because of its basic nature of human interaction. The use of narrative is quite common among social and political events for sharing information with the targeted population. Its use can be seen in journalism and news reporting and this is how we learn about our surroundings [8]. Product advertisements, services, and T.V programs are shown and introduced every day using different narratives [9]. Also, it is a common and familiar way of sharing information.

Another important viewpoint in order to consider using a graphic narrative/narrative approach to health awareness and health behavior change can be understood by Bruner's study. Bruner mentioned two different ways of understanding and knowing about new things: first- the pragmatic way, second- the narrative way [10]. Fig.1 and Fig.2 illustrate pragmatic and narrative way respectively. The pragmatic way is more toward a scientific way, including experiments, methods, data, facts, tests, and validations, etc., about the concerned topic. [11]. Whereas in contrast to

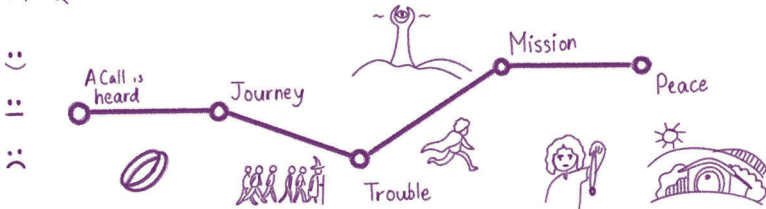
this, the narrative way is more toward a storytelling way, include gripping drama, characters, events, historical accounts, personal or someone's else experience, etc. Schank [7] mentioned in his study that to understand a particular event or situation requires storing information in our memory and retrieving the story associated with it. This narrative communication mode may be effective while addressing themes like health experience, personal values, social

Figure 1: The pragmatic way. source- self illustrated



relationships, morality, and other themes that have less support of reason and logic [11].

The Quest



The scientific way (pragmatic way) and the storytelling way (narrative way) are necessary to understand new things around us. Both are effective in their specific circumstances.

Figure 2: The narrative way.
source- self
illustrated

4 NARRATIVE APPROACH IN TRANSMITTING MEANING.

While considering graphics/comics and health communication, few questions seem to be addressed first. What is the process by which a particular information is transmitted to an individual/viewer? What kind of images (picture, graphics) and stories are more effective for creating meaning and communication? How narrative plays a role in health communication and how it can be used effectively for graphic health representation.

Studies on Psychological research mention how a narrative affects an individual (listener/viewer/reader). Green and Brock coined the term 'transportation imagery model' (TIM) [12,13]. TIM describes how an individual is transported to an imaginary space when going through a narrative story. This transportation results from 'an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings, focused on story events' [14]. Narrative both in the form of visuals(graphics) and the text probably act and affect an individual in the same way.



Figure 3: Imagery transportation while going through narrative

Comic theorist, Martin Baker, describes the work of Maccoby and Wilson (both psychologists), who studied observational learning in the context of films [15]. Maccoby and Wilson described the learning process as 'identification'. They described

'identification' as a process through which individuals momentarily places themselves in the scene and role of character and feel the same as character. In his study, Baker suggests this learning process of 'identification' is related to problematic assumptions. However, understanding through narration (as described in TIM) is different from the 'identification' process. TIM requires the active participation of an individual. The transportation or the 'mental product' of an individual while going through a narration/ story is attributed to the reader's response to the story, character and events. In this way, imagery transportation is based on the strength (quality) of the narrative and reader's active participation. Once the reader engages actively, the reader experiences the events, emotions, and feelings of the character and gains additional information. With this imagery transportation, graphic narrative/ narrative can change and influence old beliefs, attitudes, and practices in the viewers/readers [12,13].

4.1 PICTURING A SERIES OF SEQUENCES AS ONE

Scott McCloud, in his paper 'Understanding comics,' described two basic features of comic/ graphic narrative as gutter space and closure. Both features help the viewers to bridge the gap between illustrated sequences and understand the meaning of sequences as a one (closure) [16]. McCloud described the term closure as a phenomenon of observing the

parts but recognizing it as the whole. This helps the user/viewers to complete the incomplete with the use of his own past experiences. The space between two consecutive illustration panels is known as 'gutter', and this is the space where we think and fill the sequence to complete the story/narration. Fig 4. Shows an example of comic panel with gutter space.



Figure 4: Sequence of panel separated by Gutter

5 COGNITIVE THEORIES AND HEALTH-BEHAVIOR CHANGE

If narrative serves as an essential way of sharing one's experience with others, a health communication approach through graphic narrative must intend toward health-behavior change. More can be understood by Bandura's work, a psychologist who introduced the 'social cognitive theory' (SCT) of behavior change in the year 1969.

5.1 SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY (SCT)

STC states that modeled behavior, along with observational learning are two basic ways behavior can be altered. In a particular situation, a modeled behavior acts as a 'guide for action' for an individual [17]. When an individual sees and observes these 'guide for action' performed by others, s/he could also perform the same. Moreover, if a specific pattern were socially rewarded, this also supports building

observational learning. Apart from demonstrating a modeled behavior, activities that changes predefined cognitive thoughts are also responsible for behavior change (SCT). By just changing the way of organizing information and thoughts, one can learn an intended behavior [17,18].

SCT depends heavily on reciprocal determinism, a concept that describes health behavior as an outcome of three things, personal interaction, behavior, and the surrounding environment. SCT also states that many factors affect an individual's behavior: personal capabilities (skill and knowledge), self-efficacy, expectations and emotional responses, etc.

The application of personal experience narrative to improve self-efficacy has been analyzed in the study 'witness project', an examination among rural African American women to increase awareness on breast self-examination (BSE) and use of mammography [19]. In this study, breast cancer survivors acting as role models shared their cancer experiences with community women in community settings (such as churches, homes, and community halls). This study's findings showed increased reported response on BSE and the use of mammography from pre to post-intervention among community women who attended the session [19,20]. Moreover, the post-intervention qualitative analysis found that role models (breast cancer survivors) were trusted and accepted mainly because they were from the same community and shared similar culture [21].

5.2 PRECAUTION ADOPTION PROCESS MODEL (PAPM)

Weinstein introduced a cognitive model named the 'precaution adoption process model'. The model pays attention to the relation/impact of someone's behavior or thought on a person's sense of vulnerability and precaution measures. Studies based on this model suggests that a person who is aware of a problem in their community also knows people facing the same problem (and had taken precaution to avoid problem)

and more likely attempt to preventive measures through thinking, deciding, and acting themselves out of situation [22]. This PAM model suggests that audience exposure to the narrative character (sharing similar culture and tradition) may help the audience make desired health behavior decisions.

6 RECOMMENDATION

6.1 NARRATIVE AS A TOOL TO ENACT REAL-LIFE SITUATIONS.

Using narratives to teach real-life situations, Cole used this narrative approach for decision-making exercises under emergencies. Cole developed a narrative of an emergency scenario for coal mine workers [23]. The narrative scenario consisted of many decision-making points. The worker can read the narrative of this emergency situation. Throughout the narrative, they are forced to decide (how one should act under an emergency). With every correct decision taken, they proceed through the narrative, and with every incorrect decision, they proceed to alternative choices where again they have to rethink and make choices. This narrative application to teach real-life scenarios suggests that narrative can create scenarios where individuals or groups can be trained to make proper decisions under certain circumstances. Moreover, many narrative communication approaches are engaging, thus making health information more contextual and acceptable to the intended audiences.

6.2 NARRATIVE AS A TOOL FOR MODEL HEALTH BEHAVIOR

As mentioned above, the witness project is one such example of narrative as a tool for health behavior change. The project shows how cancer survivors (acting as a model) sharing their stories/experiences to the community results in increased responses on self-breast cancer screening [24,25,26]. Another such example is the CDC AIDS project- a community-

based demonstration project to prevent HIV/AIDS [27]. Personal stories were collected from the audience and shared among their peers. The project also included other supports such as the distribution of AIDS prevention information and condoms. So, the entire credit could not be attributed to the narrative aspect (collection and sharing of stories) of the project intervention. However, these projects shows how narrative can be used as an intervention tool to bring specific behaviour and how it can be used in health awareness intervention for broader community.

6.3 NARRATIVE AS A TOOL TO REACH A POPULATION WITH ORAL TRADITION

Use of narrative as a communication tool to reach population having oral tradition. For example- many Indian states (West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, etc.) still have a tradition of folk paintings where chitrakar (painters) shows the painting and narrates it orally to the audience in the form of songs. Paintings themes were usually from mythology and community stories, but over the past few years, new themes were incorporated with the help of NGOs working in child marriage and AIDS awareness programs. Hence, such initiatives can be made using narrative to reach population group with oral tradition.

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Visual Vocabulary and Visible Culture: How Exposure to Comics Informs the Practice of Young Design Students

Keywords:
Graphic medicine;
Graphic
narratives; Health
communication;
Health behavior

Jayasri Sridhar

jayasri_s@nid.edu

National Institute of Design, Department of Film and Video
Communication, India

ABSTRACT

Visual vocabulary tends to embed itself in public consciousness through the repeated exposure of a population to prevalent visual narratives. This includes developing a sense of spatial and temporal continuity through frames, an understanding of linear storytelling and the comprehension of text or oral narration juxtaposed against image. These sensibilities become ingrained in how the individual interprets the world and in turn, represents it through their own art and design practice. This paper explores how the broader medium of comics in India influenced the present generation in terms of worldviews and how it thinks visually, by articulating and interpreting the experiences of young design students. It seeks to understand how the evolution of visual sensibility was assisted by the medium as consumed by them in their childhood through interviews and surveys conducted over the course of six weeks. It enquires into the role of comics in development of visual vocabulary and grammar primarily through the views of visual communication students of the National Institute

of Design, Ahmedabad. By examining the medium from the angles of students of different Communication Design disciplines (Animation Film Design, Film and Video Communication, Exhibition Design, Graphic Design) and the connections between them, the paper argues that acknowledging these subtle influences consciously allow young artists to subvert these visual norms and communicate in a more meaningful, inclusive and representational manner. I place this research under the broader context of visual culture of societies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian society has a rich tradition of sequential pictorial narratives, seen across mediums ranging from temple murals to textile designs [1]. The Chitrakathis from Maharashtra, Phad of Rajasthan and Pattachitra of Odisha and West Bengal are a few examples of storytelling traditions which have emerged from, as well as shaped popular perceptions of myths and legends [3]. When placed alongside the modern Indian comic, these offer several interesting similarities and contradictions. We are a society constantly grappling with the binaries of traditionalism versus modernity, nativism versus globalism, and the grey areas in between. In an increasingly visual-oriented and rapidly shrinking world, what is the contribution of the above mediums in informing younger Indian consumers of their place in the larger context?

Modern Indian comics are an intriguing case in point because they have evolved into a distinctive medium for visual language appreciators, and have succeeded in creating an entire subculture around themselves. Given India's regional and linguistic diversity, comics could be considered an apt mirror to society: cultural influences affect narrative structures, underlying morals, and character arcs, which in turn affect culture. One wonders about the relevance of comic books in

the age of the emergence of newer visual media, post the arrival of television and the internet, as well as the myriad ways in which they interact with each other.

The present generation has grown up with the composite presence of comic books, comics adapted into TV shows and films as well as regionally variant visual narratives, which impacts its worldviews and how it thinks visually. This paper is a view on young design students and their relationships with these visual influences. As these students develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their positionality, identities and relations to their larger social, political and cultural context, they also acquire the ability to critically assess the ways in which the comics they read in their childhood impacted their worldviews and perceptions. This evokes the larger area of visual profiling [2] and stereotyping, problematic tropes [4] [5], active-passive character connotations etc.

2. MOTIVATION AND METHODOLOGY

Being a student of a multi-disciplinary institution like the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad gives one the opportunity to interact with a multitude of people with a keen visual and design sensibility. This aptitude is present in varying degrees in all the students who join the college, and is further enhanced as they progress through the curriculum, and are urged to think consciously about the decisions they make while communicating through visuals. Anticipating exciting insights and conversations regarding these sensibilities, I hoped to utilize the proximity to young design students across various design disciplines. Given the context of the pandemic, interviews and surveys were conducted remotely with 20 respondents, some of whom remained in correspondence as the inquiry progressed further. Interviews were conducted in a subjective manner, according to the unique responses and contexts of respective respondents. The basic framework was

to make the respondents think back to the comics/ illustrations they made as children and trace the possible influences they might have had, using the collected works as reference. The brief asked them to find any old pieces of art in which the respondents had tried to tell a story through visuals. The questions used to initiate the conversation were:

1. At what age did you make these works, approximately?
2. Which comics/ comic TV Adaptations might you have been influenced by? E.g. Manga, Superhero comics, Tinkle, Amar Chitra Katha, etc. List all and any possible sources.
3. How did these sources affect your idea of visual communication? (Think of instances such as fair characters as heroes, dark ones as villains, etc.)
4. Have you questioned your visual vocabulary in recent times? (E.g. Your drawings as a child might have shown a mother character typically cooking wearing a saree)
5. How do those influences continue to shape your practice? (E.g. A Product Design student using sequential narratives in boxes to explain a process, A Film student using words like BAM and WHOOSH during storyboarding, etc.)

Some respondents consented to their illustrations being used in the paper, which have been attached in the appendix. The further discussions were loosely based on these prompts:

1. How the comic book content you have consumed has affected the cultural settings you visualize in your work
2. How democratic do you think comic book related content is?
3. The most recognizable visual tropes in works which have been influenced by comic books
4. Common stereotypes being used currently, and being perpetuated, in terms of visuals,

character writing, and even language use in work influenced by comic books.

5. How personal experiences meld into content one has consumed, and how it affects one's own understanding of the material, as well as how one adapts the understanding one has gained into own work.
6. How much of this influence is conscious/subconscious?

3. RESPONSES

In terms of ages at which the comics in question were made, ten respondents answered ages 8-11, four of them answered 12-15, three answered 4-7, and three responded with larger age groups within which their 'styles' evolved.

3.1. POTENTIAL INFLUENCES AND INSPIRATION

1. The coloured ones from anime, and other forms of cartoons I saw on television. I did read comics such as Tintin, Asterix and Obelix, Amar Chitra Kathas, Panchatantra, Tinkles and Champak, but in hindsight my art at the time did not pick up any distinctive features from said sources. I distinctly remember trying to copy the anime style in my drawings.
2. When I was little, Amar Chitra Katha and Tinkle influenced what I was interested in and my story choices. I was influenced by a lot of western cartoons as well as anime.
3. I was heavily influenced by mainstream comic book adaptations of the time, like the Daredevil Netflix series, as well as the comic book character Deadpool, and a few of the action-adventure stories appearing on Tinkle
4. Western superheroes, Digimon/Pokemon
5. I loved Dora and Disney characters. And manga that my cousins drew (never really watched anime). Read Amar Chitra Katha and Tinkle during tweens but never really liked characters, so I

doubt the influence.

6. I was greatly influenced by anime adaptation of manga Dragon Ball Z by Akira Toriyama as it had storyline and deep character irony to cartoon shows which were meant for comical purposes
7. Tintin, definitely. The library near my house had the whole set.
8. I was inspired by Tinkle, especially Ram Waerkar. I used to sit and copy characters from Tinkle.
9. I liked Shoujo manga and Chacha Chaudhary and Batman series
10. As a kid I would try making comics modelled after superhero ones and other popular ones I read.
11. I read a lot of Champak, Magic Pot, Amar Chitra Katha, Tintin, Tinkle, Archie's and watched cartoons, which influences the colour schemes and characters that I drew in my stories.

3.2 STORYLINES AND THEMES

Fitting in: "Stories about a new girl in school who is not conventionally 'pretty' and gets ignored by the rest of the girls, but there is one nice girl who helps her fix her hair and look 'better'."

Keeping it real: "Most comic stories that kids read do not have much at stake. On the other hand, in the Tintin comics, Tintin's life is at stake. He is often being hunted down by the mob, mafia, criminals and politicians. Even though there is no real show of violence, it did introduce me to this genre shift at a very young age. And as I result, I picked up books by Moore and Igort and Miller, and films by Scorsese and Fincher, that really focus on making things as real as they can be. This is something I seem to carry forward in my work as well."

Action and violence: "I only used to think about action sequences, the heroes and their powers. I

realize now how comics made me think of guns being 'cool'. Overall, they introduced me to the gritty realism side of comics which got accentuated as I went on to read works by Moore and Igort."

Moral Angle: "My stories ended by honesty, or courage or a good quality being praised."

Themes from own context: "I remember making comics about going to the temple, or on vacation. I depicted people from my own life with their own distinctive physical features."

3.3. STYLISTIC FEATURES

1. The layout of comic that I have made earlier are inspired mostly from a mix of manga and Indian comics.
2. The speech bubble, thought bubble and whispering-bubble were a common feature that I imbibed into my own comics as a child. And facial expressions were very similar to what I had been exposed to.
3. I still regularly draw outside frames as a method of transitioning between frames. Or sometimes, with no frames at all, simply relying on the natural way of the eye to follow what is hopefully a clear sequence. Sometimes I send a step by step so people know what I drew first and what I drew last.
4. Drawing inside rectangles is too much of a norm and I hardly ever think beyond this.

3.4. CHARACTERS

1. Visually, this is kind of a strange quirk, but I was super obsessed with obscenely long hair several times the character's height. In terms of stereotypes I fed into, the usual, hero must be a slim character of eligible age, visually pretty with redeeming qualities and sometimes questionable depth of character. My villains at the time were primarily male.

2. Color schemes like green for villains was pretty evident. However, in western comics a mastermind or leader of any sort was almost always a man and usually white; in games armour for women was always skimpy while male characters looked more in tune with the tone of the games.
3. Heroes were always good-looking and villains or the bad guys were deliberately made unappealing. My girl characters were always damsel-in-distress type.
4. Muscular figures, cute creatures, badass dragons
5. Villains were always thin, heroes were macho men with moustaches, and ladies were always mothers, housewives and girlfriends
6. Conventionally attractive characters and colours
7. The villains were green and pink in the kind of shows I watched; they change your perspective of looking at villains just as villains, it had pretty good effect on me. Even good-looking people could be villains, and eerie-looking characters could be good. You couldn't really judge by the look, the character we thought was evil could actually be angelic. But characters with light in eyes and good smiles seem like good people.
8. Earlier I used to give all female character long hair, and male short hair.
9. The way I named my characters was very peculiar: they were always western- seeming, exotic or Christian names, never actually encountered around me. Such as, Felorexa, Elfa, Sophira, Elvin, etc. (See Fig 2 in Appendix).

3.5. GENDER AND REPRESENTATION

1. I used to make a lot of comics when I was around 12 years of age. My sister and I used to make short comic strips for each other. Looking back, I realized a pattern in a lot of them, we made comics only with female protagonists,

something both of us could somewhat relate to. There were many stories about 'glow-ups' and 'transformations.' Stories about a new girl in school who is not conventionally 'pretty' and gets ignored by the rest of the girls, but there is one nice girl who helps her fix her hair and look 'better' and suddenly everyone starts to see how nice she is. What I inferred from this makes me feel like I knew being nice is important, but no one will see that if you don't look good. A lot of the stories and the style was inspired by the barbie movies and shows like Winx club, material made for young girls but with all female characters being unrealistically beautiful. Other comics with a similar subject matter had mean girls doing mean things, but they almost always got a punishment for those. Sometimes the punishment was them turning 'not so pretty', like losing all their hair or something. It's embarrassing to think about now, and also a little sad. I wish I had better visual material and better female role models to look up to as a child, and not Bloom or Barbie. I was very much into drawing croquis as a teenager, and until very late, I subconsciously felt like the girl looked disproportionate (even when they already are) if she didn't have the tiniest waist or the longest legs possible. Even in movies today, the prettiest girl is always the protagonist. Looking back, I wonder how we expect our girls to embrace themselves when all the content they are consuming tells them that they look more like the main character's best friend.

2. I always believed the girl should be pretty, petite and pleasant altogether.
3. I always drew slim characters with straight hair.
4. Both male and female are a bit sexualized sometimes, in terms of exaggerated features.

3.6. CONTEMPLATING INFLUENCES AND CHANGES IN PRACTICE

1. Not colouring inside the lines strictly anymore. Doing away with character tropes.
2. I don't think they [childhood comics] have had such a lasting influence on me. Maybe just that drawing inside rectangles is too much of a norm, and I hardly ever think beyond this.
3. Currently I'm studying character design [in the Animation Film Design discipline], and questioning visual vocabulary a lot. It's because we're used to seeing rather than observing, that we struggle to find references of day to day things.
4. I work in Animation, so these influences are still going strong. Whether it is art styles, gag ideas or narrative threads, I end up drawing reference from what I've seen or read before, especially for Storyboarding. Also, during Foundation [first year] I did research on methods like Kaavad and regional sequential narratives, and that influences to this day my style of animation and the objects I want to experiment with.
5. I have often contemplated why a certain character looks the way it does, or the colors which I decided were to be part of someone costume or even the way the text was written on some of them., I have always attributed them to my childhood influences, in terms of comic adaptations. They affect the way I compose thumbnails for an illustration, trying to make them more dynamic or static based on the situation, or deciding the kind of costume a certain character would wear in them, or the kind of stories I write, which often tend to lean heavily on existing comic book mythology, or are heavily borrowed from them.
6. I have most prominently contemplated how the untrained, unfettered mind of a child has a vague grasp of reality. I have found childhood illustrations like the one with an ant, with a badly drawn mango beside it, except the ant was

the size of a human in comparison. My drawing was not bound by the constraints of reality or the limitations of physics. And they [characters] all had a name. However, I think the drawings show a rudimentary understanding of capturing motion in drawing.

7. I spent my formative years in the USA, so everything I drew was ultimately influenced by Western culture. As I grew older, I tried breaking away from the prejudices I noticed in my own drawings, like drawing a majority of people with Caucasian features and western clothing.
8. When I was introduced to social media a lot of experiential and emotion inducing artwork was popular at the time. I try incorporating everything I know into my work now. I want to draw in a way that feels like reading a book.
9. I think I grew conscious of my pattern of making slim tall fair straight-haired figures three years ago. That was also the time I started loving myself more. So, I'd say a lot of that influence completely flipped. I started drawing a broader range of shapes and sizes and colours.
10. In my current practice [Film and Video Communication], I like to add storyboarding in things and my art style is also anime or manga style. And yes, even my story-writing is similar, with plots and different storylines.
11. I don't stick to stereotypes when coming up with characters anymore.
12. As a kid I didn't really like drawing things around me. I would rather draw things I never saw. Now I mix it up.
13. I still draw comics. I think the realism aspect of my influences constantly plays into my storytelling.
14. To some extent the features I liked drawing back then I realized are not realistic but they are related to design choices, to attract viewers. I find them to be a bit questionable at times, but do understand the reasons for it.

INFERENCES AND DISCUSSION

The medium of comics as consumed by the respondents at a young age seems to have influenced the styles, themes and characters they came up with in interesting ways. Many cite Amar Chitra Katha, Tinkle, Western superhero comics and anime as major influences. Referring to their childhood influences, one deduces prevalent features through a conversational process of semiotic deconstruction. This research has the potential to be carried forward on a larger scale to arrive at broader generalizations, informing us about the evolution on visual culture. Some inferences derived from this sample set are:

Themes: Action and crime (See Fig 3 in Appendix), moral stories, fantastical creatures appear to be a recurring theme. Some seems to tell chained stories, with "episodes" or chapter-like features, though not necessarily sequential, pertaining to certain characters like detectives, group of friends, etc. A parallel can be drawn between this tendency and regular features like Luttapati and Mayavi (Magic Pot) and Tantri the Mantri (Tinkle). Some respondents illustrated folk tales and other stories they had heard, while others wrote these stories themselves.

Visual features: Many illustrations feature practice drawing of shoujo manga-style eyes and facial expressions. Some follow the Tinkle style of illustrating characters and setting. An interesting aspect in the intuitive layout of panels, with an initial establishing shot of where the story is set along with an opening line, followed by characters and their dialogues. In terms of skin colours, most comics use pale tones for their characters, atleast for positive roles. Representation of less-than-skinny characters is rare. Animals are given speech and thought bubbles like humans. Regional influences of what one has encountered in real life also occasionally makes an appearance (See Fig 1 in Appendix).

Evolving approaches: As more diverse strands of knowledge and debates regarding gaze inform students, they become more critically aware of the subconscious influences they operated under as children. All of them admitted to noticing visual profiling and stereotypes in their narratives, characters and themes. Along with this awareness, they attempt to subvert these tropes as they see fit. Creating characters of all shapes, sizes and skin colours, diversifying contexts and introducing nuances like political correctness, representation and sensitivities gains priority over creating something that appeals to an imaginary audience.

CONCLUSION: INTERPLAY OF DESIGN PRACTICE AND VISUAL VOCABULARY

Formally learning principles of design, composition, colour as well as an introduction to liberal arts has enhanced the visual vocabulary and grammar of design students (See Fig 4 in Appendix). They increasingly question the reasons behind their creative choices. Students of various communication design disciplines also appear to be informed by their respective fields in terms of pacing, sequencing, camera angles and perspective, illustrative styles, typography, etc.

Predominant influences can be traced to the exposure that the students had to "visible culture". Comics and shows which they interacted with on a regular basis have had a direct or indirect presence in their own art. This is how visual vocabulary, or the various visual features and phrases that constitute a person's ability to communicate through visuals, is linked to the visible culture in their surroundings. However, not all elements of the respondents' childhood comics were found problematic in retrospect: some reflect the sheer imaginative and uninhibited quality that a child has. Combining it with the critical aspect of

contemplating design choices in sequential narrative carefully has become a useful approach in these design students' current practice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the respondents who have contributed their illustrations and reflections to this paper: Medha Bhagwat, Shruti Ganesh, Eichha Singh, Nirmita Roy, Avani Samaga, Gaurav Pati, Tarun Singh Pangtey, Nonisha Negi, Divyanshi Khedekar, Pranav Holla, Rohit Thomas Issac, Saurav Syam, Dipankar Talukdar, Satvik Soni, Rohan Bhatia, Swarnav Nayan et al.

APPENDIX

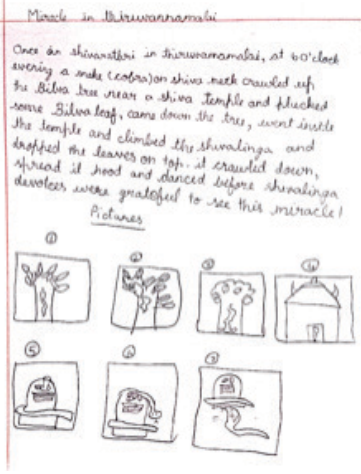
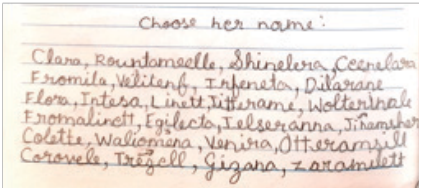


Fig. 1. This sequential narrative made by the author at 7 years of age depicts the story written above it. What interests me about this old piece of art is not just that a young child has interpreted a story, possibly of her own creation quite literally through visuals, and that she understands that drawings can supplement a verbal story, and that boxes indicate a sequence, but also the tiny details of the lines showing the snake dancing in frame 7, the structure of a temple gopuram, the design on the snake's hood, midrib on leaves, carrying in mouth, showing attention to detail, the Tripundra on the linga. Also fascinating is how grounded in context this comic is; the child knows that a certain town, snake, a certain tree, a kind of temple and the linga are all connected to this deity. And she uses this knowledge to craft a story and depict it through meticulously drawn frames.



Fig. 2. Note the elaborate drawing of a fairy, her features, accessories. Also note the names the child has provided below.



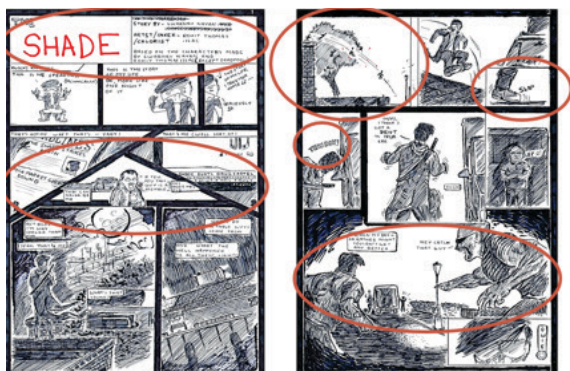


Fig. 3. Stylistic features draw a lot from existing comics. In this artwork by Rohit Issac and Swarnav Nayan, crime chase action seems to be the theme, notice the title and its similarity to tinkle digests. The triangular panels adding dynamism to the layout, the continuity of action shown through multiple drawings and lines, a smaller panel to highlight a detail, the use of words as clarifiers, the foregrounding and mid-grounding of elements, a cut in for an close up action spilling out of panels, irregular shapes for panels and tiny arrows to indicate flow: they are an interesting blend of prevailing visual narrative techniques and childlike innovation.

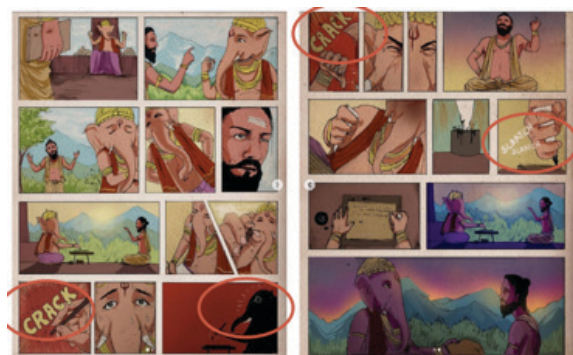


Fig. 4. Evolution of practice. This comic by Dipankar Talukdar shows how some elements of visual vocabulary are carried forward even in recent works.

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Keywords:

Graphic culture;
India; Visual
narrative; Comics;
Graphic novel.

Graphic Culture of India: From the Perspective of its Form, Themes, and User base

Rohit Kumar¹ and Shatarupa Thakurta Roy¹

rohitkr@iitk.ac.in

stroy@iitk.ac.in

¹ Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, Design Programme,
Kanpur 208016, India

ABSTRACT

Chitrakathas, or visual narratives, have played a significant role in shaping India's visual and graphic culture. Although comics and graphic novel culture had evolved over a few decades, India has had a tradition of these visual narratives thousands of years ago. Unlike this tradition, the culture of comics/graphics is relatively new. With its wide variety of content/themes ranging from political issues, socio-cultural issues, health autobiography, etc., this medium is gaining its audience base from different age groups. More importantly, it indicates a change in the perception and attitude of readers toward this medium. In India, the comic is usually seen and associated exclusively with children. In recent decades, after the emergence of graphic novels, which deal with many serious issues and stories, this media's perception seems to change. With its artistic form and more vivid content/themes, the graphic novel helped rebuild adult's interest in this medium today. However, many do not see this medium as 'literature'; this graphic medium's future seems bright in India. In the context of

graphics and visual narration, this article seeks to explore how this medium begins? How the culture of graphic and comic changed over a period of time? Is there an Indian tradition for graphic and pictorial narratives? These are the few areas this article attempts to explore and possibly answers. This article also tries to understand this medium (pictorial narratives) from the perspective of its form, content/themes, and different audience bases.

1 INTRODUCTION

Chitrakathas or visual narratives have played a great role in shaping India's visual and graphic culture. Although comics and graphic novels' culture had evolved over a few decades, India has had a tradition of these visual narratives for over thousands of years ago. Some evidence of this tradition can be seen at Ajanta's caves (Maharastra) and Bhimbetka (Madhya Pradesh). Though the narrative element of paintings at Bhimbetka cave is not very clear, the paintings at Ajanta caves is quite prominent to exhibit the narrative element, representing different stages and periods from the Buddha's life. These cave paintings are among one such example of a visual narrative tradition in India.

Apart from these, India has a culture of Chitrakatha-telling stories through pictures. The storyteller (also the chitrakar) narrates the stories while holding and displaying painting, which complements the narrated stories to their audience. The paintings are generally done on cloths and paper, whereas the story's content/theme could be mythology or related to religion. Unlike this form of Chitra Katha, another form has emerged over a few decades: visual narration through comics and graphic novels. With its wide variety of content/themes ranging from political issues, socio-cultural issues, health autobiography,

etc., this medium is gaining its audience base from different age groups. More importantly, it indicates a change in the perception and attitude of readers toward this medium. In India, the comic is usually seen and associated exclusively with children. In recent decades, after the emergence of graphic novels, which deal with many serious issues and stories, this media's perception seems to change. With its artistic form and more vivid content/themes, the graphic novel helped rebuild adults' interest in this medium today. However, many do not see this medium as 'literature'; this graphic medium's future seems bright in India.

In the context of graphics and visual narration, this article seeks to explore how this medium begins? How the culture of graphics and comics changed over a period of time? Is there an Indian tradition for graphic and pictorial narratives? These are the few areas this article attempts to explore and possible answers. This article also tries to understand this medium (pictorial narratives) from the perspective of its form, content/themes, and different audience bases.

2 VISUAL STORYTELLING HERITAGE AND SOME EARLY COMICS OF INDIA

The first identifiable work in Indian comics is recognized as 'Avadh or Oudh Punch,' published from 1877 to 1936, a Lucknow based magazine published weekly. The magazine used the political, social, and linguistic theme as satire and humor to portray social odds [1]. During years of country independence, satirical magazine and comics had developed to respond to British colonial rule. This satirical included poetry, essays, cartoon strips, caricature, etc. Such magazines were published and distributed in many northwestern regions [1]. Such magazines and comic work led to the foundation for both critically aware content and regionally diverse comics acceptance among Indians. These works specifically paved a

path for other comic publications in Bengal, Tamil, Malayalam, and languages other than dominant English and Hindi.

In the years that followed, British comics and magazines along with regional comics proliferated. One such example was the comic work of C. Subramania Bharti; a Tamil language comic published weekly in a magazine named 'India' [2]. Another such work was of artist Gaganendranath Tagore (1867-1938), who worked for 'The modern review' in 1917 [3]. After the 1920s, growth in terms of cartoons, caricature, and comic work was significant, especially in Tamil Nadu. Many cartoonists and comic artists of the state became popular by the year 1930s [2]. The medium gained popularity through the work of 'Mali,' a Tamil artist who worked for 'Ananda Vikatan' and 'Indian Express' and was recognized as the state's popular periodicals. His work also inspired other artists like S.Gopalan [2].

Figure 1 (bottom left) Awadh Punch magazine title page from one of the issues (1877), Reference- Tribune India

Another well-known and successful work during and after independence (1947) was 'Chandamama,' a family-owned children's magazine founded by Chakrapani and B.N's contribution. Reddy [4]. Its simple storytelling style, beautiful illustration, and

Figure 2. (bottom right) Chandamama comic title page from one of the issues

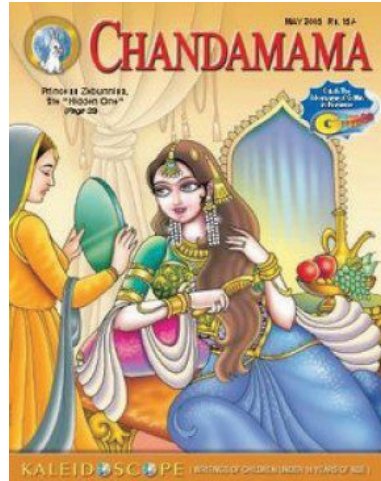
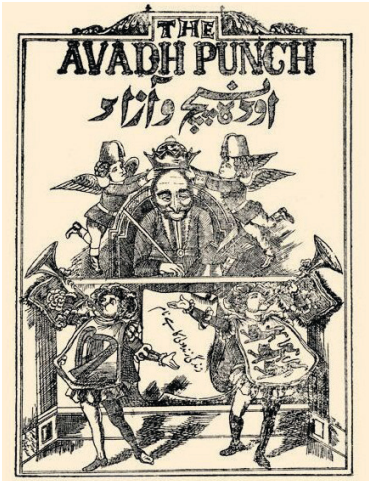




Fig 4. (left) one of the illustrations from 'You said it'

Fig 3.(right) One of the illustrations from the book 'Goa with love.' reference- Pinterest



availability in regional languages have helped 'Chandamam' gain popularity and unique identity. During the same period, comic artists like Rasipuram Krishnaswamy Laxman and Mario de Miranda arose. Miranda worked for 'The Times of India' as a cartoonist and was known for his color and ink illustrations and murals; one such successful book with comic illustration was 'Goa with love.' He illustrated the day-to-day lives of goa people. R.K. Laxman, too, worked for the 'The Times of India' as a cartoonist with his work on social and political issues, and known for his illustrated character of 'common man' and illustrated strips of 'you said it's published in year 1950s [5]. Both R.K. Laxman and Mario Miranda were recognized as socially significant comic artists and were awarded by Padma Vibhushan (India's second-highest civilian award).

Table 1
Categorization based on form, theme, user base, approach, and prominent work

The period of independence in 1947 and the following year afterward was violent due to nation partition, mass migration, as well as changes in social activities, urban lifestyle, culture and education system that

Form	Theme	User Base	Approach	Prominent work/ artist
Regional comic	Children story	Children	Entertainment	Chandamama, Awadh punch
Single panel and comic strip	Social and political	Adult	Satire and humor	R.K. Laxman, Mario Miranda

followed. Artist and content creator of that period including Miranda and Laxman were engaged in themes related to social issues. Table 1. Illustrate brief categorization based on the theme, popular work, approach, and audience base.

3 RISE OF COMICS WITH AN EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

Indian comic history took significant transformation by the introduction of 'Amar Chitra Katha,' a locally created comics with its characters and theme from Indian mythology. Although, around the same period, comics with international themes and characters were seeping into the Indian market by 1964 [4]. In 1967, Anant Pai collaborated with 'Indian Book House' to produce children's comic named 'Amar Chitra Katha.' Initial themes for the first few issues were on western stories and were available in the Kannad language. Later the theme was changed to Hindu mythology and shifted its approach more toward education [6]. Amar Chitra Katha sold its first 20,000 issues within a time span of three years, and later the sales increased exponentially to 50 lakh per year [7]. Pai's choice of Hindu mythology and its character in 'Amar Chitra Katha' set a path for other comics. However, some scholars did critics his work and noted that the ACK series was more religiously biased and inclusive toward Hinduism. Another work in comics following the same religious theme path was 'Sufi Comics,' which included Islamic tradition and history as comic content. The education approach in comic as similar to ACK was also taken and applied by others, such as 'Indian War Comics', started publication in 2008 with its theme on Indian wars [8].

Table 2.
Categorization based on form, theme, user base, approach, and prominent work

Form	Theme	User base	Approach	Prominent work/ artist
Comic	Hindu mythology, Indian War, Islamic tradition	School children	Education, entertainment (Edutainment)	ACK comics, Indrajal comics, Indian war comics

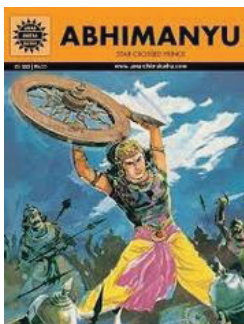


Figure 5.(left) An illustration panel from ACK comics. Reference- Google Images



Figure 6 (right) An illustration panel from Indrajal comics. Reference- Phantom wiki

By the 1980s, another comic named 'Indrajal comics' with its Indian character and theme was published with the collaboration of A.C. Shukla (Indrajal manager) and Abid Surti (comic artist). Indrajal comic incorporated a newly

designed Indian character named Bahadur, an active detective with a simple orange tunic. This comic availability in multiple languages and its character diversity made indrajal comic popular by the 1980s [7].

4 RISE OF MINI-COMICS

By the 1980s, two more big names entered the growing Indian comic market. The first one was 'Tinkle' comics, which started publication in 1980 and soon became popular. The comic included small games, puzzles, contests and quizzes, and attractive illustrations for the children. Six years later, by 1986, a family-owned 'Raj' comic debuted in the comic market. D.C./Marbel comics more influenced this Delhi based comic, and it's style. This comic incorporated their superhero named 'Nagraj,' but very similar to 'spiderman,' Nagraj uses snakes similar to spiderman uses webbing. Both these comics Tinkle

and Nagraj, were widely popular in year 1980s and paved the path for other small publication houses, which finally led to the explosion and acceptance of mini-comic as a reading culture [9].



Figure 8. (left) An illustration panel from Indian war Comics. Reference- Google Images

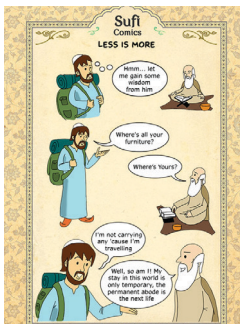


Figure 7. (right) An illustration from Sufi comics. Reference- Suficomics.com

Meanwhile, competition from western comics was increasing due to their cost-effective printing and distribution process. As a result, comics from small publication houses such as 'Chitra Bharti Kathamala' comics and 'Radha' comics were closed. Whereas, few others managed to survive for few more years, such as 'Kiran' comics, based on imported stories and a title like 'Tarzan', and 'Rani' comics, based on the character 'James Bond'. Later, by the year 2005, their sales declined, and they were forced to close the publication [9].

With the explosion and acceptance of this mini-comic form, the publisher attempted to create creativity from the artist/creator and comic accessibility. This evolution can be seen as an overlap of creator freedom, reader enthusiasm, and comic experimentation [7]. Moreover, as a part of an experiment, publishers shifted toward short-form comics, which were smaller in size and cost less; this led to the shift of comics from brick and mortar stores to small bookstall/vendors [7]. In the end, this event made comics more accessible through its vast distribution network. On the other hand, the readership of big publication houses such as ACK and Indrajal declined, which ultimately led to the cease of regular publication [10].

5 BIRTH AND RISE OF GRAPHIC NOVEL

The year 1994 marked the beginning of graphic novel with the introduction of 'River of stories,' a graphic novel based on Narmada river and dam social and political issues. This graphic novel was illustrated and narrated by Orijit sen [11]. This novel paved the path for other artists working on different social and political issues with its unique long-form.

In 2004, following the same path, author Sarnath Banerjee published 'corridor,' a well-distributed graphic novel in many cities [12]. During this period, comics shifted toward freelance work and small-scale

publishing. As a result, artists from different states grouped and formed a community to support other's work. Moreover, Orijit sen and a few other members acted as a mentor for the community. One of the artists from this community was Amruta Patil, known for her ground-breaking work 'Kari'(2008), which set the path for others in terms of new and compelling storytelling. From there, the number of publications in graphic novel form grew with a wide variety of themes. Later in 2007 and 2011, Sarnath Banerjee published 'The Barn Owl' and 'The Harrapa Files' respectively and established himself as a graphic novelist [12].

6 INTRODUCTION OF COMIC EVENTS

The first comic event as Comic Con India was organized in the year 2011 in New Delhi. The event attracted big publication houses such as Diamond comic and level 10 and many individual artists/ creators/animations. Over more than 15,000 attendees were present and participated in different workshops and events. At the end of the event, Anant Pai was awarded a Lifetime achievement award . In the followed year, the event expanded to other cities like Bangalore and Mumbai [13].

7 CONCLUSION

To understand a particular medium's history is vital to appreciate the medium. It is quite challenging to mention every comic work, title, author, publisher, and organization associated with this medium.

The early comic/graphics of late 1980 were more oriented toward national issues and were available in regional language. Children's comics were also present, such as Chandamama. After independence, the decade led artists like R.K. Laxman and Mario Miranda to consider themes of social issues such as education, urban lifestyle, etc.

The year 1967 saw a rise in some culture and mythology-based comics such as ACK and Indrajal.

With ACK selling more than 50 lack copies within a year. The popularity and acceptance of ACK paved the path for other budding artists and publishers, such as recent India War Comics (2008) and the adoption of educational approaches.

The decade of the 1980s seen a rise in comic with a different form factor, mini-comic. This mini-comic was widely accepted due to its size and low cost. Moreover, it transformed the comic distribution pattern in the country.

'River of Stories' by Orijit Sen was the first work to be considered as a graphic novel. The introduction of this comic form led to the comic community and individual work/comic publication. This form was more suited for the inclusion of serious social and political issues; examples of such work are River of Stories (1994), Kashmir Pending (2007), Kari (2008), etc. Graphic novels were more inclined toward Adults as it's user base.

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Comic & Contextual characters as a new narrative between Indian Children & Stakeholders

Keywords:
Comics, India,
parents,
Education, Story,
Characters

Mohit Goel¹ and Richa Mehrotra²

mogo.iitd@gmail.com
richa.hrex@gmail.com

¹ ADP, India

² NIFT, Hyderabad, India

ABSTRACT

In 2019, we got an opportunity to present a design thinking workshop for the class 4th students of a Hyderabad based international school. As a part of it, students were asked to make comics, in order to cover different aspects of design thinking, e.g. use cases, storytelling, mapping out the users (characters) using themselves as characters. They were also asked to include their parents in the homework related to comic making exercise and were quite enthusiastic about including family in the process. The paper presents reflective analysis of involvement of the students as creators & teachers as facilitators in forming narratives around characters in Indian context. It is an exploratory research on comics as a narrative and outcome rather than a few design concepts. The paper also invites possibilities of including parents as a co-designer (or idea inducer / sharer) of comics to develop a bond between children and parents. We will briefly discuss the future aspects based on our observations.

1 INTRODUCTION

The conversational relationship between child and parents is quite dynamic in nature. It has a property to change across land, time and context. The way parents hold a conversation with their child is quite different in eastern culture than western culture, esp. American. In this paper we will present a rarely discussed territory of the Indian Child-parent(al) relationship with comics as a mediator / facilitator.

Fig. 1. Workshop with 4th grade student at Oakridge international school, Hyderabad.



2. WHERE IT ALL STARTED

In 2019, we got an opportunity to conduct a design thinking workshop for the class 4th students of a Hyderabad based international school. We had discussed the same with a few students of similar age

and talked through their notion of the word 'design', so that we could prepare our workshop. We understood there is usually an overlap of definition of art and design. This overlap was common between students from the international school in Hyderabad as well as from local English school in tier - 2 cities from Uttar Pradesh.

3 WORKSHOP DETAILS

The workshop began with a presentation followed by an activity. The presentation had a few points:

- Difference between art and design
- Importance of users & context
- A few examples on validity of design, overlap of art and design, etc.

After the presentation, we switched to a design activity.

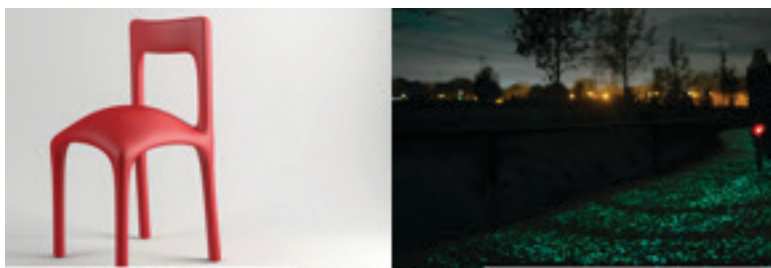


Fig. 2. A few slides explaining difference between art & design and their relationship.

3.1 COMIC AS A MEDIATOR TOOL: A REALISATION

Design is an iterative process. Solutions are designed keeping users as a character and their pain/need points around them. During our discussion with students we realised that summer was around the corner and the students had planned their vacations. We deduced that kids/students were in need of a to-do-list of activities for their summer. It was an unrealised need which came out as a part of discussion. One of the major pain point (for them) in the process was to collaborate with their parents. During discussion, the best possible product which we could come out as a result of the workshop was a 'calendar'. In order to think all possible scenarios, we asked them to play around with a lead character of themselves and make comics. Comics use storytelling techniques that revolve around various characters.

This was a spark moment when we realised, 'what if' we introduce parents as characters in this comic book and thus, co-creators of the same?'. When we speak about child parent relationship, it not only include child's relationship to mother and/or father, but also to everyone who is parental to them. This thought opened up the possibility of expanding the collaboration between children and elders.

3.2 REFLECTION OF PARENT CHILD RELATIONSHIP

It's important to discuss how society and context changes the dynamics of parent child relationship in India. This will also reflect on the strategies of using comic as a mediator. The primary audience of the workshop was International school in Hyderabad with comparatively higher fees bracket. Parents in such cases are relatively selective in their conversations. Mostly, both the parents are working and are open for using various techniques to interact with kids. These kids are comparatively more open in nature. They have school sessions on mental health issues, design workshops, etc. which is still a taboo for tier two cities' parents.

4 ANALYSIS

The workshop aims at various actions to be taken to involve kids into self expression through images rather than words. Students were asked to draw characters and stories around themselves. It was more comfortable for them to visualise themselves in a character. This exercise aimed at providing the voice in head into words, so that the character is someone who sounds like them immediately.

Fig. 3: Dialogues among character



For example, in Fig 3, the students narrated the whole conversation between them and their parents. Apart from this it's an interesting proposition to develop their rhetorical skills. This was taken for experiment that if only student fill the bubble box and let their parents take time to fill their side of bubble. They are free to draw anything they mean. This opens up a collaborative opportunity to have a conversation. Comics as storytelling also facilitates the judicious use of humour. There are funny, wry or silly aspects to most situations. It's very interesting to note the usage of concentric squares and lines that were made to complete the overall look of the comic.

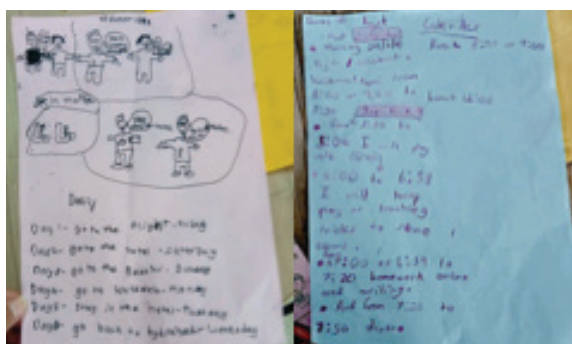


Fig. 4. Diary formats comic

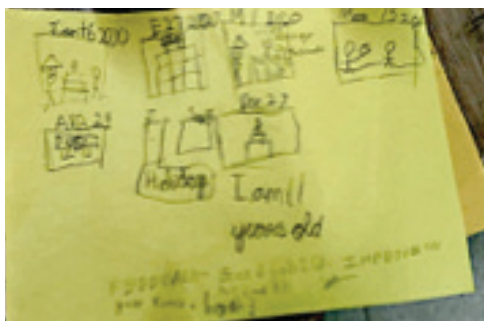
In Fig. 4. A calendar format came out by a student. There are no characters other than the student himself. The conversation is in first person. We think, this provide an interesting point. In our earlier days, elders / teachers used to advise us to write diary. It's also a way to self reflect. Students were told to do this exercise of daily comic. In fig 4. Student starts with

'Mom, I want to go to Goa'. This is also an opportunity to understand which parent is closer to the student.

In second frame, the student is so keen on the timings. '6:00 to 6:59', "I will keep play or teaching tricks to cows". Through a chronological timeline, the student is adopting a linear process to visualise. There was no use of comics or figures. We can start with small figures and motivate such students to practice comic.

Fig. 5. Calendar format comic

In Fig 5, the student attempted to visualise calendar with stick figurine characters inside the boxes. There are no words and minimum figures were used for communicating concept, like birthday candle in the last 27 dec box.



The image shows two pages of a child's drawing book. The left page is blue and contains a drawing of a person with a speech bubble saying "I think you EAT ONE!". The right page is yellow and contains a drawing of a person with a speech bubble saying "I think you EAT ONE!" and a drawing of a person with a speech bubble saying "I think you EAT ONE!".

5 REFLECTION OF PARENT CHILD RELATIONSHIP IN TIER 2 CITIES

COMIN20

by youtube videos. Ability to operate youtube videos and phone is a sign of intelligence among parents. In their memories, they had never drawn a cartoon or comic.

6 DISCUSSION

If we look at the contemporary Indian context, Indian patent website has a pdf in which they have explained the concept of patents & copyrights via Parent-child comics. It's not only easy to understand but also, teaches the narrative which can be used by Indian parents to discuss and explain things to their children. Another famed comics - Menstrupedia, is being used in various schools and at home. These discussions often need a complete trustable source. The main characteristics of this proposed comics is the introduction of 'comic maker' posed themselves as lead characters. Psychologists have long known that the first items presented in a new series of information are remembered better than those presented later, and that a person's memory of this information is difficult to change in the following days. This is called the primacy effect (e.g., Waugh and Norman 1965; Glanzer and Cunitz 1966) [2]. As a result, makers make realistic and aspirational personalities in these characters. They gradually put more in-depth understanding of the character as the story progresses. These characteristics represent not only a character's form, but also highlight its personality and unique role in the story. Successful dialogues with other characters enables the maker to easily remember and identify each character's role and thereby become absorbed in the story. We turn to Field (1979; 2005) [3], who purported that 'all drama is conflict'. He further explained that without conflict, there is no action; without action, there is no character; without character, there is no story. Online animated cartoons like Pega Pig and baby shark, are popular instead of comics. The point we want to bring in is that animated videos and other sources are passive in nature. Child and parent are consuming them by listening. There is no dialogue happening between

parents and child. The proposed comic as medium and collaboration tool is a potential case. Since, the involvement of online medium has deepened so much in our social fabric, we realised that if comic is being made by children themselves, it would be distraction from online tool.

7 FURTHER POSSIBILITIES

The paper opens a possibility of conversation on awkward unknown territory between parents and children in Indian context. Indian education is going to get a massive restructure after following per new education policy. It also outlines the possible challenges when NEP is yet to implement but presents a conversation starter for effective usage of comics as an acceptable norm. We feel that these interactive comic sessions can be used to propose various storytelling scenarios for covering various domains such as finance, maths, economics, law etc. In the world level PISA test for a 15 years old child, where India took 74th out of 75th position, in theoretical environment, we need to consider if explorations in comic space is worth a shot!.

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New Epoch of Anti-Comic Cartoons in India: Tracing the Role of Cartoonist O. V. Vijayan

Keywords:

Cognitive faculty,
colonialist
contempt,
populism, serious
cartoons.

Basil Thomas¹ and Dr. E. Krishnan Namboothiri²

basilthomascce@gmail.com
krishcheeravallil@gmail.com

¹Department of English, Christian College, Chengannur, Kerala, India

² Department of English, S. D. College, Alappuzha, Kerala, India

ABSTRACT

The rich heritage of mimicking, punishment, mocking, howling, curse, criticism and fooling are the foundation stones of the genre of cartoons. The traditional assumption about the form and content of this art form is based on the element of laughter and humour. The element of humour is needed to tackle the problems created while the cartoonist denigrates a person or an issue. Cartoon makes itself different from other serious matters in the pages of magazines and newspapers not with the aspect of cynicism but with its ability of deconstructing the news about the issues of the world. Instead of creating mere laughter, it focuses on the philosophical reading of the deep historical reality of the news behind. In this sense, cartoons should not be restricted to the purpose of laughter generation as they do not have the liability to make people laugh. This paper seeks to foreground the aspect of cartooning as a serious mode of art than as a mere source of laughter and intends to throw light on the understanding that cartoons are not merely pictures to generate laughter alone, rather

as capable of possessing and transmitting stimulating thoughts. They possess the dynamic potential of seriousness. In the light of this idea, the paper studies the perspectives of the Malayalam novelist-cum-cartoonist O. V. Vijayan, who can be rightly said to have pioneered an unconventional mode of cartooning in India as a serious genre. O. V. Vijayan insisted on this aspect of serious cartooning and he certainly took a divergent path when compared with his predecessors and contemporaries. It resulted in a new era of cartooning in India, especially Malayalam. . This paper tries to analyse the reason for the affinity of the publishing firm towards humorous cartoons and the reason for the neglect towards serious cartoons.

1 INTRODUCTION

Cartoons are one of the most attractive and catchy elements in the pages of a magazine or newspaper. This popular genre became the dwelling place for the contradicting forces which generated different types of laughter like chuckle, chortle, guffaw, giggle, titter, snicker, ha-ha, tee-hee, snigger and so on, through the portrayal within the frames. The rich heritage of mimicking, punishment, mocking, howling, curse, criticism and fooling are the foundation stones of the genre of cartoons. The traditional assumption about the form and content of this art form is based on the element of laughter and humour. The element of humour is needed to tackle the problems created while the cartoonist denigrates a person or an issue. The act of disparage is forgiven and forgotten when the attack is wrapped in humour. In an interview with Sudarshna Dwivedi, R. K. Laxman speaks about the importance of humour as "a person may feel hurt if he has no sense of humour" [2]. This helps the 'art of verbal attack' in cartoons to escape the allegation of being a cruel art with the element of laughter in it. Different styles of cartoons and multiple schools of cartooning bring variety to this art form. The cartoons

of Tim, the French cartoonist, can be considered as cartoons of fine arts where as Abner Dean, the American cartoonist, created philosophical cartoons. The cartoon series of Jim Davis's Garfield and Frank A. Clark's Country Parson come under the category of serious cartoons generating cognitive turbulence among readers. The cartoonist has to tackle the challenge raised by different types of art forms. He has to create a reality of his own within the limited space allotted to him. The person who is not able to make use of the space and think creatively will be satisfied with the creation of farce instead of serious cartoons. If the shot of the cartoon doesn't hit at the target, the art becomes null [3].

K. G. Sankarapillai's article "Varakkali Narmathinappuram", in Jamal Kochangadi's *Sathyam Parayunna Nunayanmar*, states that cartoon makes itself different from other serious matters in the pages of magazines and newspapers not with the aspect of cynicism but with its ability of deconstructing the news about the issues of the world. So, instead of creating mere laughter, it focuses on the philosophical reading of the deep historical reality of the news behind [3]. In this sense, cartoons should not be restricted to the purpose of laughter generation as they do not have the liability to make people laugh. This paper seeks to foreground the aspect of cartooning as a serious mode of art than as a mere source of laughter. That is, a cartoon does not cease to be a cartoon if it does not invoke laughter. In the light of this idea, the paper studies the perspectives of the Malayalam novelist-cum-cartoonist O. V. Vijayan, who can be rightly said to have pioneered an unconventional mode of cartooning in India as a serious genre.

2 METHODOLOGY

The paper makes a reading from a broader spectrum of the transformations that have sprouted from the perspectives of cartoonist O. V. Vijayan rather than

attempting a close reading of his cartoons. The paper utilizes the theoretical premise of Cultural Studies in alliance with the MLA Style sheet 8th edition to explore the same. Analysis is made on the historical and colonial contexts in the formulation of patterns of cartooning which have moulded the mental framework and aestheticism of the average Indian reader of cartoons. The paper interrogates the ways in which O. V. Vijayan, a regional cartoonist from Malayalam cartoon industry, served as an agent of a paradigm shift from comic cartoons to anti-comic and serious cartoons in the Indian cartooning context.

3. CARTOONS AND HUMOUR: WHY HUMOUR IS SO INEVITABLE?

Contemporaneity and immediacy are the catalysts of the beauty and success of cartoons. The same qualities shield cartoons from false notions like nostalgia and revivalism because cartooning is the art of 'the here and the now'. The cultural significance and the aesthetic aspect of cartoon are beyond the element of laughter. It is not a new idea to say that cartoon's primary aim is not to generate laughter. According to K. G. Sankarapillai, instead of laughter, problematization of the issue is the life of cartoon [3]. It is true that the melancholic pattern in Indian cartoon started with the era of O. V. Vijayan which gave way to uncurbed thoughts and criticism without mercy.

4. CARTOONIST O. V. VIJAYAN

O. V. Vijayan was born to Thachamuchikkal Kamalakshi and O. Velukutty, the Subedar Major of Malabar Special Police, in 1932 in Palakkadu district. He worked as a college lecturer before he joined in the world of print media. He was an employee in *Deshabhimani* and *Prapancham* before he joined *Sankar's Weekly* as staff cartoonist in 1958 but he openly declared that he was not indebted to Sankar for his cartoon style and method [3]. Vijayan wanted to establish his own way of

cartooning to stand different from the classical style of Sankar's school, by blending a philosophical vein into his cartoons.

Sankar's cartoons focused on his personal relationships with the leaders of the pre-independent and post-independent India, instead of offering a philosophical or theoretical analysis of the issues. Several budding cartoonists found their schooling in *Sankar's Weekly*, including O. V. Vijayan. However, Sankar's style was not agreeable to Vijayan and soon he left *Sankar's Weekly*. After working in *Patriot*, he continued as a freelancer, he drew cartoons for *Eastern Economics*, *Economics Review*, *The Hindu*, *Mathrubhumi*, *Kalakaumudi* and so on. His solitary venture was supported by cartoonist Rajendar Puri. He started the cartoon series, "Ithiri Nerampokku Othiri Darshanam" in *Kalakaumudi* after the period of emergency.

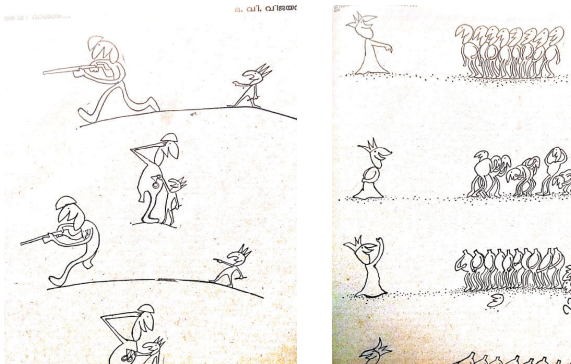


Fig. 1 & 2. The cartoons given in this paper are taken from O. V. Vijayan's cartoon series, 'Ithiri Nerampokku Othiri Darshanam', in different volumes of *Kalakaumudi* Magazine of the years 1976 and 1977. [7].

5. O. V. VIJAYAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON CARTOONS AND HUMOUR

Vijayan believed that in an illiterate society, nothing can be done by a writer and journalist against despotism. According to him, there is no scope for 'soft options' to the troubles and turmoil of third world countries. The soul of India is its pure culture and that is why India keeps itself different from other third

world countries [3]. He believed that the cartoonist of a third world country with social commitment does not have this soft option. The duty of a cartoonist, according to Vijayan, is to lead the readers through the difficult paths and he needs the support of the publishing firm for the same. Since newspaper is a psychic commodity, the publishing authority ought not to consider it as a profit making business. O. V. Vijayan says that the cartoonist who tries to make the circulation boom with the farce in his cartoon and the chief editor's profit making mentality are the two faces of ethical deterioration [3].

6 PUBLISHERS' AFFINITY TO HUMOUR FOR MARKETING

The matter of investment and sale is a matter of concern to the publishing firm. It cannot be compared to the sale of a commodity as the publication has the active process of humanitarian responses in it. It is the responsibility of the authority of the publication to take the stand that cartoon is not simply comedy but a matter of criticism and vision. O. V. Vijayan opines that the cartoon which reflects the Indian reality may not have the scope to generate laughter. He had bitter experience from the publishing firms for this attitude that "cartoons are not supposed to be wrapped with comedy" [3].

7 HUMOUR IS NOT INEVITABLE IN CARTOONS

O. V. Vijayan explains the reason for his lonely journey in the world of cartoons in an article, "Hasyachitrakarante Vijnjanam" included in Jamal Kochangadi's book, *Sathyam Parayunna Nunayanmar*. According to him, the problem of defining cartoon as comic pictures itself creates confusion as the word comic cannot be segregated to a particular angle. The reaction to an issue or problem cannot be restricted to comic response [3]. This is the general custom of the third world countries including India. He is of the opinion that the role of cartoon is to make sarcasm

by taking the political symbols of the social process. Hypothetically, a third party who is not involved in a particular issue can by all means enjoy the flavor of laughter in it when presented humorously as a comedy, unlike the victim involved in the same. For instance, it is similar to how Indians may insist Jews to laugh through the cartoons against the Nazi holocaust. Vijayan says that his existential bewilderment about an issue is bigger than the element of laughter which can be attributed to it. According to him, the rulers across the world have a dictator within themselves. Indians also witnessed the same during the time of the period of Emergency. [3].

O. V. Vijayan says the problem of the lack of vision and philosophy in cartoons is not solely because of the prejudiced attitude of the publishing firm. A major reason he attributes to this is the incompetency of the cartoonists as they are not literate enough to view the inner reality of things. This results in the failure of the society on humanitarian grounds. [3]. According to him, chief editors nurture the same colonial contempt towards Indians even after independence as well, which explains the low profile and low farce produced by their cartoonists. This is backed with the belief that western cartoonists can handle diverse and huge plots better than Indian cartoonists. [3]. In parallel to this, it can also be seen that a wide majority of the

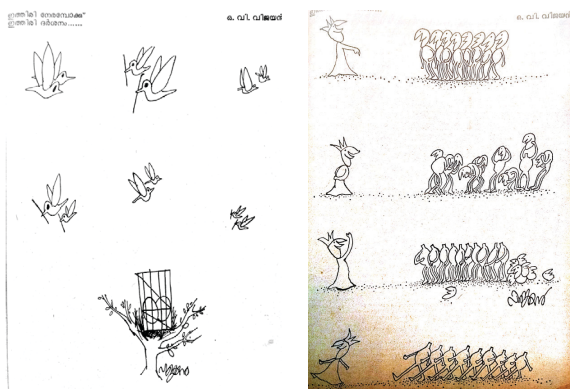


Fig. 3. & 4. The cartoons given in this paper are taken from O. V. Vijayan's cartoon series, 'Ithiri Nerampokku Othiri Darshanam', in different volumes of Kalakaumudi Magazine of the years 1976 and 1977. [7].

Indian cartoonists exhibit a propensity to learn from the western cartoonists and emulate their works, rather than creating their own signature suited for the Indian audience.

With reference to Malayalam dailies, Vijayan compares and contrasts the attitudes of news dailies that are published in English versus the vernacular Indian languages. The probability of readership of English dailies being global, enhances their standards to compete with western dailies. As such they ensure a raised honorarium for their cartoonists whose position in the power structure of the firm is held sufficiently satisfactory. Even so, these cartoonists still pursue their art by inadvertently imitating the western ideal discussed above. It seems like the specter of the western ideal has not evaded even with a rightful space or paycheck allotted to them because of a misconception that serious cartoons do not cater to populist base. Vijayan also finds that the dailies of the local languages are not able to create a domestic culture of their own because of the above mentioned colonialism and subsequent elitism. He makes a controversial comment that the Indian cartoons in English language are smuggled goods. [3]. It is this subconscious attitude that creates farce in cartoons which keep the standard low. The fact that this farce is still celebrated as sublime based on circulation statistics rather than quality is criticized by Vijayan.

According to Jamal Kochangadi, a cartoon becomes a cultural product only if it is made in the mother tongue. [3]. Becoming a philosopher is a revolutionary situation as far as a cartoonist is concerned, because the cartoonist, being an independent critique, will be an ailment for the power structure of the publishing firm. Vijayan says that there are several incidents as the chief editors prohibited him from making original and fundamental declarations about an issue. [3].

8 REASON FOR THE LACK OF SERIOUS CARTOONS

The pulp publications in Indian vernacular propagated cartoons satisfying readers with the bare minimum literacy, and thereby diminishing the value of vision and philosophy. As such, serious cartoons became negligent in significance. O. V. Vijayan tries to explain the reason for the lesser number of serious cartoons tracing the evolutionary history of publications in India. The pre-independent media was greatly associated with the mainstream nationalist movements. And the early Indian cartoonists worked in this respect. The person behind the cartoon was more of a spokesperson of nationalism and a freedom fighter than a cartoonist.

The inclusion of the elements of comedy, laughter and sarcasm in early Indian cartoons was largely because of the tolerance of the British regime. Once, Sankar, the father of Indian cartoons, received a refined response from the Viceroy for a humiliating cartoon. In fact, the Viceroy demanded the original drawing of the same cartoon and even Sankar was astonished at the tolerate attitude of the British ruler. This colonial attitude must have triggered the humoristic nature of cartoons to be taken forward in the post-independent Indian scenario. It is a distressing sight to find that the post-colonial Indian cartoons make a laughing stock of Indians themselves in the same manner as the colonizers did to them. Sadly, this 'perennially' colonial model of exploiting our people was never questioned or resisted by the post-independent Indian cartoonists. The ignorance of the contemporary cartoonists who create farcical illustrations of shaming and ridicule should be educated so that serious cartoons without these could be created as instruments of social criticism. It is high time to step out of the thresholds of colonial hangover! According to O. V. Vijayan, this degenerative system demands the emergence of cartoons with black humour and non humour. The

lack of laughter in cartoons affects the popularity and marketing [3]. He shares his own experience about his cartoon series, "Ithiri Nerampokku Othiri Darshanam", which somehow escaped from this marketing failure as the readers relished it with the eyes of love and empathy. During the time of freedom struggle, symbols of nationalism occupied the maximum space in the cartoon frames than people. This gesture created a large populist base for the cartoonist. A major share of this populism was from the supporters of freedom movement rather than cartoon readers. With the Independence, the nationalist consensus got shattered and the once united people were fragmented on the basis of personal affiliations [3]. After independence, the space occupied by nationalist fervor in cartoons was replaced by mundane issues of little significance for which farce and humour were sufficient. This gradually paved the way for the emergence of the belief that cartoons are meant to create laughter and not to stimulate thoughts.

9. VIJAYAN'S ART OF CARTOONING

The characters in the cartoon series, "Ithiri Nerampokku Othiri Darshanam", of O. V. Vijayan come out of the new and old legions of culture. The formula created by O. V. Vijayan with the images of Buddha, Krishna, Siva, Christ, Marx, Gandhi, Hitler, skulls, tanks,

Fig. 5. & 6. The cartoons given in this paper are taken from O. V. Vijayan's cartoon series, "Ithiri Nerampokku Othiri Darshanam", in different volumes of Kalakaumudi Magazine of the years 1976 and 1977 [7].



lizard, spider, fox, dog, new leaders, new liberation movements and new ideologies seek answers to the riddles of the social world. It equates the balance of the external real world with the projected reality within the cartoon frames [3]. Each cartoon in the series can be read to be a new myth of the counter culture against the fascist myths of knowledge, reason and power.

Cartoonist Sudheernath says that O. V. Vijayan is the first cartoonist to bring 'high seriousness' in Indian cartoons [5]. V. C. Abhilash, in his *Cartoonvicharam*, says that Vijayan's thoughts are more powerful than his drawings. Vijayan's cartoons dealt with more theoretical and practical philosophy than his fictions [1]. According to Sukumar, Vijayan was a cartoonist who was unaware of the art of drawing and this added novelty to his cartoon style. Sukumar illustrates this argument with an instance where Sankar once asked cartoonist Yesudasan not to draw like O. V. Vijayan. This incident shows that Sankar was quite happy with the thoughts, philosophy and the vision conveyed in Vijayan's cartoons, but not his drawings. [6].

O. V. Vijayan had no soft feelings when attacking others through his cartoons but on the other hand, he was not tolerant enough to receive such criticism. Cartoonist Sudheernath, in his book *Varayum Kuriyum* describes an incident when O. V. Vijayan appeared as a character in the cartoon column, *Assalum Pakarpum*, a cartoon column in *Mathrubhumi* by Cartoonist Paul Kallanadu. Immediately after the publication of that cartoon, Vijayan telegraphed his complaint to the office of *Mathrubhumi* and in addition to that he personally went to their office in Delhi and demanded apology from the authority through the news paper [5]. This incident shows that Vijayan's celebration of philosophy and sublime vision is one sided and that the preaching is not practised. The same incident can be analysed in another way as the temperament of Vijayan is quite fragile that he is not able to cope up

with the atrocities around him through the element of laughter in his cartoons. Since seriousness is his 'sthayibhava' the 'rasa' generated in his cartoon is 'raudra' and 'veera', not 'hasya'.

10 CONCLUSION

In short, the attempt of this paper was to throw light on the understanding that cartoons are not merely pictures to generate laughter alone, rather as capable of possessing and transmitting stimulating thoughts. Cartoons deserve to be glorified and celebrated in the mainstream canon of art as a rightful mode of discussion and evaluation of social and political phenomena. As creative means of expression, they possess the dynamic potential of seriousness.

A unique feature of a cartoon is its ability to reach the common masses, who may or may not possess the minimum level of literacy. Cartoons make this possible by primarily utilizing humour which crosses the barriers of language, literacy and education. However, a broader vision of 'art for life's sake' can be achieved only if cartoons raise themselves from being media of laughter to being media of empowerment. The connotative sense conveyed in the cartoon is rooted in the cultural history and this modulates the interpretation of the readers. To uplift the populist base of readers from their current state of ignorance to enlightenment requires serious efforts from a cartoonist and this was the vision of O. V. Vijayan. The literacy of the cartoonist and that of the reader form the criteria for this transition to happen. It should be mentioned in this context that any new venture is usually accepted very slowly and the cold reception of Vijayan's visual output in Malayalam in the 1970s proves this true. This underlines the fact that the readers should also be open minded so as to let such revolutionary changes occur. [3].

O. V. Vijayan insisted on this aspect of serious cartooning and he certainly took a divergent path when compared with his predecessors and contemporaries. It certainly resulted in a new era of cartooning in India, especially Malayalam. It should also be admitted that the perfection of anatomy in the cartoons of Vijayan was not up to the mark. Considering the analysis of Jamal Kochangadi about this lack of technical brilliance in O. V. Vijayan, one can assume that this is probably why Vijayan stressed on giving prominence to the cognitive faculty of the presentation and practiced the same himself [3]. In any case, it should be acknowledged that the creative output of Vijayan projects a renewed sense of approaching cartoons seriously rather than as media of laughter alone.

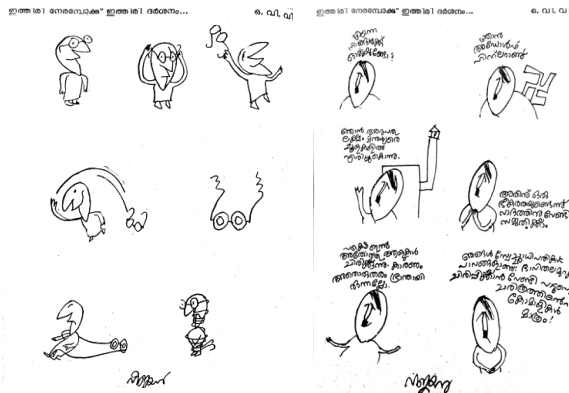


Fig. 7. & 8. The cartoons given in this paper are taken from O. V. Vijayan's cartoon series, 'Ithiri Nerampokku Othiri Darshanam', in different volumes of Kalakaumudi Magazine of the years 1976 and 1977 [7].

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Rohan Chakravarty, India's Answer to Environmental Comics

Keywords:
Comics, wildlife,
environmental
education,
diversity

Thankam K Abraham

thankamkabraham@gmail.com

University of Kerala, Department of English
Christian College ,Chengannur, Alapuzha, Kerala, India

ABSTRACT

*Comics are very often not treated as serious literature or art. But they serve to influence popular imagination in powerful ways and are statements of our fantasy, preferences and culture. An area quite new to comics, in general, are environmental cartoons. They require a union of artistic calibre with scientific knowledge. Rohan Chakravarty, a Nagpur based illustrator, wildlife enthusiast and cartoonist stands as India's answer to cartoons on environmentalism. His works which come out as Green Humour comics and otherwise, serve to educate the laymen about the implications and impacts of environmental issues. He has also brought out books for children which help them develop a taste for nature,. The purpose of my paper is to establish how comics can serve as an effective tool for environmental education through an analysis of the book *The Great Indian Nature Trail with Uncle Bikky*. The task is to enquire into the possibilities of comics as an eco narrative. The book is an endeavour to educate the young minds about the rich abundant biodiversity of our nation through fun filled facts and activities These comics definitely evoke in us an ecological sensibility which would help us value our planet more and adds on to our understanding of earth and its creatures.*

INTRODUCTION

Comics are very often not treated as serious literature or art. But they serve to influence popular imagination in powerful ways and are statements of our fantasy, preferences and culture. An area quite new to comics, in general, are environmental cartoons. They require a union of artistic calibre with scientific knowledge. Rohan Chakravarty, a Nagpur based illustrator, wildlife enthusiast and cartoonist stands as India's answer to cartoons on environmentalism. His works, which come out as *Green Humour* comics and otherwise, serve to educate the laymen about the implications and impacts of environmental issues. *Green Humour* could easily be the singlemost largest collections of environmental cartoons on the web.[1] He has also brought out books for children which help them develop a taste for nature. He believes in nurturing this taste quite young and talks about the campaign 'Kids for Tigers', an outreach programme by Sanctuary Asia that helped him shape his loyalties.[1]

ARGUMENT

Chakravarty believes in education and women empowerment for tackling environmental issues.[1] The purpose of my paper is to establish how comics can serve as an effective tool for environmental education through an analysis of the book *The Great Indian Nature Trail with Uncle Bikky*. The theoretical perspective employed is that of ecocriticism. The task is to enquire into the possibilities of comics as an eco narrative. The book is an endeavour to educate the young minds about the rich abundant biodiversity of our nation through fun filled facts and activities. It was a work created by Chakravarty for WWF India. The essays that accompany the comics are composed by Bijal Vachharajani. It is an interactive comic that involves the reader in the journey forward. Comics have a wonderful way of appealing to the eye and the intellect. They effectively manipulate the visual and verbal mediums to catch our imagination.

Uncle Bikky, Chunmun and their doggy friend easily endear themselves to the reader. The comics depict a close encounter with nature and facts imparted are peppered with humour to make them interesting. Uncle Bikky is an ornithologist by profession and is on a quest to find the Himalayan Quail with his sharp, resourceful niece Chunmun and their pet dog Duggu. The journey progresses through various sanctuaries, reserves and deserts. The joy of discovering animals and getting to know them meets no comparison. Also revealed to us is the geographical diversity of our country that serves as habitat to these wonderful creatures that are often endemic to our land.

The first principle of deep ecology as formulated by Arne Naess establishes that "the well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes".[2] The second principle states that "richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realizations of these values and are also values in themselves". [2] It is an encapsulation of these principles that we find in these comics. They lead to the realization of the value of biodiversity and reverence to the non human world.

There are sixteen short comic strips which are connected by the presence of Uncle Bikky, Chunmun and Duggu. Their expedition takes them along national parks, reserve forests, beaches, grasslands and even their own backyard and the city night streets. The very first location is at Daroji Bear Sanctuary in Karnataka which hosts the endemic population of Sloth Bear. The bear has the habit of carrying its young one on its back while hunting for termites – a way of protecting the young as well as training it to fend for itself. The second strip highlights the greenery of Western Ghats. The species in focus is the flying lizard also known as Southern Flying Dragon which has the ability to fly and excellent camouflaging techniques. From the green rainforests we move to the whites of the Himalayan

ranges to learn about the Orange Oakleaf Butterfly which has an underwing that resembles a dead oak leaf while its upperwing has bright radiant orange patterns. We also learn about Baransh, a juice made from rhododendron flowers. The fun facts at the end of the strip tell us that rhododendron is the State Tree of Sikkim and Uttarakhand and that Himalayas boasts of 80 species of rhododendrons.

The fourth strip takes us to Sunderbans which is home to a variety of waterbirds and tigers. We meet Goliath Heron, the Collared Kingfisher, the Blackcapped Kingfisher, the rare Ruddy Kingfisher and the endangered Masked Finfoot. Next location is the terai of UP, the grassland that grows in clay rich alluvial soil. There, in the Dudhna National Park the trio come across the One-horned Rhinoceros, the Barasingha, the hog deer and the Floricans. The Floricans are birds that jump high to attract the females and only 1500 of them are left in the world. We learn to distinguish between the Bengal Florican that has a curved jump and the Lesser Florican that has a vertical high jump. From grasslands we move to the backyard of Uncle Bikky where they witness an entire ecosystem in process when they spy a Checkered Keelback Snake eating an Indian Bull frog. We are informed that during breeding season bull frogs turn bright yellow and blue to attract mates and threaten rivals. We are also told that the Indian Grey Mongoose eats birds, lizards, rats, frogs and even cobras.

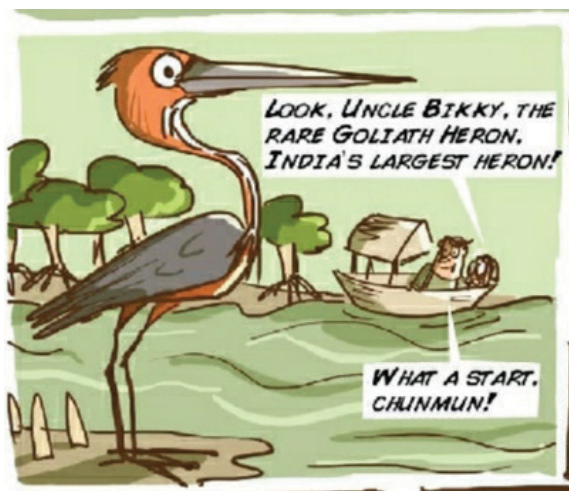
The seventh strip takes us to Rajasthan's Desert national Park where we meet desert fox, spiny tailed lizard, a desert cat eating an Indian Gerbil, a rodent that can leap like an antelope, the blackbuck, the chinkara with straight antlers and the Great Indian Bustard, a critically endangered bird that is one of world's heaviest flying birds and also the state bird of Rajasthan. We are informed that deserts are not entirely barren but have vegetation including acacia, date palms, buck thorn and spiny shrubs. In the eighth

strip we are in India's highest national park, Hemis. There Uncle Bikky and Chunmun are warned of the arrival of the snow leopard whose favourite prey is Bharal or the blue sheep by the highly social ground dwelling rodent, Himalayan Marmot. Hemis is also home to Argali, Urial (mountain sheep) and the Tibetan wolf.

From the snowclad ranges to the sandy beaches of Andaman Nicobar Islands. Uncle Bikky decides to go birdwatching while Chunmun chooses diving. Uncle Bikky is rewarded by sightings of the endemic Nicobar Parakeet, the Nicobar bulbul that is becoming rare due to logging and habitat loss and the Nicobar Megapode that builds large mounds around its nest to warm its eggs by decomposing organic matter. The marine life that Chunmun encounters include the colourful coral reefs, the leatherback sea turtle, the largest turtle in the world and the Dugong that is also called the sea cow. The next destination is the hills of Nainital where the Himalayan Quail was last sighted more than a hundred years ago. Uncle Bikky could only manage to see the hill partridge a common species that is the larger cousin of the Quail.

The eleventh strip is located in Agumbe Reserve Forest of Karnataka which receives an annual rainfall of 7000mm. The monsoon season is the best time to watch snakes and we come across the Malabar pit viper, green vine snake and rat snake. Funfacts about snakes include that rat snakes are the favourite food of King Cobra whose latin name is Ophiophagus which means snake eater. The twelfth strip takes us back home where we do bird watching by the window spying on a bird bath. The visitors to the bath include red vented bulbul, oriental white eyes, the grey wagtail, black rumped flameback, wood pecker, the ashy prinia, house sparrow, coppersmith barbet and Paradise fly catcher.

On number thirteen is the Tiger Reserve in Arunachal Pradesh. The forest of the area has been largely [3]



These strips are not merely showcasing nature, they also enrich us with valuable little tidbits of knowledge. Interestingly the titles of each of these strips are found to be quite catchy and they hint on the prime focus in the strips. To quote a few: "The Piggyback Bear", "Bird bath Matinee", "Quail Trail" and "Olives by the Beach", they divulge a poetic taste that blends so well with the scientific temper of the cartoons. More of nature study is achieved by these strips than perhaps yearlong drudgery with textbooks. Also it remains to be seen whether such focus on biodiversity will be found in textbooks. We get to know of the diversity of terrain also.

On critically examining the strips we can see that the predominant colours used are earthy and green. The attire of the characters also tend to blend in with the landscape precisely because they don't want to draw attention to themselves. Vibrant colours are employed only to showcase the flamboyancy that nature herself indulges in to ornament her creatures. The focus is on the flora, fauna and landscape. What makes these cartoons special is that the figures of animals, birds, vegetation and landscape which are usually relegated the background status are foregrounded. Also the

blatant anthropomorphism often found in other popular comics featuring animals is absent. Here they appear in their own right, true to their essence. Other comic strips by Rohan Chakravarty might have the creatures borrowing the faculty of thought and speech but there ends the similarity with humans. The humour evoked is not by trivializing the non human but by the banter between Uncle Bikky and Chunmun.

On further analyzing the visual image we can find an interplay of what Charles Sanders Pierce calls the iconic signs and the symbolic signs in these comics. "In iconic signs, the signifier represents the signified by apparently having a likeness to it. This type of signs is often very important in visual images, especially photographic ones"[4]. The word texts that accompany the images stand in the realm of symbolic signs which "have a conventionalized but clearly arbitrary relation between signifier and signified".[4] These word texts or symbolic signs are integral to the cartoons for they impart the very knowledge that the cartoon seeks to convey. The accompaniment of the images or figures makes the fun facts more enjoyable and appealing. They also convey the varied diversity of the Indian landscape which ranges from snow capped Himalayas to the grassy terai to the evergreen rainforests to the sandy beaches and deserts. Jonathan Burt comments with regard to animals in films that, "Rather than seeing animals purely as semiotic devices it makes more sense to see them as dynamic and fluid agents that are integral to passage of change".[5] So is the case of Chakravarty's animals. By identifying them as iconic signs, we are acknowledging their status in their own right.

According to Dalacosta as quoted by Toledo et al, "The power and efficacy of cartoons has long been recognized because of their readability and visual appeal to the audience. It takes the essence of a particular situation or character and further condenses it into a single image, telling a clear story in a brief

and influential way." [6] Toledo et al further remarks that environmental education is aimed at promoting environmental sensitivity, awareness, understanding, and competence and thus lead to the creation of an environmentally literate society ready to take strategic actions for the environment. The amount of information captured in these sixteen strips is far from little. Chakravarty's work is unique as it requires an ecologically sensitive mind and an artistic flair for producing such exceptionally well informed cartoons. The target audience could be children but they don't fail to enthrall an adult passing by.

CONCLUSION

These comics definitely evoke in us an ecological sensibility which would help us value our planet more and adds on to our understanding of earth and its creatures. Children bond with nature by instinct and it rests on us to nurture that bonding. *The Great Indian Nature Trail with Uncle Bikky* is a fine way of familiarising the young minds with teeming diversity of India's wild and its uniqueness. Its of imperative importance today as we are on the verge of mass producing techno geeks. Even they are targetted as we have the book in digital format too. We can rightly claim that environmental comics are "a potential medium of consciousness change and an increased ecological sensibility which, however indirectly, can help to contribute to a change of political and social practices." [7].

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Keywords:

Indian Graphic
Novels, Sarnath
Banerjee, Indian
Comics, Amar
Chitra Katha

Thinking Narrative: A Critical Reading of Sarnath Banerjee's Corridor and The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers Amishal Modi

Amishal Modi

amishal.modi@gmail.com

Independent Researcher, India

ABSTRACT

Scholars regard Indian graphic novels as the more sophisticated and objective successors of the Amar Chitra Katha series of books that unflinchingly raise uncomfortable questions about India and Indian society. Taking Sarnath's Banerjee's first two novels as cases in point, this paper will argue in light of Frederic Jameson's ideas that the postmodernist leaning of Banerjee's work takes away from the purpose and seriousness accorded to these novels by scholars and by Banerjee himself. What makes the thrust of Banerjee's novels particularly elusive is the absence of distance between author and characters and the gap between the author's view of his narratives' impact and the actual impact of the narratives on the reader. Despite their distance from each other based on the differences in form, content and tone, ACK and Banerjee's writing come together, contrary to critical opinion, in the manner in which they affect the reader.

Graphic novels can loosely be described as comic narratives with serious themes that are meant for adult readers. Before the introduction of graphic novels in India, the *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) series of books that are meant for children dominated the comic narrative scene for several decades. The Indianness of the Indian graphic novel, which is a borrowed form, is described in terms of its distance from the ACK series. Whereas the ACK series of books, say scholars, present a glorified image of the country revealing their nationalistic agenda, the graphic novels challenge this very representation and present a country that is far from glorious by raising much-needed questions about its culture, customs, urban life and history.

Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004) is widely regarded as the first Indian graphic novel and is said to have popularised the genre in the country. There is little doubt that graphic novels in India, in the style of Banerjee's novels, raise questions that earlier narratives have not asked. While the ACK comics sketch an uncritical portrait of Indian society, Sarnath Banerjee's pathbreaking works—*Corridor* and *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*—offer a satirical take on society and everything else that comes under their radar; however, unlike the ACK has a moral purpose that goes hand in hand with the nationalistic agenda, Banerjee's satire is without end. Banerjee's books create a congealed world that is unable to point to a reality outside of itself in which the reader can participate. In this his writing becomes as monolithic as the writings that both scholars of the graphic novel and Banerjee himself criticizes. This becomes palpable when one looks at the way in which narrative functions in Banerjee's novels. The questions this paper will ask are: What is the place of story in Banerjee's writing? What impact do his stories have on their audience? Scholars also argue that India has a history of pictorial art and hence the graphic novel form is not entirely alien to India [1]. This paper will investigate whether alongside invoking India's pictorial

heritage Banerjee's writing also invokes an Indian way of thinking.

Perspective in this paper will be provided firstly by a statement made by Art Spiegelman about Marjane Satrapi's writing: Spiegelman says that Satrapi's work does not attempt to create a hermetic universe that has nothing to do with the real world, a trait that he sees in most comic books / graphic novels that, in his opinion, capture attitude, not reality. Frederic Jameson's views on literature in the time of multinational capitalism speak to Spiegelman's comment on graphic novels. His ideas about the depthlessness of literature and the absence of critical distance in postmodern texts will be helpful in unraveling Banerjee's works that, while lacking in self-irony, are replete with irony directed outwards. A. K. Ramanujan's essay, "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?" will be used to understand what constitutes the Indian worldview. While Ramanujan says that the Indian worldview is constantly undercut by counter positions, and historically by the advent of modernity, the thrust of this worldview continues to be context-sensitivity. For instance, a moral precept in India is inflected by the contexts of sex, class, caste, age, frame of mind, circumstance, geography, etc [2]. And hence the dream in this context-sensitive society is to become context-free [2]. There are a host of ways in which this freedom is construed in India. The dream, or the end, in a way, of life that Ramanujan speaks of will be particularly useful in underscoring the direction Banerjee's writing takes.

The *Amar Chitra Katha* series of books are stories from Indian history, mythology, folklore, and legend in comic form that were introduced by Anant Pai in 1967 to the Indian audience. His intention was to introduce Indian values and themes to middle class children who, he believed, were becoming alienated from their roots [3]. These stories became a part of a large number of middle class homes in

the 1970s and comics that were until then viewed as exercising a corrupting influence on young minds, in the ACK series found parental approval. Deepa Sreenivas locates ACK at the interstices between the dissolution of the Nehruvian era and the emergence of a more conservative politics in the 1970s [3]. The right wing marketed its politics as a modern politics that espoused the progressive Vedic values of ancient Hindu India combined with the bourgeois individualism of the West. Their spirit of bourgeois individualism was displeased with the "special rights granted by the state to disadvantaged sections of society on the basis of caste, community or gender" [3]. The right wing attempted to engender a national identity that was masculine, monolithic, Hindu, chauvinistic, individualist, and capitalist. Sreenivas emphasises that ACK espouses completely the modern, Hindu politics of the right wing, and that all aspects of ACK, their stories, the artwork, the body types, are crafted in support of a conservative, exclusionary politics.

Not all scholars, however, have such an extreme view of the ACK. Frances W. Prichett sums up the preoccupations of these comics thus:

Pai and his staff thus create each issue in a field of tensions: sales versus educational values; scholarly accuracy versus the need to appease particular interest groups; a commitment to Indian history versus a commitment to national integration. And Pai addresses all these complexities in the comic book medium a medium with its own potent qualities, its own effects, its own opportunities and constraints. The result is a fascinating phenomenon, the product of an extraordinarily complex series of choices. [4]

In her account, the ACK narratives appear to have been created and distributed with both worldly and idealistic concerns. Overall, insists Prichett, the ACK does not engender an attitude of total exclusion:

All things considered, the influence of the series is undoubtedly constructive. *Amar Chitra Katha* readers may indeed be led to hate the British, who are no longer there to object, but they will also be led to hate untouchability and to feel outrage at the plight of the poor and to admire the gallant deeds of at least some women and some non-Hindus. *And they will never, in any issue that I've seen, be led to feel hostility toward one another.* They will have a strong, positive sense of India as a multicultural nation in which they can all work together (emphasis added). [4]

The moral concerns of the ACK override its politics, in Prichett's view. In fact, Pai is self-consciously in favour of equality and justice, both Sreenivas and Prichett point out, even though he is unable to create such a world in every book.

Critics tend to read the Indian graphic novel, in the mode of Banerjee's works, as antithetical to what they see as the jingoism of the agenda-driven ACK books that preceded them. Speaking of the difference between ACK and graphic novels in India, Suhaan Mehta says,

ACK steers clear of polemic, ironing out creases in the fabric of national integration and presenting a highly selective view of India to a young audience . . . The work of Banerjee and his contemporaries signals a decisive break from ACK's airbrushed view of India's past and present. More broadly speaking, the Indian graphic novelist has created an alternative space by accommodating voices that habitually fall outside the realm of Indian socio-politico-cultural discourses. [5]

E. Dawson Varughese adds that the Indian graphic novel presents "Indian society and ideas of Indian identities in challenging and unfavourable ways"

[1]. Both critics suggest that while ACK presents

a monolithic, uncritical view, graphic novels offer a nuanced, realistic and honest account of the country. Both critics cite Sarnath Banerjee's works as exemplary of the characteristics they identify. In an interview to the *Guernica* magazine Banerjee explains his writing:

Such writers [who target a very specific audience] don't want to irk their readers; they don't want to challenge their readers; they want to produce exactly what their reader expects them to produce. I'm not like that. I want to make sense of things, to understand the world, but my work is never really instructional. I have no wisdom to impart or give, so I think my dream readers would be people who just use the book as an excuse to get into their own cycle of thought. [6]

Banerjee situates his writing in opposition to the ACK, the point of difference being, his writing, unlike ACK, does not impose views on his audience, it makes them think for themselves—his writing induces in the reader an attitude of self-scrutiny.

Banerjee's first novel *Corridor* revolves around the lives of six male characters five of whom are intellectually inclined and are new age and non-aggressive characters (very different from the uber-masculine, aggressive, self-confident traditional male figures of the ACK books). Even though their circumstances are distinct, in their responses and attitude they appear to be interchangeable. One can imagine them as one solitary, tempered, human being roaming the city, assuming different avatars. Jehangir Rangoonwala comes to know the essence of life early: "it all comes down to chewing your food well" [7]. His story ends there as he has come of age and he spends the rest of his days (and space in the text) selling books and dispensing wisdom at a roadside stall in Connaught Place. Bhriugu, the homodiegetic narrator of the book, breaks up with his girlfriend and the last panel of the text, on which he has drawn an image of her,

bespeaks his attachment to her. The reader is unable to either apprehend or comprehend Rangoonwala's epiphany or Bhriгу's attachment through the text—the basis of Rangoonwala's search for meaning and the experiences or understanding that would lead to his epiphany, and Bhriгу's bond with his girlfriend that would explain the frustration he speaks of are missing from the narrative even as the narrative leads the reader to believe they understand.

In the more complex *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* one strand of the novel depicts the narrator's relationship with his girlfriend Bipasha with whom he breaks up at the beginning of the book. The only insight into the relationship offered in the novel is an extended sex scene portraying his anxiety, which is quelled by the ringing of the phone that informs him of his grandfather's demise. Thus ends the sexual encounter. The girlfriend who has found new love, breaks up with him and while he does not say this to her, the relationship ends mutually. Even though the relationship does not appear to be more than a superfluous affair, the narrator insists that London has become associated with her and their six-month old relationship. He returns to Calcutta seven months after his grandfather's demise and his break-up to claim among other things his grandfather's book. Looking for the book that has been given away to an unknown taker takes up the major portion of Banerjee's book. Once the book is found the novel abruptly ends in a five-page long chapter about his broken relationship. It is titled "The Bipasha Factor". "At the end of a relationship there is at least a common recipe . . . Which lingers long after the person herself has disappeared from memory" [8]: this is the last line of the book. This line creates the appearance of offering some understanding of the relationship until critical distancing renders the words void because his relationship with his girlfriend is missing from the novel.

Even though Banerjee's novels have a light mocking tone, the central characters are to be taken seriously—their depiction is not mock-heroic. One of the ways in which the characters are lent weight and dignity is through attributing to them or associating them with aphoristic statements. *Corridor* ends with Rangoonwala's statement: "People are like onions, baba" that Bhrigu the narrator completes: "They have layers and layers. But who will know? Who has the time?" [7]. What these layers are is unclear, because the characters are flat. The question of time is also new—the text does not address it at all. Another such weighty line tucked into the folds of the text is: "Verse, fame and beauty are intense indeed. But Death intenser—Death is Life's high meed" [7]. This is the text's introduction to Prof. DVD, the forensic science doctor, who carries upon himself the smell of death. There is no discourse around death, however, in relation to the professor or elsewhere. It is merely the smell of the dead—a physiological aspect of the dead body that the text is concerned with. What engages the reader are these pithy statements and other such external trappings in which a limp narrative is ensconced. Shintu, a character who has tried various ways to understand and improve his sexual performance, eventually manages to attain his desired sexual prowess with the aid of "sande ka tel" procured from a hakim only to realize one day that he had been fleeced and his revived performance has resulted from his newly acquired self-assurance. "Shintu lamented the loss of a thousand rupees. Not realising the great discovery he's made:—sex is in the mind silly" [7]. While this might be as true a statement about sex as any, the narrative offers it axiomatically rather than as a truth the narrative and through it the reader has realised with Shintu.

One of the characteristics of texts produced in the age of multinational capitalism identified by Frederic Jameson is the waning of affect in the text: "This is not

to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings—which it may be better and more accurate, following J.-F. Lyotard, to call “intensities”—are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria” [9]. The sentimental endings of Banerjee’s novels, a result of the absence of real emotional journeys that lead up to them, provide to the reader the kind of thrill or euphoria generated by present day journalism, in which the timing (placement in the case of Banerjee’s texts), manner of presentation (urbane graphics in this case), the hyped rhetoric (of the sort mentioned above), the attractiveness of the presenters (the urbane, languid characters of the novels) draw attention away from the thing being presented, giving the viewer a “high”, the sort one gets from an addictive substance.

Banerjee’s narratives indulge their characters, themselves and their author. Bhrigu, the narrator, like the author is a graphic artist. *Corridor* begins with Bhrigu roaming the streets of Delhi in search of a book. He reveals his obsessions to the reader: for collecting objects like books, LPs, pens, cameras—collector’s versions of these items [7]. And then speaks of Jean Baudrillard’s explanation of this death-like endeavour. This is a possible moment of self-reflection in the book. But just like the objects Bhrigu cherishes and preserves over-zealously he refuses to ever suspend control of his narrative. The text ends with an image of Kali, his girlfriend, with whom he has broken up. It is supposed to reveal the narrator Bhrigu’s attachment / feelings / longing for his girlfriend. The moment becomes sentimental because it is unaccompanied by realisation / understanding / acceptance / struggle to accept the situation. Kali’s image becomes an object signifying his emotions that replaces the narrative of his relationship. The narrative does not move in this moment—it remains frozen in the image of Kali suggesting nothing. It is an obsessive image

that takes the reader back to the objects mentioned earlier in the book that Bhrigu is obsessed with. "Archives are everywhere in the contemporary graphic novel, [. . .]—archives of the forgotten artifacts and ephemera of American popular culture, items that were never meant to be collected. [. . .] And yet, these archives are far from the random gleanings of the packrat or hoarder," says Jared Gardner [10]. Archiving is a way of interrupting the rapid flow of time. Walter Benjamin (says Gardner) "called for a new way of writing to replace the purely textual, one that would utilize the graphic energy of advertising to more accurately capture the present that was, in modernity, already past at the very moment of its articulation" [10]. Motion pictures did not provide space for reflection, especially for the re-encounter with the present / past [10]. Gardner says that Benjamin, without realising it, was speaking of the graphic novel, when he called for a new form for depicting the changing relation of the present with the past. In response to the overstimulation of contemporary living, an existence in which most of what happens in the world goes unnoticed, "comics do open up (inevitably and necessarily) a space for the reader to pause, between the panels, and make meaning out of what she sees and reads" [10]. One danger of archiving, however, is that the present can become paralyzed by the past. Graphic novelist Ben Katchor says that it is the responsibility of the comic's creator to put the tension between word and image to productive use (qtd. in Gardner) such that it captures the uneasy relationship between past and present, creator and reader, text and image.

This archival turn in the graphic novel is reflected in the anti-narrative propensity of Banerjee's writing. Rangoonwala's languor, Bhrigu's preoccupation with objects and a woman he does not appear to have been deeply involved with, *Barn Owl's* narrator whose indulgence in Calcutta history goes hand in hand with his search for his grandfather's book reflect an

attitude antithetical to the pace and preoccupations of the modern world. The photographs of Calcutta's old streets in *Barn Owl's*, of decaying old buildings, the references to road side stalls, street dogs, street smells, the use of film posters and other old posters in *Corridor* emphasise the need to deal with the past. Gardner argues that comics capture the excess that our times produce that cannot be captured by linear cause-effect narrative but can be absorbed by the archival drive of the comic [10].

Banerjee's own archive of images of a world that is being forgotten and the collector tendencies of the narrators of both books close the gap between the narrators and their author. Both narrators are unable to dissociate themselves from relationships that were devoid of emotional engagement to begin with. Quite like their obsession with objects of the past world, they are obsessed with their relationships. The almost unqualified identification between author and narrator results in the absence of critical commentary in the text. Despite the invocation of Baudrillard's idea of the death-like obsession with objects in a consumer society, the text itself is unable to respond to these ideas self-reflexively. Hence the irony does not penetrate the surface of his text, becoming, as with the obsession with photographs of the past, an obsession with irony, an image of it. Jameson considers the age of multinational capital as the purest stage of capitalism in which capitalism overtakes previously uncharted territories like agriculture and the unconscious and which sees the rise of the media and the advertising industry [9]. The boundary between art and commerce completely collapses in this age, and thus art which is no more a product of a unique individual sensibility but is entirely dictated by commerce loses its distinction and cannot therefore generate in the reader the ironic distance than can be generated by a work that is created by a singular, distinct personality.

In the *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*, one of the few series of panels that exploit the possibility of an interesting relation between text and image are found in chapter five, "Milk of Magnesia" [8]. The narrator's grandfather is a worshipper of the hilsa fish. The grandfather is on his way home from the fish market where he has purchased a hilsa. While the text in the panels explains the Bengali association with the hilsa, the images depict the grandfather protecting a couple of women from motorcycle riding eve-teasers by hurling a hilsa at them. From time-to-time the text and the image come together in this episode. For instance the text in the panel in which the eve teasers are lunging at the women who shirk in response reads: "However, a restaurant in Calcutta has devised a way of preparing boneless hilsa. A revolutionary concept, this boneless hilsa" [8]. Just the way there is nothing hilsa about a boneless hilsa, there is nothing manly about eve-teasing. This is the one time in the book that chivalry has been shown—whether it is the chivalry of the grandfather, of the older generation, of the more traditional person, of the intellectual, of the Bengali community—the book does not clarify. And the episode therefore "sink(s) to the level of sheer decoration" [9]. In and of itself these panels are extremely engaging, both at the level of story and storytelling; they do not, however, indicate what the reader must take away from them. The ironic commentary on manliness or bonelessness thus turns into an unironic episode directing the reader towards indulging its own potential to induce laughter.

In both *Corridor* and the *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* kernels of narratives replace actual narratives. The narratives hold the reader's fancy because of the artwork (a motley of black and white sketches, coloured panels, photographs, kitschy popular culture images, and photographs overlaid with penwork), the newness of the form and the satirical take on otherwise sacrosanct subjects like history, masculinity,

sexuality . . . (but only in comic books; Rushdie's irreverence predates Banerjee's by over two decades). At the level of narrative the reader is not moved. If a narrative has to truly affect the way a reader looks at the world, in that, if a story has to sensitize the reader, the reader needs to be offered experience, they need to be emotionally affected. The reader neither experiences the upheavals in the psyches of the characters in *Corridor* nor in *Wondrous Capers*. Satirical comments replace experience—satire gives the reader a high because the mockery is directed at someone else. But if satire has to be effective, the author needs to offer a worldview in which there are solutions to problems or an image of a world in which the author truly believes. This is not available in Banerjee's works. While Banerjee's books are tellingly postmodern in their depthlessness, in their waning affect and the absence of ironic distance, the archival thrust of his narrative overshadows the unconscious longing in his writing towards establishing a cause-effect relationship. There is a clear tension between a longing for form and the free-floating nature of the episodes, text and images in Banerjee's books.

This is also where the Indianness of the text comes into question. While it is difficult to say what is Indian and what is not post centuries of colonial rule and more recently because of rampant globalisation, differences in cultures do exist. A. K. Ramanujan says that even though modernity has reduced India's context-sensitivity, India remains a heavily context-sensitive society and the dream in such a society is to become context-free. Traditionally and even to this day freedom from context is aspired through the attainment of *moksha* or salvation, through *bhakti* or devotion, through *rasa* or the essence in aesthetics, through *sanyasa* or the renunciation of the material world, and through *sphota* or an explosion in semantics [2]. Banerjee's satire does not aspire to attain any kind of freedom from the world at which it is aimed. Even when characters attain what they

have striven to attain, like for example when Shintu in *Corridor* realises that his sexual ability is linked to his self-assurance and is not dependent upon heeding the advice of hakims, the narrative offers no relief. This realisation is glossed over as Shintu is shown to be disgruntled afresh. While the possibility of freedom from context does not shape the narrative's worldview, even the works themselves do not correspond to the idea of a narrative essence or *rasa* that can be experienced by the reader through the emotion that the text arouses in them. Far from affording freedom or movement or emotional release the texts leave the reader benumbed with an overdose of congealed verbal and visual images.

Most graphic novels create, in Speigelman's words, hermetic worlds that cannot be penetrated, largely because they are hollow [12]. The texts are nothing except themselves, they offer no perspective on the world they represent. Banerjee's texts disallow the reader to participate in its world because its world is all surface, no depth. While the hip visuals and pithy narration and dialogue that the graphic form lends itself to, can generate new and complex meaning they can also be used consciously or unconsciously to consume the reader such that they are unable to pay attention to the half-baked and in a lot of cases, absent narratives.

The comic is a complex narrative form that combines the verbal and the visual. In the words of Hillary Chute:

Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn't blend the visual and the verbal or use one simply to illustrate the other but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning. [11]

In my own experience of reading comics I find myself alternately utterly absorbed by the visuals or

sidestepping the visuals to focus on the verbal flow of the narrative. Processing the two together seldom if ever happens. In a graphic narrative in which one is always going back and forth for what one has missed of one or the other of its strands—that is the visual or verbal—even a weak narrative may make the cut because in grappling with the demands of reading the text the reader might overlook the actual quality of the text. Comics are replete with spatial and temporal gaps and overlaps further making the reading process nonlinear and demanding. On the one hand these gaps and this nonlinear reading gives the reader the chance to pause and think, creates space for reflection; on the other if the gaps are too wide, they distract and dissociate the reader from developing a personal response to the text, trapping them in the text's complexity. If the decoding of the text becomes laborious, it is likely to become the end of reading as it will leave little energy to comprehend what has been read and even less to demand that the text lends its complexity meaning. The reader, in such a case, will not be able to distance themselves from the text.

In fact, when character after character in a book expresses the same thought, or is made of the same material, it is difficult to question them. One of the reasons for Banerjee's success is that his work emerged at an opportune moment giving to youngsters (especially) a much needed break from the tone, sensibilities and milieu of the earlier books that urban youth could no more identify with. One of Banerjee's interviewers, Ratik Asokan, explains why he and his schoolgoing mates became fans of *Corridor*:

Though rooted in the local textures of Delhi street life, *Corridor* was driven by an assured, cosmopolitan sensibility. Banerjee made it his business to gleefully make collide east and west, culture and kitsch, high and low—to make Baudrillard wash himself with the local Liril soap. His early aesthetic, in which characters drawn in a sparse western comic

style are often superimposed on billboards and street photographs of Delhi, brilliantly mimicked the mentality of post-colonial urbanites who straddled different cultures. [6]

Banerjee's books gave to his young readers an image of themselves. And this image was reinforced in every panel of *Corridor* through every character. To an audience hungry for comics populated by people like themselves, *Corridor* filled a gap. Much in the manner of adolescents both the characters and their author have little sense of the world beyond the obsessions and engagements of the characters. For instance, Shintu's obsession with his manhood, Rangoonwala's with his wisdom, Brigu's with his relationship and his possessions, and in *Barn Owl's* the narrator's obsession with *his* relationship are given heroic proportions in a faux ironic manner. The ACK books lend epic proportions to mythical and legendary characters in whose actions the books express belief. Banerjee's narrative is largely caught between satirising everything and attempting to express belief through certain characters. It is unclear what Banerjee finds alluring about his characters—their non-aggression, their world weariness, their obsession with objects, their intellectual leaning. In the absence of an overarching belief system within which these characteristics operate they lose force or meaning.

The cartoonish depictions of characters in comics erases the gap between reader and character heightening the appeal of comics and reducing the possibility of maintaining critical distance from the characters and the worlds they inhabit. When we see a realistic photo or image we see another; but when we see a cartoon we see ourselves [13]. "We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it" [13]. When such is the association with characters in a story, maintaining distance from the characters becomes difficult. Identifying with youthful, self-indulgent, world-weary characters, of the sort found in Banerjee's novel is especially attractive to young readers and in

our times and to urban readers generally. The ACK books are openly didactic, telling their audience what to do and think. On their part, Banerjee's novels are not imposing; they however generate in the reader the self-obsessive tendencies of the characters, and whatever the characters do, becomes the norm. The reader does not have adequate scope to enter either type of narrative. However, whereas ACK will generate belief in the ideas it upholds in the reader, Banerjee's audience is likely to believe they believe in something, even as they do not.

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Keywords:

Bengal comics,
stylistics,
conversation
mechanics,
children's
literature

Stylistics of Indian Comic Series: A Select Study of Narayan Debnath's Comic Strips*

Rima Namhata

arimanamhata@gmail.com

Jaipuria Institute of Management, Jaipur, Business
Administration, India

ABSTRACT

Indian Comic strips especially from the regional languages have quite been disregarded in the academia. This paper proposes to study the stylistics aspect of the comic strips from Bengal especially written by Narayan Debnath, who is the recipient of Sahitya Academi for Children's literature; and how this printed visual medium rose to popularity. This article aims to identify the unique stylistics and formal aspects of Indian Comic tradition from Bengal. It also aims to study the popularity markers through the stylistics aspect of Narayan Debnath's three comic strips that have kept audience imagination alive for more than 5 decades. The methodology adopted for the first objective is a systematic literature review with inclusion and exclusion criteria. The second objective has been addressed by identifying the stylistics through close reading of the texts and systematic review of secondary literature. Only those stylistics were considered that were prominent and integral across the literature and the texts. Further, a matrix has been designed to map the identified stylistics. A couple of implications show that this study may help the post-Millennials or the GenZ to

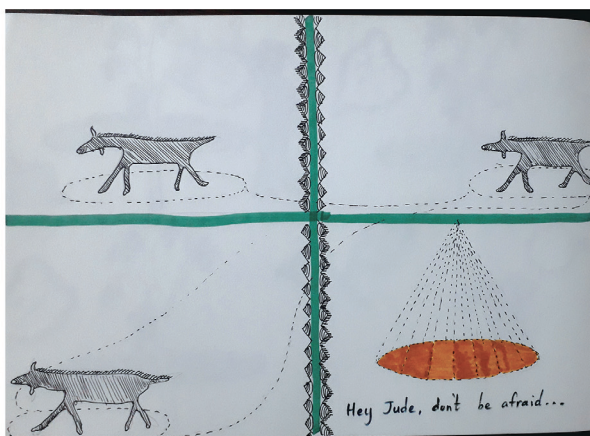
realise the beauty and loyalty of reading, and shape the imagination prowess of youngsters, apply intelligent humour in life, develop creativity in writing style and even develop conversation mechanisms. Also, making today's generation read and chisel fertile imagination for the digital natives remains a challenge. However, this age-old art form can be employed as an academic endeavour and become part of children's regular reading.

*The author has requested not to publish the full paper

ComIN Workshop: **Seeking a Visual Style**

Workshop instructor : **Subir Dey**

A conference without the practice of actual comic making would feel incomplete. Since the theme of the ComIN is grounded on Indian Comics hence a workshop titled Seeking a Visual Style is organised. The objective of the workshop is to identify, analyse and create a style of making comics that emits our cultural aroma. The workshop discussed identifying and analysing different folk art styles that are embedded in Indian graphic traditions. The wide visual styles display authentic graphic traditions that are unique to India. In recent times, some graphic novels specially Bhimayana and Sita's Ramayana have exhibited the power of folk art styles in a graphic format. Drawing inspiration from the rootedness of the folk art practices the participants created their interpretation of themselves in the form of self-portraits and a 4 panel comics strip. The following pages display some of the submissions from the participants.

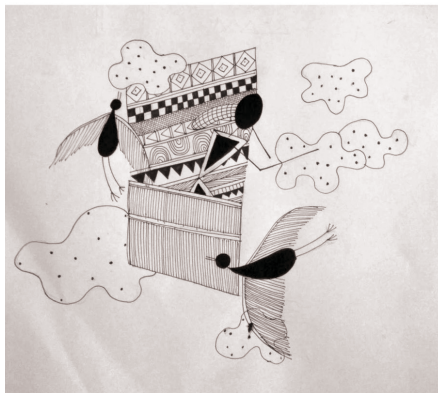


Amishal Modi

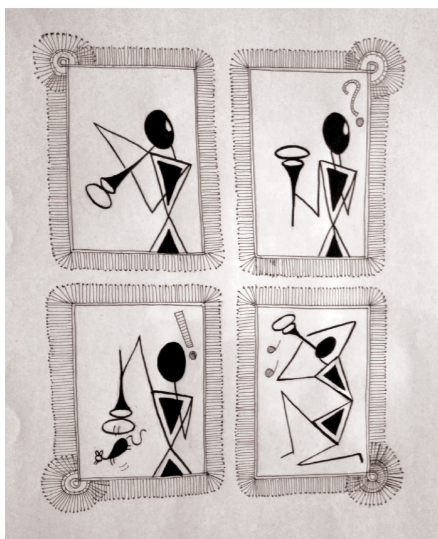


Sonny Mishra

Self Potrait



Short strip



Janhavi Deshmukh



Mahindra Prashad Tudu

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ComIN

International Conference
on Indian Comics

Conference Proceedings
ISBN: 978-93-5419-740-6

Department of Design
Indian Institute of Technology Delhi
Hauz Khas, New Delhi- 110016

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