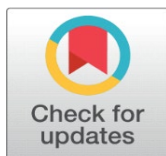


INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND MODERNITY: MILIEU OF INDIAN COMICS AND SUPERHEROES

Dr. Sambuddha Jash ¹

¹ Guest Faculty, Department of Applied Sciences, Humanities and Management, NIT Delhi, India



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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to trace the genesis of Indian comics and the superheroes portrayed in them as a site of serious critical thought. The composition of the initial crop of Indian comics is intricately connected to the study of traditional Indian mythology and its relevance to the eulogization of heroic ideals and spirit. It is deeply entrenched into the various genealogies of change that has been catalysing our own Indian knowledge systems. This has been done by providing a brief history of the development of Indian comics which at its initial stages was mostly a derivation of its western counterparts. Through an analysis of Amar Chitra Katha and the Raj Comics, I have tried to delve deeper into the construction of the 'Indian Superhero' and it being the point of departure from popular superheroes like Superman, Batman and others. The analytical framework of the paper is the fact that the advent of the Indian Superhero was not only a necessity of the Indian comics' readership market but also a metaphorical moment that shares tangential relationship with the political changes and economic liberalization.

Keywords: Knowledge Systems, Comics, Indian Superheroes, Amar Chitra Katha, Raj Comics, Modernity

1. INTRODUCTION

The growth and distribution of comics in India is more recent than its European, American and Japanese counterparts. Despite the publication of about 100 million copies a year, comics in India for a very long time had largely been fed by American imports, with a later addition of regional variants. One of the earliest attempts being the comics' magazine *Chandamama*, the Indian comics' culture was popularized on a grand scale by Anant Pai's *Amar Chitra Katha* series, the objective of which was to transmit to children the great stories of historical figures and of those in religious texts of the Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains and Christians. But unlike in Japan, where comics were quickly received as a potentially mature medium, comics' readership in India remained confined to children, and the content was largely seen as non-serious and hence not worthy of critical scrutiny.

Within this rubric of growth in comics' culture of India, my paper attempts to interrogate the spatiality of comics as cultural products in a globalised world with particular reference to the *Raj Comics* series. This attempt also leads me to an analytical point further that how the neo-liberal imagination of Indians had shaped the distinctive form of the 'Indian Superhero', since this superhero is imagined to be born for the resurrection of Indians from the turmoil that was dominant in contemporary India. Raja Pocket Books, that later gained a wider popularity as Raj Comics, was established in the mid-1980s with an objective mission of producing the 'Indian Superhero' with its creators having the characters of Indrajal Comics in mind who were mostly of foreign import. In their quest for an Indian superhero they started

working on the idea of an Indian Spiderman, bringing in global parameters as the Indian readers had been fed for a long time with specific cultural imports. The link between globalization and the modern can be well explained by the venture of Raj Comics whose work of imagination is neither purely emancipatory nor is entirely disciplined, instead it is a space of contestation in which individuals (here the producers of Indian comics) and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern.

With the progression of globalization, there have been shifts in key relations like that between producers and consumers and also a blurring of lines between temporary locales and imaginary national attachments. With the gradual withering away of the Nehruvian dream of establishing a fragile abstraction known as the 'nation' which aimed at producing citizens devoid of any form of 'primordial loyalties' and only following ideals of nationalism that were thought fit by the Nehru camp, and with the consequent flourishing of scopes in free trade market, the idea of 'belonging' changed drastically. In the neo-liberal era of the 1980s in India, modernity now seemed to be more practical and less disciplinary than it used to be in the fifties and sixties, when it was mostly experienced through the realization of propagandas that were devised by the leaders of newly independent nation states like Nehru. Arjun Appadurai finely observes this change as he says 'The mega rhetoric of developmental modernization like economic growth, agribusiness, schooling, and militarization in many countries is still with us. But it is often punctuated, interrogated, and domesticated by the micro narratives of film, television, music and other expressive forms which allow modernity to be rewritten more as vernacular globalization.'¹ Raj Comics in this context holds a greater significance as the concept of vernacular or indigenous globalization is enacted under their aegis. Taking upon the 'universal' superhero iconography, they grafted it into the Indian psychic topography with certain associations with Indian mythology that made them famous in the Hindi pulp fiction world. Like its Western counterpart DC Comics, Raj Comics is organized around characters like Nagraj, Doga, Parmanu, Super Commando Dhruv, Bheriya, Inspector Steel, with some of them being mutated versions of American superheroes as well.

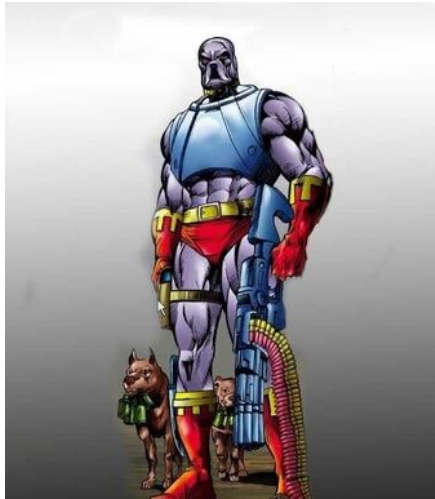
For instance Nagraj, or the Serpent Lord is arguably the first Indian superhero, and its inception into the plethora of comics is deeply rooted in Indian mythology. Nagraj is believed to have been inspired by the mythological *Ichchhadhari Nag* or the shape shifting snakes, known historically as *Vishmanushya* (venomous human), who's stories create a rich blend of mythology, fantasy, magic, and science fiction. Nagraj's fans believe that, over time, Nagraj's comics have developed a Snake Mythology of its own, which is unique to the popular Indian beliefs about snakes that are prevalent among the masses. Nagraj was initially conceived as a crusader against international terrorism who operates from the fictional city of Mahanagar, and uses snake venom as his weapon for the destruction of the evil. The 'Naag' as a component of Indian myth has long been appropriated by the electronic media and well articulated with varied potentials.



(Nagraj as illustrated in Raj Comics)

¹ Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large*. Oxford University Press p. 37

The Raj Comics characters are all common people who by some divine, iconographic or scientific intervention gain the status of superheroes. Gerard Jones in his book *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*, while talking about American superheroes points out the fact that Superman as an American comics star had undergone several rounds of representational variations, which Jones felt that had largely happened due to the changing impulse of the American society. During the 1930s Superman was possessed with an angry streak but as the world gradually embraces him as the superhero he becomes the 'Nice guy Mr. Superman'. Comics heroes in India too have witnessed changes as Phantom later moves out of the jungle and is now equipped with all forms of modern gadgetry, whereas the very creation the superheroes of Raj Comics were imagined to produce competent fighters against the new challenges that had raged India during the turbulent 1980s. A vital question arises here: What makes America such a suitable destination of cultural import when during the same time comics' industry in Japan was a fast growing economy? The answer probably lies in the changes in American economy, which from a cultural point of view had become a huge free trade zone, full of ideas, technologies and representational idioms that the rest of the world found fascinating. This free trade zone had hence given scope of growth for market economics and even civil society politics. The Indian comics flourished at such a time and with post liberalization the comics' industry tended to be more inwardly drawn. Culture offers a route to frame India's past and present while also staking claims for the Indianess of their plots and narrative. Comics' book producers in India paid particular attention to culture. To substantiate their cultural claims in comics, Indian publishing houses frequently used to inform readers of presence of a historian or cultural expert among their staff, who would ensure the accuracy of the research for their narratives. The producers of Raj Comics who were avid readers of *Indrajal* and *Amar Chitra Katha* series played on this cultural trope and introduced something like Naagraj that epitomised their dream of the Indian superhero who was already a part of the mythic past. The journey after the advent of Naagraj seems to be much influenced by the ethics of heterogeneity, and through characters like Tiranga, Dhruv and Doga there has been a constant move towards projecting characteristic patriotic myths that have the potentiality of transforming cosmopolitan values into a national ideal. Also what is noteworthy here is, the idea of 'responsibility'; which is distinct in the superheroes of Raj Comics. If we look at the illustration of the superhero Doga, it is evident that the creators have tried to create an Indian variant, at times even an amalgam, drawn from the western imagination of the superhero particularly in relation to his gears and attire – signalling towards an initiative of a creative yet hybrid entity:



(Doga as illustrated in Raj Comics)

As discussed in a particular comic strip where there is an ongoing debate between Naagraj and Tiranga, they talk about their relationship with law. Tiranga only gets hold of the villains and transfer them to the police but Naagraj himself executes as he feels that the villains would somehow be bailed out and again create problems by harming the public. Naagraj projects himself to be the law whereas most other heroes consider themselves as custodians of law. Amitav Kumar in his *Raj Comics for the Hard Headed* too talks about the kinds of criminals and tasks being divided among the superheroes. By talking of 'Jurisdiction', he clarifies that when there are alien threats to society; Naagraj comes for the rescue, whereas Doga deals with those cases that happen within the country. This division of tasks is hardly visible in other comics' form, who imagine superheroes to be above all worldly limitations.

The pertinent question that arises here is that how post national politics like that of the 1980s in India, becomes the producer of a cultural fact like the comics? With all wider claims of globalization and free market economy, it is beyond doubt that the covert appeal of comics is most powerful when its political sense is expressed in cultural forms. The concept of Cosmopolitanism is important in this respect as it projects a theory of world government and corresponding citizenship; it in turn also constructs political utopias in guise of the aesthetic, so that it often can play with what on probing emerges as an economic role. In the post national milieu of India, the *Matribhumi* series of the Doga comics deserves some critical thought. In a diasporic world where the issue of mass migration has been the cause of much anxiety, Doga operates in a space where post national forces are pushing out groups in acts of 'ethnic cleansing' intended to produce the very people whose pre – existence the nation was supposed to ratify. The *Matribhumi* series is very aptly contextualised here as the issue of Maharashtra composing only of the *Marathi Manush* and that of the Gorkhaland agitation is given a sort of exclusive nationalist colour by their respective leadership, with the producers taking upon the task of managing evils through the medium of comics. It can further be observed that within a world system, there are disparities in national power that exists, there are structures that give some chance to local or indigenous people to draw a line between what is theirs and what lies beyond that, what is open to the outside and what is sheltered from it. The neo liberal imagination that gained momentum after the eclipse of the nationalist ideals in India had become a site of free ideas due to the fast-encroaching globalisation and also a kind of indigenous process of moulding the past in the globalised form.

Brennan in his *Cosmopolitanism and Internationalism* notes 'Administratively, nations today are discrete units for the organization of profit – making, resource extraction and the perpetuation of unequal social relations. They allow the state to manage the subalterns and direct subalterns to petition the state, with a rhetoric of the popular that appeals to a shared cultural identity'. The question that arises here is that: does this 'rhetoric of the popular' appealing to a 'shared cultural identity' give birth to the Indian superhero with the influx of Modernity? With the effacement of boundaries between high culture and what is known as the popular culture in the postmodern era could there be emerging forms of mobility in the arena of cultural production? The electronic mediation into mass culture and production of TV series speaks of this reach of the global parameters into culture. With the creation of diasporic public sphere in India and its subsequent displacements the fantasy of state building no longer holds on. The problems of political rights, ethnic violence, and communal riots could have been a factor behind the birth of the superhero but the way in which capitalism is instrumentalised in the somewhat uneven economies of the post national nation states like India cannot be done away with since comics too are part of this cultural setup in the capitalist market. Hence we have with us a world recreated in the image of America as a 'universal nation' – hegemonising through popular culture, fashion and the internet.

Since the central debate of the present century has been over grappling the 'culture concept' that has largely been a factor for human belonging, it can be interesting to interrogate whether the variety of the Indian superhero is part of the indigenous culture or are there implications that like all spheres of public communication, economic globalization here too has completely or at least partially subsumed the cultural, causing the transcendence of two previously distinct spheres. The ever-changing landscape of comics and its study in India has definitely formulated paradigmatic changes, with comics no longer being a children centric genre but has made inroads into serious debates of narratology and critical enquiry.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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