



WEBCOMICS IN INDIA: FORM AND FUNCTION

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ABSTRACT

Underground Comix, otherwise seen as anti-mainstream comics, was a rage during the 1960s and 70s in the United States and the United Kingdom. What started off as pornographic comics (Tijuana Bibles) made by anonymous artists in the late 1920s and 1940s featuring characters from mainstream comics, slowly evolved into a huge phenomena countering culture and its practices. Thanks to Fredric Wertham, who rose to fame with his Seduction of the Innocent, the birth of Underground Comix was around the corner. The mainstream comic industry fearing public backlash, financial loss, and dip in popularity due to Fredric Wertham's Seduction of the Innocent, brought Comics Code Authority in 1954, imposing self-censorship on its comics. Underground Comix came to the forefront at that time, and it was all that mainstream comics were not. This Underground Comix, right from its very origin, has served different purposes, has catered to most types of audiences, touching upon various subjects that the mainstream comic industry shied away from. It was the go-to form for artists to take a dig and be critical of various issues and practices. With this as the context, this article contends that webcomics in India—similar to the Underground Comix of the US and the UK—came into being due to the ennui of mainstream comics, especially Amar Chitra Katha (ACK). It perceives Indian webcomics as a version of Underground Comix, and brings forth the form and function of Indian webcomics. It also discusses the role of internet and social media platforms in popularizing webcomics in India.

KEYWORDS: *underground comix, webcomics, counter-mainstream, social media, internet*

Webcomics in India seems to be a by-product of the very famous Amar Chitra Katha which has ruled the Indian comic industry from 1967, the year of its inception. One of the main reasons for its success is, it “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” (Mehta, 2010). Its philosophy was that “comics must tell what is pleasant and avoid what is unpleasant” (Pritchett, 2016). This mainstream orthodoxy shown by the comic publishers in general and Amar Chitra Katha in particular, seems to have



paved the way for fresh unrestricted content. One of the reasons for calling Amar Chitra Katha the triggering factor for the birth of webcomics in India is, it has reached a place no mainstream publisher has ever reached in India, having “around four hundred titles in over twenty languages” (Mehta, 2010). The reach it has had, making its presence felt by bringing out its work in every Indian regional language possible is a phenomenal feat, through which it has become a household name. “When ACK came into existence in 1967, they were an instant game changer. In the 53 years since, they’ve published over 400 comics across multiple languages, sold over a 100 million copies till date, and have cultivated generations of comic readers” (Salamander, 2020). It is not that the other comic book publishers did not stand a chance, publishers like Diamond Comics, Raj Comics, Lion-muthu Comics, Nila comics were doing great business translating comics from around the world to regional languages in India, and were also coming out occasionally with characters developed in house. But, it was Amar Chitra Katha that “forced the comic industry to conceive and create comic characters that were uniquely Indian instead of merely translating comics from abroad” (Salamander, 2020).

Amar Chitra Katha deserves a standing ovation for putting the Indian comic industry on the world map, and for introducing India to the world, but, it “remained dominated by mythological figures and superheroes even through the 1980s,” (Ghosh, 2016) whereas, “on the other side of the globe, change was afoot.” (Ghosh, 2016). This approach by the Indian Comic Industry giant Amar Chitra Katha might well be due to its aim, the aim “to educate the children and the youth of the country about their rich heritage and their traditional narratives. Although this ensured liberation from the strong influence of colonialism on the nation’s graphic narratives, it reinforced some of the age-old problems of Indian society. One of them is the issue of representation of the marginalized, particularly the portrayal of women” (Nayek, 2020). This strategy—to educate youth of their country’s heritage and tradition—did pay off and worked wonders for Amar Chitra Katha, as “Mythology and folklore are classic comics topics,” and “have neat ideas of good and bad, and have morals. They are not messy or complicated like real life. The same goes for superhero books. Maybe we like clear-cut”, says Banerjee (Ghosh, 2016).

With Amar Chitra Katha ruling the roost by using Mythology and Folklore to their advantage, many authors wanted to experiment, to go far away from the route taken by Amar Chitra Katha. “Several authors and artists explicitly work to establish an alternative or independent comics culture that is focused on creators, their craft, and the communities that form around them. In particular, Orijit Sen of the Pao Collective in Delhi, Vidyun Sabhaney of Captain Bijli Comics in Delhi, and Pratheek Thomas of Studio Kokaachi in Cochin are working to develop more independent and community focused platforms for their own and others’ work” (Stoll, 2016). They believe “that the roots of comics culture lie in the broader



visual culture of India, whose traditional visual storytelling primes readers for critical engagement with visual narratives. This understanding allows them to push for a greater awareness of the comics medium as an international form with the potential for great variation beyond corporate production” (Stoll, 2016).

With that being the case, there is almost an art revolution around the corner, with artists moving away from the ever-loved and much celebrated Mythology and Gods as superheroes. The trend now is strikingly similar to that of the “the small, self-published comics that arose from the American underground comix of the 1960s and 1970s, the focus is on more diverse, emotionally realistic, and expressionistic storytelling” (Stoll, 2016). New vistas have opened up as “Companies like Liquid Comics (formerly Virgin Comics) and Vimanika Comics share a focus on reinterpreting epic narratives and developing profitable film, television, video game, and other projects” (Stoll, 2016). It is not just a mad rush by companies, it is a well thought out move by the big players of the comic industry, they realise the impact of visuals and visual storytelling, the revenue that can be made, as visuals “can be much more visceral and direct as compared to prose; not to forget they also have great recall value,” says Kuriyan (Ghosh, 2016). But, big comic book players do not seem to support all types of content, as artists, “working on non-fiction and contemporary issues have no choice but to operate as single entities. This can be a double-edged sword” (Ghosh, 2016). Working on novel concepts may well be something that “makes their work stand apart, but it is also what makes it more difficult to keep up with the organised industry that produces comics on mythology on such a large scale,” says Kuriyan (Ghosh, 2016).

Nevertheless, it is a great sign, as visual narrative “in India is slowly expanding to include more political commentary, especially with web comics like Royal Existentialists and Crocodile in Water, Tiger on Land, and now, Rashtraman. Many newspapers have begun to carry short graphic-novel-style strips within their pages, the latest being the revival of Manjula Padmanabhan’s Suki – the strip that pioneered feminist comics in India” (Ghosh, 2016). Sarnath Banerjee, author of *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (2007), feels many visual artists from India are “more original than their Western contemporaries,” (Ghosh, 2016) narrating stories that stay put in India. By just focusing on issues that plague the society, visual narratives, especially graphic novels, are growing too serious, about which graphic novelist Sumit Kumar says, “I see gender neutral, hyper sensitive, black frames. Kuch serious conflict type issue + grayscale + in English + thoda samajh nahi aaya = a great graphic novel? This perception is getting tiring” (Ghosh, 2016). This is where webcomics chip in, with its courage to capture the wrongs and the wrongdoers in its panels, no hesitation whatsoever to laugh at silly stuff, going against the government and its policies at times, and always vocal about artistic freedom. Now, it will be



worthwhile here to explore a few of the webcomics that come out of India, to discuss their form and function.

Royal Existentials

The about section of Royal Existentials reads, “a weekly webcomic series that uses Indian vintage art and imagery to tell stories of historical (and contemporary) angst”. While Aarhi Parthasarathy writes concepts, her colleague in the studio, Chaitanya Krishnan, illustrates, animates and works on the layouts. The panels employed in the comic strip make use of random Mughal miniature paintings, very similar to David Malki’s *Wondermark*, who uses 19th Century Victorian illustrations as the panels in his webcomic.

Aarhi Parthasarathy's social commentary in Royal Existentials seems very much incidental. “It started out as a way to just have fun with images,” says Aarhi (Narayanan, 2014). “After the first three, I suddenly realised that this is becoming very social, very feminist,” she further adds (Narayanan, 2014). While Mughal miniature paintings provide a sneak peek into the society, its culture and customs during 16th and 18th centuries, “this comic series presents a fun mirror to 21st century preoccupations,” says Aarhi (Kohli, 2014). Aarhi says that David Malki’s *Wondermark* gave her the “idea of doing something similar in the Indian context,” (Kohli, 2014). She carefully chooses “images with potentially interesting scenario”, images “that will arouse curiosity as well as engage readers,” says Aarhi (Kohli, 2014). The reason for Aarhi Parthasarathy to come up with Royal Existentialists is that she “was deeply affected by what was happening in politics and by various social issues, and made the decision to contrast the opulent imagery of miniature painting with social and political writing” (Bangera, 2016).

Adarsh Balak (Ideal Boy)

Priyesh Trivedi, the creator of the now cult ‘Adarsh Balak’, says Adarsh Balak “started off as an inside joke that just snowballed into something else entirely on social media.” (Ladha, 2019) He adds that “It’s a series that parodies the educational posters that we had in schools in the ’80s and ’90s that were highly indoctrinating and stereotypical in nature” (Ladha, 2019).

One of the first of Adarsh Balak to be released online is a picture in which a school going son offers his father a joint(Cannabis). It set the internet abuzz in India, and made its creator Priyesh Trivedi, and his Adarsh Balak, stars overnight. It attained a cult status in no time, and many followed in the footsteps of Priyesh Trivedi and came up with Adarsh Bhakt, Adarsh Balika, Adarsh Liberal, Aadhaar Balak and so on.

“I once happened to stumble upon a blog that compiled all those original posters and when I saw them again as a grown up with an entirely different worldview, all these ideas started to hit me of how I



could subvert the imagery and turn the idea of being an ideal child over its head by showing the protagonist and his friends doing things that go against societal norms and conventions,” says Priyesh Trivedi (Ladha, 2019).

He tries to merge his “fascination of the vintage with pop culture and the contemporary human condition at large using nostalgia and subversive dark humour” in his works. He adds that his work “is filled with enough reasons for people to be pissed at me but in those few years of working on that project, I faced almost no pushback at all. Even if there was, it didn’t hit my radar” (Ladha, 2019).

About the response he received for the painting of a lady lighting a cigarette with a traditional lamp, Priyesh Trivedi says, “there were many people who thought I was ‘ruining Indian culture’ and ‘insulting women’. But I don’t think I’m answerable to self-appointed saviours of culture and tradition, so I usually let criticism of that nature slide.” (Ladha, 2019)

Crocodile in Water Tiger on Land

“Crocodile in water tiger on land is a non-profit equal opportunity collection of below-the-belt cheap shots in comic form. Look for updates every Monday morning, the best time of the week for insults,” reads the about section of Crocodile in Water Tiger on Land. The webcomic was launched in 2010, “named after a popular Bengali saying that evokes the feeling of being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, it takes potshots at humbug and fraud from every end of the political spectrum, as well as the societal hypocrisies of contemporary India” (Anasuya, 2015).

“After five years of appearing like clockwork every Monday morning, CWTL has been turned into a book, Crocodile in Water, Tiger on Land,” that speaks a whole lot about the reach it has had, its followers, and its effective content (Anasuya, 2015). About its content Aneesha Bangera says, “It takes pot-shots at the political system, calls out stereotypes and injustices and points to the sheer absurdity of modern life. And it does so with powerful visual metaphors where, for example, a television becomes a character; and through writing that is ironic and irreverent.” She adds that its strength lies in its powerful visual metaphors where “a television becomes a character; and through writing that is ironic and irreverent” (Bangera, 2016).

Rashtraman

Rashtraman, the self-proclaimed hero of Rashtria who is dead against radicals and radical thoughts. The man behind Rashtraman is illustrator-writer George Mathen who writes under the pen name Appupen. Rashtraman symbolizes power, with a ₹ (rupee) symbol on his bodysuit he is undoubtedly an



Indian product. His “books began as commentary on environmental concerns and take on commercialisation (sic), consumer behavior and corporate strategizing” (Narayanan, 2016).

“Appupen decided to release the first issue to make his stand in support of the freedoms that are being threatened on university campuses and elsewhere in the country. At the same time, Appupen thinks his work will be restricted to a small crowd of affluent English-speakers crowd” (Narayanan, 2016). Asked about the news that the ruling government plans to have a watch over, track news and comments online for negative, provocative, or anti-government content, he replies, “I feel these are all unnecessary restrictions. It’s not a world I feel comfortable in” (Narayanan, 2016).

A hardcore fan of Rambo as a child, Appupen has created a superhero of our times, who draws power by drinking green tea. Worships cows, supports all the corrupt policies of the government, thrashes radicals and calls them anti-nationals, bulldozes forests and slums to give way for smart city projects. Appupen feels that it has been “Since 2014 we’ve had an atmosphere of control, surveillance and fear in India too. The Big Brother like image of the government did the rest. I was also looking at creating something very Indian, with a nod to the great epics, which inspired the effort of the Halahala universe itself. The idea of a modern “itihaasa” was intriguing” (Mitra, 2018).

Brown Paperbag

Brown Paperbag is all about what life is like for children growing up in Indian families. Created by Sailesh Gopalan, a Digital Media Arts student at Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology. It has received a decent following for a webcomic, clocking over 150k dedicated followers since its inception in June 2016.

“I’ve always been interested in drawing comics,” Sailesh says (Nèjè, 2018). Sailesh has a plea for upcoming comic artists, “Upload! Don’t let your inhibitions keep you from sharing your work with the world. I had no idea my comics would receive the response it did, and the only way I could know is if I put it up on the Webtoon” (Nèjè, 2018).

Sanitary Panels

For Taneja, “Sanitary Panels is a feminist webcomic that comments on culture, society and politics.” It has made most of its followers through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram where Rachita Taneja posts her comic strips regularly. “From mental health to social issues to humour, the webcomic covers a diverse range of issues using simple, predominantly black and white, stick figures that Taneja manually creates using a pen and paper” (TheQuint, 2020).



Form and Function: The New Mainstream?

The webcomics from India—put together—play various roles, to sum it up, it can be contested there is more to Indian webcomics than merely seeing it as counter-mainstream. Its' function is to show, present different ideas, register the other novelties through the already existing artform of comics. Webcomics, similar to Underground Comix is often seen as anti-mainstream or counter-mainstream, this article calls for a fresh perspective, it argues that Underground Comix and Webcomics did not originate as a disregard for the mainstream body of work but for their thematic boredom, and overused content such as good vs evil in which the good always comes out with flying colors. These alternate mediums offer space for artists that are without any restrictions, encourage them to come out with content that is provocative, unpleasant, disturbing, taboo, and it is more about following than making money through mass production. These mediums do away with overused images, ideas and stereotypes, brings forth novel ideas, taps into audiences (mostly adults) and caters to them in plenty. It is no doubt that Internet and Social media platforms breathe life into these mediums, taking it to a vast audience across the globe.

Following are some of the characteristics of Indian webcomics:

1. They cater to urban elites (English speaking community), people who are Internet users, particularly smartphone users.
2. Social Media as the platform, triggers instant responses. Artists can see how their works are being received.
3. Different kinds of work coexist with each other, making the space more open. Looks beyond fictional characters and mythology to cater all sorts of audiences.
4. Shares a similar ideology with Indian Graphic Novels. Non-fictional most of the time, issue-centric narratives that are rooted in India.
5. With mainstream comic publishing almost losing its sheen and hard copy book reading a thing of the past, webcomics are slowly emerging as the new mainstream with the able support of the Internet and Social Media platforms.
6. It showcases the real India, shows it in all its glory, and does not shy away from showing its dark side.



Conclusion

Webcomics in India occupy a space which was left open for ages by the mainstream comic publishers. Through webcomics, comic artists have occupied dual space. Firstly, they have occupied the Internet and Social media platforms with their works, and they have also occupied the alternate comic space which was there for the taking. Comic artists have realized the potential of publishing their works online, where their works have a wider reach. There are dedicated webcomic websites like Striptease the Mag, Bakarmax, Newslandry, Brainded, where many can publish their works and earn money. Artists like Priyesh Trivedi, Manjul, Sailesh Gopalan sell their printed comic strips that are in demand. About the present day webcomic culture in India, author and comic-book creator Samit Basu says, “They provide a frame of reference, and add depth to present-day debates by linking them to images that have withstood the test of time. It’s a secret handshake with the reader.” (Bagchi, 2015). He concludes by adding that he does not “think they’re intended to be works that have lasting impact — for that you need to create new material, or continue with the parody over a long period of time. The intention here is immediate recognition” (Bagchi, 2015). With the Internet at its helm, webcomics are slowly but surely turning to be the new mainstream in India. The Girl who Smokes Pot, Savita Bhabhi, The Testimonial Comics, Green Humour are some of the other notable Webcomics from India that commands attention.

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