

Today's Comic Culture in India

Manan Kumar



Manan Kumar

A Brief History

The realm of comics has evolved relatively later in India than in the West. Around three decades ago comics were not much in vogue in India. The selection that was available was in the form of imported digests and books like *Tintin* (originally French private detective), *Asterix and Obelix* (superheroes of Gaul, erstwhile France), *Archie and Commando* (war stories of World War II) etc. A costly product for an average Indian, these comics were rather available to the children of the wealthy.

The change came in the mid '60s when a leading newspaper publication house of India launched Indrajal Comics. It was the first serious effort directed towards the evolution of comic culture in India. Well within the buying capacity of middle class children, Indrajal Comics made foreign comic heroes like "Phantom- the ghost who walks", Mandrake the magician, and Flash Gordon household names in India.

The immediate success of Indrajal Comics gave a further boost to the indigenous comic industry and in 1967 came the educational comics series called *Amar Chitra Katha* (Immortal Picture Stories) by Anant Pai, who is also considered the father of Indian comics. A welcome change, *Amar Chitra Katha* effected a fusion of the rich treasure of folk tales and exploits of mythical and legendary characters in comics. Each of the comics in this series was devoted to a person or event in Indian history, religion and mythology. Anant Pai conceptualised all of these and wrote the scenarios for most of them. With over 70 million copies sold in the last 40 years these comic books are regarded as internationally successful.

Most Indian children have grown up with *Amar Chitra Katha's* vast and rich treasury of Indian folk tales, the brave exploits of mythical and legendary characters—from Birbal's witty and lively stories to the endearing and didactic tales of Jataka and Panchtantra. *Amar Chitra Katha* forms a storehouse of books for all age groups in several Indian languages.

Like Anant Pai, cartoonist Pran has also made positive contribution in the evolution of Indian comic culture. Pran broke the monopoly of syndicated foreign comic strips and gave India its first comic characters 'the teenaged *Dabu* and his mentor, Professor Adhikari' in 1960. He followed it up with Shrimatiji, and in 1973 with Chacha Chowdhary and Sabu, the duo who combine brain and brawn to fight the evils of society. These characters like those of Anant Pai have proved tough contenders for the foreign counterparts in their Indian comic scenario.

Comics and Indian Children

Comics, with the rise of the Indian middle class and its purchasing power and indigenous production, have gradually become an integral part of the children's world in India today. Almost all Indian children, especially those belonging to the lower middle class and above and living in urban areas, grow up with comics available to them in a wide array of choices.



At the World Book Fair in Delhi, India (photo courtesy of the author)

According to A. C. Nielsen and the TNT-Cartoon Network survey of almost six thousand 7 to 18-year-olds, termed "New Genre Asians," across 18 cities of the Asia Pacific in 1998, the Indian child is an astute, observant and decisive individual, who recognises school as the most important thing in life. ... In terms of readership, the Indian child reads mostly schoolbooks and comics.

The increasing craze for comics among Indian children can also be gauged from the statistics of the Bible Society of India and the United Bible Societies (UBS) that have managed to spread awareness about Biblical characters through the help of comics. During the period 1984-1989 they sold around 5.5 million copies of the Moses, David, Elijah, and Jeremiah comics in the *Heroes of Faith* series. Between 1984 and 1994, total Indian sales of all UBS comics was over 10 million.

Lately there has been an upsurge in the publication of indigenous comics. Devoid of any superheroes or cult figures like Superman, Spiderman or Tintin, the Indian children have found their own heroes in the form of comic figures like Shaktiman (person having powers like Superman), Nagraj (Snake man), Tenali Raman (witty minister of a king), Motu-Patlu (fatso and skinny), Chotu-Lambu (short and tall), Billoo (naughty kid), Kapish (monkey having the power to lengthen his tail), Chacha Chaudhary (intelligent uncle), Rajan-Iqbal (detective friends), Mahabali Shaka (extremely powerful man), Fauladi Singh (Iron man), Agniputra Abhay (son of fire) etc.

However, many of these indigenously produced comics are substandard—not only do they lack a proper storyline, content, imagination and visual graphics but they also draw heavily on characters from western comics like those of Superman, Laurel and Hardy, and Dennis the Menace, etc.

Most of the indigenous substandard comic literature is more popular in small towns and shanty areas of major towns in the Hindi speaking belt. Available at very low price on hire (Re. 1 per day to Rs. 2 per day i.e. 2 to 4 US cents) in private libraries-cum-shops, they hook children at a very tender age. As in the USA such comics have been responsible for children attempting daring but foolish acts, hoping to be saved by the superheroes. Many have lost their lives or have become maimed for life.

Another section of middle and upper class children living in urban areas more or less relate better to foreign comic characters like Disney's Mickey and Donald, Tin Tin, Superman and Archie, etc. But they are also avid readers of Indian comics like *Amar Chitra Katha* and a magazine called *Tinkle*. The popularity of Indian characters can be judged from the following. "One of the characters of *Tinkle* is called Suppandi and the stories are sent in by readers and then drawn by professional artists. The publisher gets about 5-6 thousand letters with stories from their readers per week." (from *the India comics website* created by World Comics, Finland, Dec 2000)

From Comics to Animation

With the advent of cartoons on television, comics in print are facing a tough time. It all started with *Jungle Book's* Mowgli over a decade ago. After that Disney's characters took the scene by storm. Now many channels have dedicated time slots for cartoon shows. The viewership of Cartoon Network,

a dedicated 24-hour TV channel, is growing steadily among Indian children as well as adults. However, these channels lack Indian sensibility and Indian viewers do not relate to some of their characters.

Cartoonist Pran regrets the deterioration. According to him, the violence and mild sex, which is being served through cable television cartoons, is having a very bad impact on the child's mind and the remedy for many publishers seems to lie in introducing more blood and gore into comics.

The fact that the Indian television viewers are more interested in Indian versions of comics and cartoons can be ascertained from the roaring success of the animated *Jungle Book*, *Ramayana*, *Chacha Chowdhary*, *Pandavas* and *Tenali Raman*.

Although India's exposure to cartoon animation is meagre, many companies are fast offering quality work. The success of animated Indian epics and stories has prompted big foreign companies to concentrate on India, and Indian comics are all set to take over cartoon shows on television channels, thanks to a local acquisition drive by international cartoon networks and outsourcing of animation works to India by foreign companies. This has also been prompted by global recession, which caused considerable damage to some international cartoon animation firms.

India thus has become an important place where work can be outsourced. Though China is a big competitor, India has the edge thanks to its command over English.

According to a recent industry survey, the Indian animation industry, which is now pegged at US\$550 million, is expected to grow at 30% annually in the next couple of years and reach US\$15 billion by 2010.

To meet both domestic and export demand, around 40 Indian companies are venturing into the 2-D and 3-D animation market. Indian entrepreneurs have set up state-of-the-art special effects studios in cities like Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Thiruvananthapuram to garner a major chunk of the global business.

The fast-paced changes in the last decade have proved beneficial for comics in India. Besides being in print, the Indian comics have now started getting their due share on the television also. With companies moving in top gear and indigenous comics getting huge appreciation, comic culture in India is all set to take a giant leap in the near future.

Manan Kumar

Born in Dehradun, capital of hill state of Uttaranchal, in 1966. He got interested in Journalism as it is a tool to transform the world for better. He worked for various publications like *Sun*, a youth magazine, English daily *Pioneer*, Hindi edition of *Reader's Digest*. Currently, working as a correspondent in leading Indian English newspaper *Hindustan Times*. He likes writing on developmental issues and features. His hobbies are travelling, reading, writing and photography.

Manan Kumar, Correspondent, Hindustan Times, (home) 17-A/60 Western Extension Area, Karol Bagh, New Delhi 110005, India, e-mail: manan24@rediffmail.com