

Design Resource

Comics in India

A Medium for Storytelling

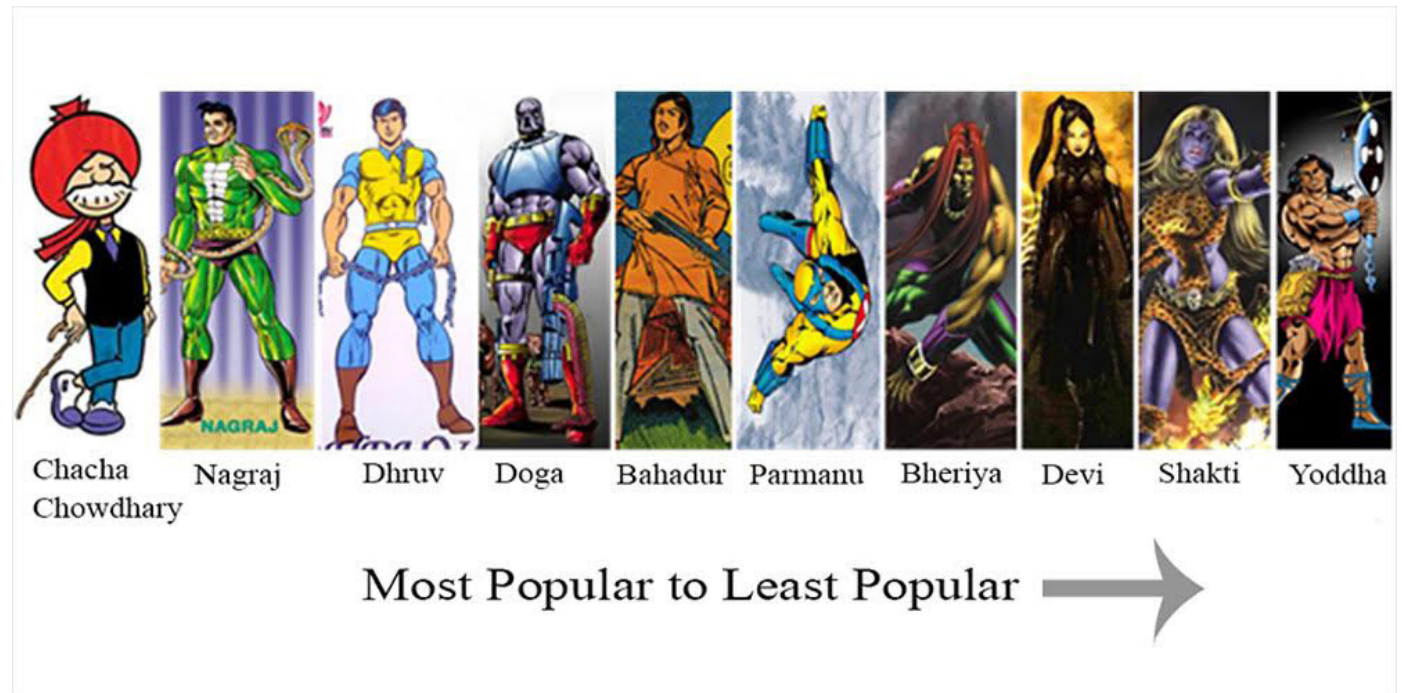
by

Subir Dey with Prasad Bokil

DoD, IIT Guwahati

Source:

<http://www.dsource.in/resource/comics-india>



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Source:

<http://www.dsource.in/resource/comics-india/introduction>

Introduction

Comics are a visual art form that conveys a story. It is a product of the culture and it interacts with the culture through its stories. Today, comics are becoming an integral part of the book stores and competing with the novels and literature of similar standards. The characters from the comic books are transferred to the live action screen and to different forms of merchandise. In totality, comics make a significant part of the pop-culture and provide a window to reflect upon the world around. However, since its birth, comics have always remained a form of subversive art. Its status has been considered as subaltern as compared to the 'high-art'. Comics and its creators has been a subject of critical adverse comments and unacknowledgement throughout the history. It is not a surprising fact that both painting and comics employ common tools for expression. The space, images, text and panels all become a part of a 21st century conceptual artist working in a range of media. The visual styles of art are evident in comics and vice-versa. Therefore, the relationship of art and comics is intertwined in space and time.

Since the classical period of visual art to the post-modern era of conceptual art, visual styles have changed and modified. The visual styles those are prevalent in one era gives way to newer styles. This is a general process of progression for visual arts. In the same context comics have witnessed a change in the visual styles from the early newspaper strips to the recent digital comics (figure 1). It is true that the standard format of a comic book is still a bound-book form, but even then the visual style and the design have undergone a change. As mentioned earlier about the state of comics as subaltern art, the visual styles of comics from a designer's perspective have not been studied yet. Scholars have mostly studied comics as part of cultural phenomena, a tool for education, a medium for visual language or a medium for storytelling. Rarely the process of working in different visual styles has been attributed significance. As there are many visual styles as genres of comics, this demands in depth understanding of the images and their representation in comics.

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Fig 1. Different formats of comics.

If comics are considered as a medium which uses images to tell stories, then its roots can be traced back to the period of cave-painting. But then, history of images or any form of visual arts has developed from the Paleolithic age only. Therefore, to narrow down the history of comics, we would consider the middle ages as a starting point. During AD 113, Trajan's column in Rome stands as an important example from this period. It mainly consists of a continuous narrative inscribed on the stone column that runs from bottom to top. It is also one of the earliest examples where man learnt to depict events in a sequential manner. During the same period, Bayeux tapestry in Normandy is considered another exceptional example where images represent events.

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In the 15th century, Wood-block printing mainly accounted for the printing of 'broad-sheets' and 'pamphlets' that mainly announced political affairs. However, with the invention of printing press, mass production printing was made possible. It not only revolutionized the printing industry but sparked further possibilities of new innovations through print. Some important elements of comics like the speech balloons, speed-lines and panels appeared in the broad-sheets, although in a crude form than in today's comic books. With the improvement in printing in 19th century, the broadsheets were transformed in the form of 'magazines', which were tightly bound and contained more pages with more images. Funny illustrations were always a part of the printed material and enjoyed by the masses. Whether it's a caricature of a dictator or a satire on the political context, humor made the images more appealing and acceptable. Once the magazines were popularized, it paved the way for dedicated illustrated magazines by the end of 19th century. 'Punch' (1841) was particularly famous for its satirical drawings on political affairs (figure 2). A bunch of other magazines followed the way, which further strengthened the foundation for comic books in the coming years.



Fig 2. Trajan's Column, Rome; Bayeux Tapestry and Cover of Punch Magazine.

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In the plane of visual arts, comic books have rarely found a place to be discussed as a form of visual arts. Since its early days, comics have constantly faced adverse criticism and rage of the 'literate' society. In the 21st century, there are subtle paradigm shift on the perspective of comics as a respectable medium. In the last few decades, with the perfection of printing technology and engaging ways of storytelling, comics are slowly being recognized as par with films and novels.

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Comics - Defining

Comics: Defining or Ontological Understanding?

In the domain of comics studies, scholars and artists have time and again endeavored to define 'comics'. However it seems that rarely any concrete definition of comics is agreed upon. Oxford online dictionary defines comics as a singular noun; comic, which means a periodical containing comic strips, intended chiefly for children. As an adjective it could mean a cause of laughter. To a layman with negligible knowledge about comics, this definition might work well. However, when inspected critically, this definition would seem to cover just a fraction of the broader meaning. It is not mandatory for comics to be a periodical. It could be a single-shot story, with only a single issue publication. Further, not all the times it is intended chiefly for children. Since, comics could often be spotted with a 'strictly for adults' or 'Explicit content' warning printed on the cover page. Therefore, this leads towards seeking of a more concrete (if existing) implied definition of comics.

Few centuries back, during the 15th century woodblock printing period, when 'broad-sheets' were widely printed for information, attained refinement and transformed into modern narrative artform which is also known as comics (Eisner, 1985). In the same context, Eisner also suggested that comics is a form of sequential art. Meaning, comics would contain images that would be arranged in a sequence in order to tell a story. The practice of sequential art was nothing sort of new. Sequential art has existed since the time of Trajan column or Bayeux Tapestry. However notion of comics as sequential art initiated newer thoughts in the years to come. Eisner's seminal work on comics was a huge influence for Scott McCloud's Understanding comics (1994). It was a more in-depth approach towards the mechanism of comics.

Even though McCloud gave a definition of comics, his primary foundational idea was sequential art (McCloud, 1994). The definition serves a more explicit purpose for clarifying the nature of comics and its two essential traits: Juxtaposition and Sequentiality. The definition is very much open-ended and may encompass a vast range of visual artforms as well as graphic design: films, infographics, instructional diagrams, sequential wood-block prints, single panel cartoons and so on. Still, the term comics is strictly used in terms of mass-produced flashy books and not for the paintings of great artists.

David Kunzle also approached to define the medium and its nature. Kunzle stresses on the sequentiality, preponderance of images, mass productivity, and the storytelling aspects of a comics. He proposed a historical approach whereas few other scholars have proposed an aesthetic approach for comics. David Carrier claims that comics is a composite art; when they are successful, they have verbal and visual elements seamlessly combined (Carrier, 2000). Legendary cartoonist and critic R.C Harvey points towards the notion among linguists and scholars, that they often compare comics based on literary models or like literary fiction: beginning, middle and end. However, a major part, the pictures receive little attention for analysis, as they form an important part of the narrative (Harvey, 1996).

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To analyze the effectiveness of comics, one should notice the extent to which the meaning of the words depends on pictures and vice-versa. This will lead toward better understanding of the inter-relationship of the elements towards meaning making of the comics.

Alan Moore, author of Watchmen (figure 3), opposes the idea of hybridity as a risky boundary. It might suggest collapsing comics with other hybrid forms especially films. He suggests that films are hybrid of spatial and temporal modes whereas comics are hybrid of two spatial forms: print and image (Wegner, 2014). The physical existence of printed comics is as important as the image which is printed on that.

One of the most celebrated sci-fi and fantasy writer, Neil Gaiman, considers comics as a medium which tells story through static images (Gaiman, 2005). The static images moves inside the reader's mind and creates movement. Thus, in this context comic is closer to prose than films.



Fig 3. Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud, Watchmen by Alan Moore, Comics & Sequential Art by Will Eisner.

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So far it is clear that there exists few commonalities between all the definitions proposed by the scholars, like sequentially, hybridity, image-text relationship and so on. However a single assimilating idea of comics is rarely agreed upon. At one point it seems logical enough to find a definition of the subject being studied. With time and critical analysis, the definition starts taking different directions and approaches. Finally, after many decades also, it still remains an unfinished definitional project. The point of concern is whether one should carry on with further investigations to find a definition or instead look at comics from an ontological paradigm and locate its metaphysical identity in the sphere of culture and society? Given the diverse and varied forms of comics, it will be more instrumental to critically reflect on the process of the different formats. Whether it's a comic strip or a performing piece of art that uses comics as a medium, reflecting on the intricacies of the system of the comics and its executorial form is much needed action right now.

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Development in India

Indian comics came in existence in early 1960s. The Times of India group, Bennett Coleman & Co. launched Indrajal Comics in 1964. Till this time Indrajal only published foreign characters and lacked original characters of its own. Indrajal published its first 32 issues on The Phantom. It is created by Lee Falk, an American writer. In the West, it was already in circulation since 1936. When The Phantom was first published in India, it became a very popular series since its contextual settings were similar to India. With Indrajal gaining popularity, other foreign characters like Mandrake the Magician, Flash Gordon, Garth etc started to get published through Indrajal (figure 4). Therefore, it would not be logical to claim that these were actually Indian comics. These were Western comics that were translated in Indian languages. However Indrajal soon came up with an original Indian comic character known as Bahadur and started its series. The stories of Bahadur were in truest sense Indian. The contextual settings and the characters personality conveyed a sense of Indianess in the stories. It's only with the launch of 'Bahadur' in 1976, that Indrajal comics created an original Indian hero. The first regional language version was published in Bengali in January 1966. English was the initial language in which these comics were published however for the obvious reason of expanding its readership, Indrajal translated these titles in regional languages.



Fig 4. The Phantom, Mandrake and Flash Gordon published by Indrajal comics.

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Since Indrajal's inception, 'The Phantom' was the major character that became hugely popular. However, when Indrajal's last issue was published in 1990, the rights to 'The Phantom' were taken by Diamond Comics. Eventhough Diamond Comics started publishing The Phantom, Mandrake and some other foreign characters, however at this point of time, it also started publishing some of the popular characters like Chacha Chowdhary, Pinki, Billoo etc that gradually contributed in the formation of league of authentic Indian characters.

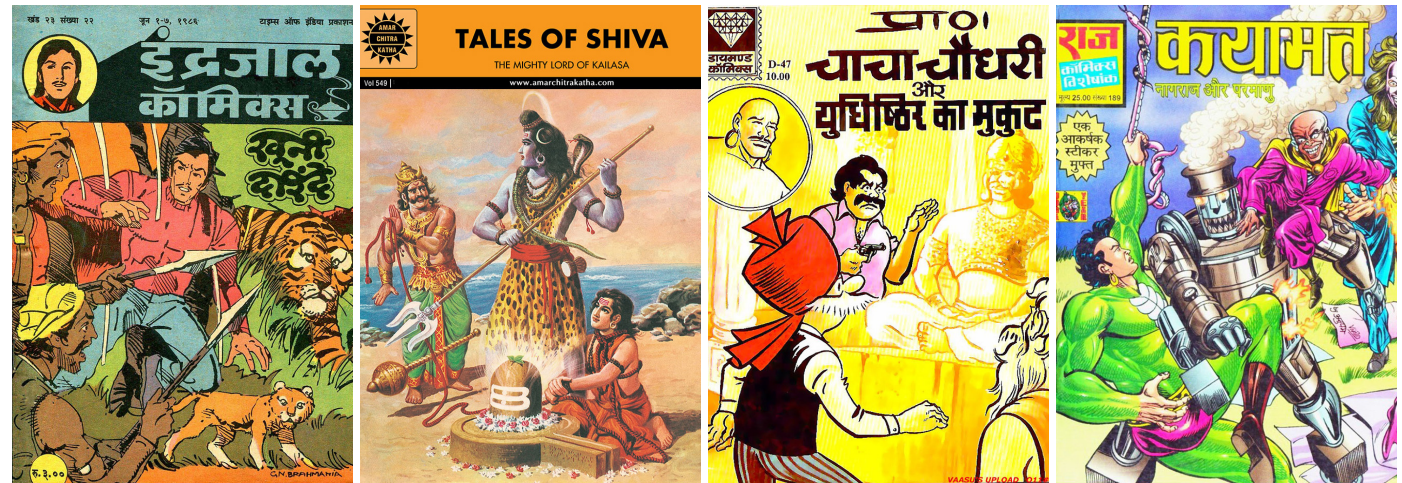


Fig 5. Indrajal Comics, Amar Chitra Katha, Diamond Comics and Raj Comics.

Few years later, in 1967, Amar Chitra Katha or ACK, started its journey. Its main focus and source of inspiration lied in mythology and history. ACK were the only comic books that were considered as educational material and were welcomed in schools. It is due to the fact that ACK was launched solely to promote Indian mythology and history to children. However, initially ACK was published in Kannada language. Later on, to invite wide readership, it started to publish in Hindi and other regional languages. Its popularity was such that even national leaders endorsed its releases from time to time. In September 2006 it was found that ACK accounts for almost 30% of the rupees 30 crore indigenous comics market in India. Today ACK still remains one of the pioneers in comics publishing with more than 400 titles and a large readership.

While ACK was primarily concerned with spreading education through its comic books, in 1986, Raj Comics launched its range of superheroes modeled on Western comics. The superhero genre was still not popular in Indian comic books scenario thus, Raj comics filled this gap and became a hugely popular publisher (figure 5). It created a line of Superheroes with Indian origins and their adventures mostly took place in different parts of India. This helped in connecting the reader with the comics and experiencing the adventures in Indian context. Since its inception, Raj comics is publishing in Hindi language as it was initially targeted towards the Northern part of India. But, over the years it has spread its readership to almost all parts of India. The majority of Raj comics is still publishing in Hindi language. However very limited digital editions are available in Bhojpuri, Nepali, Bengali and English.

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Ascend of Indian Superheroes

The world has always needed an external source on which it could rely upon in the difficult times. A source that could feed their imagination. In the ancient times it was the natural-spirits, in the medieval times it were the gods and demi-gods and in today's age they are the superheroes. It does not mean that the superheroes are the gods, but superheroes represent gods. This concept is explicitly evident in DC's Superman, who is not from our planet, he can fly, he is almost invincible, and above all he saves humanity and gives hope to them. These qualities are almost in sync with the powers of a God worshipped in any culture. Probably, worshipping Superman (by the comic fans) does not seem to be a weird idea then! Superman was also one of the earliest Superheroes to get introduced in comics. Action Comics No. 1, 1938, featured him showing great strength and fighting ill deeds. In the coming years, DC comics turned into a sales generating machine when it introduced further line-ups of Superheroes. Marvel was not far from the ongoing superhero phenomenon and quickly introduced The Human Torch as its first Superhero. Due to fierce market competition and huge popularity of Superheroes, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created The Avengers inspired from DC's Justice League of America. These Superheroes are often characterized by their superhuman strength, strong motivation to save humanity and their virtual invulnerability.

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Fig 6. The Superhero league of Raj Comics.

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The Indian comics market was lacking a community of Indian superheroes since the beginning of comics culture. After the introduction of few characters like Nagraj and Super Commando Dhruv, the readership started to heighten significantly. Soon enough, other characters were introduced and a league of superheroes were created (figure 6). Although the superheroes of Raj comics were not completely a novel creation, but still their stories and characteristics became popular among the Indian readers. Among some of the popular superheroes are: Nagraj, Dhruv, Doga, Parmanu, Shakti, Bhokal, Bheriya, Tiranga, Inspector Steel, Anthony, Super Indian and Shaktimaan.

The study of Superheroes have remained an interesting area of discussion around the world. Their personalities and their motives reflect the society and culture we live in. Just like Batman's darkness and mystery tell us something about our own mysterious nature, similarly the split personality if Kobi and Bheriya signifies good and bad existing within us. Superheroes are also strongly related to the politics of society. The way they behave, their actions, dialogues and costumes, everything signifies a deeper meaning of the culture they exist in. In this context, there are certain traits that is common among all the superheroes, these are:

1. Extraordinary Power (Physical or Mental or Both).
2. A strong Moral Code.
3. A motivation.
4. A secret identity.
5. A distinctive costume
6. n underlying motif or theme.
7. A Rogue.
8. A back-story.



Most Popular to Least Popular →

Fig 7. Popularity Analysis of Indian Comics Characters.

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To find about the popularity of some of the superheroes of Indian comics, a survey was done. The results of the survey is shown in figure 7. It was found that the most popular character is Chacha Chowdhary (Diamond Comics) and the least popular character is Yoddha (Raj comics). The survey also revealed that Chacha Chowdhary's character and stories are more relevant to the readers since he is not really a superhero but a simple, humble and intelligent old man having a life of a common man. His witty and intellect based approach towards problems is what attracted the readers most.

Similarly, another survey was done to find the relevant strong domains of each characters. The domains were divide into: Strength, Intellect, Relevance and Motive. Figure 8 shows the positioning of different characters according to their character traits. Chahcha Chowdhary and Dhruv were the only characters to find a place in the Intellect category. Whereas Bahadur was found as a strong motive driven and contextually relevant character.



Fig 8. Character Positioning according to the Character traits.

Some interesting inferences could be drawn from figure 8. Previously, from the popularity analysis it was found that Chacha Chowdhary is the most popular character. His popularity is (possibly) related to his intellect driven characteristic feature. Followed by Dhruv, he is also found to be among the most popular character and with a strong intellect driven personality. Thus, it could also be implied that a strong intellect driven character is more popular among the Indian readers. More than throwing cars and beating rogues, readers are more interested towards a character who solves the problems in a more tactical manner. Such kind of inferences and study could be helpful for making characters that are more appealing and effective.

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Conclusion

Indian comics have a brief history compared to Western and Japanese comics. It also has totally different evolutionary circumstances since there is a vast cultural difference among India and the West. However even after so many decades, comic culture and understanding this artform is still at a nascent stage. This posits a huge scope for designers and writers to create stories and characters that are immersed in our culture instead of modelled on Western prototypes. The need of the hour is to focus on critical understanding of this medium and create comics which have a strong message to convey. Most of the new publishers are still grinding the age-old concept of mythology with a modern twist. Some fail to understand that comics is more than just fancy figures and flashy artworks. The system of comics have an intricate balance between good drawing skills, composition and most importantly its story. However, with the rise of Comic conventions and new publishers in India, there seems to be a small wave of comics culture rising up. Its high time to think about comics critically and reflecting on its nature and philosophy to build a strong foundation absorbed in Indian culture.

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