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INDIAN GRAPHIC NOVELS: THE NEW MODE OF STORYTELLING

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Abstract

The graphic novel is not new to India, but its themes and styles are new. Indian graphic novelists are creative and produce innovative traditional works within the new format of graphic novels. They have come to the fore in the last decade because of the popularity of graphic novels like *Delhi Calm, Corridor, Kari, River of Stories* etc. Indian graphic novels have been able to grab the attention of readers across various age groups. The digital era and globalization have increased curiosity of and accessibility of Indian graphic novels. These connect the youth of the country to their historical and socio- cultural roots in an effective, appealing, and efficient way. These can retell Indian cultural values of the past in the present by connecting them to the present conditions and aspirations. *Amar Chitrakatha* is one of the earliest examples of Indian graphic novel published in India. The term, graphic novel was coined in 1964 by Richard Kyle whereas the famous *Amar Chitrakatha* was published in 1967 the changes in the medium of comics in America were soon appropriated into the Indian comics industry. Indian graphic novels are constantly enlarging its themes, techniques.

Keywords- Indian comics, Indian graphic novels, publishing market, Indian writing in English, sequential arts, visual storytelling.

Introduction

The idea of representing your thoughts, emotions and experiences have been there from the ancient times hence the idea of graphic novels can be traced back to the cave paintings of early man. Indian visual narrative or storytelling via pictures can be assumed to be starting from as early as 200 BCE in different parts of India. These went through innovations and refinements in the medieval period in India like Buddhist Murals, Mughal art, Pattachitra, Kavaads, Phads, temple art etc. Oshin Vipra Sagar in his paper titled "Colloquium: The

Story of Sequential Art" comments that medieval art in the western world as well as the eastern world grew out of the cultural and social influences of their ruling empires and the iconographic traditions were generally associated with the religious institutes, sects or groups dominant in those regions. Medieval art hence generally were representations of religious texts and folk tales of the oral tradition.

When talking about Indian graphic novels a prior history of comics in India cannot be neglected. This is because the graphic novel that we read today is an amalgamation of all the historical changes,

evolutions, and changes in formats of narration and form of representations that the comics' culture of that particular country has gone through. As Hillary Chute points out the history of comics and its evolution into the graphic novel format is not same for every country. Hence the trajectory of comics in India along with its evolution into the graphic novel format is not the same as how it emerged and developed in other countries like France and America. Indian comics books emerged and developed out of a different agenda other than political propaganda. Unlike America comics in India did not go through a national censorship phase as American comics did in the 1970's nor did it experience an underground comix phase which led to an alternative counterculture. Although innovations, non-traditionalist form or narration and representation has been experimented in Indian graphic novels, but this was done individually by graphic novelists; it was not a part of a national alternative culture movement as it was in America in the 1980's.

The History of Comics in India

The comic book is relatively a new form in India and can be assumed to begin after the publication of *Ambulimama* or *Chandamama* (1947) by B. Nagi Reddy, Chakrapani and edited by Kodavatiganti K. Rao. It was similar to a picture story book rather than a comic book. The magazine was started by publishing content in Telegu and Tamil but gradually it started to be published in few other languages like Bengali, Assames, Punjabi, Gujrati etc. as well. *Chandamama* presumably the first illustrated Indian narrative formed the base for illustrated storytelling in the Indian publishing industry. *Dharamyug* (1956) a Hindi magazine published a strip called "*Dabbuji*" created by Aabid Surti, assumed to be the first Indian comics. It was so popular that about four lakh copies were sold weekly, a great number for circulation in that period. In 1964, the *Indrajal Comics* was published under the times of India newspaper. The backing of a mainstream newspaper meant having quite a good production quality and circulation power. It became popular because of the *Phantom* comics series other comics series like *Mandrake* and f*lash Gordon*. These were foreign comics series featuring foreign

characters. An original domestic superhero comics character called *Bantul* or *Batul- The Great* was created by Narayan Debnath in 1965 and gained a huge readership during late 1960's and early 1970's.

The introduction of *Amar Chitra Katha* (1967) by Anant Pai caused a break in the erstwhile comic book publishing format in India eventually leading to a boom in Indian comics industry. *Amar Chitra Katha* was started by Anant Pai with the purpose of educating young children about India's indigenous tales and stories of religious sects. *Amar Chitrakatha* comic books were 30 to 40 pages long picture stories about India's long-standing culture and heritage. Each *Amar Chitrakatha* magazine had one complete standalone story depicted though illustrations and words, arranged in a sequential manner, it is lucid that from where the heritage of Indian graphic novel lies. Such a unique original content in such a new format was pioneered by Anant Pai in India. Riding on the success of Amar *Chitra Katha*. Anant Pai along with the Indian Book House published India's first comic book magazine *Tinkle* in 1980. *Tinkle* was and still is a comics magazine which includes comics, stories and columns that addresses the interests of school going children in India.

The Graphic Novel is not new to India, but its themes and styles are new. Contemporary Indian graphic novelists are quite innovative and creative seen in the way they are able to uniquely represent traditional tales using the new format of graphic novels. Indian graphic novels have come to the fore in the last decade proven by the popularity of graphic novels like *Delhi Calm, Corridor*, *Kari, The River of Stories, This Side That Side, Hush, Munnu: A boy from Kashmir etc.* Although Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel, *Corridor* is assumed to be the first Indian graphic novel, but it was Orijit Sen a pioneer of the graphic novel format in India, authored *The Rive*r *of Stories* (1994). Many Indian Graphic Novels have managed to grab the attention of readers across range of age groups. The digital era in India, opening of the Indian publishing market and globalization has increased the curiosity and availability of Indian Graphic Novels. These Graphic Novels connect the Indian youth to their history, culture, and social setup in an effective, appealing, and efficient way. Graphic novels have the feature to

retell the core cultural values of India and keep them in the consciousness of the readers making them question their position in society and structuring of their identity as an Indian and questioning their social consciousness. This is done by linking the past events and values to their present interests and anxieties, making it easier to comprehend.

Amar Chitra Katha is one of the earliest prototypes of Indian graphic novels published in India. The term graphic novel was coined in 1964 whereas *Amar Chitra Katha* began in 1967. These narratives are deeply rooted in the Indian culture, published in English and a variety of Indian languages. Tradition of Comics and comics readership is long one in India. These Indian Comics targeted children as their primary readers, making religious stores, folklore, and myths as their main content. The Indian comics industry peaked during the 1980's and 1990's, almost selling 500,000 copies. Unfortunately, it declined in late 1990's due to the introduction of television which offered them a variety of choices. The Indian comics industry began in the 1960's with the publication of *Indrajal Comics*. Indian comics continued to explore and expand its themes and techniques and the changes in the medium of comics in America were soon appropriated into the Indian comics industry. The Indian graphic novel was born from creators' interest and urge to experiment with the comics form using nontraditional formats. It was a result of innovations in the visual narrative forms and eventually became a mass cultural product.

Beginning with *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Tinkle* comics, the comic culture in India is an old one. In the recent years, Graphic Novels and Comics have found a unique contemporary Indian voice. This form dapples with issues, which are close to the heart of an Indian who is educated, urban, and globalized. Issues like identity crisis, culture appropriation, regional language, family relationships, love relationships, life in a new city, creating a home in a new city etc. Indian Comics has entered and penetrated the general book industry, proven by the popularity of Graphic Novels like *Adi Purva, Aranyaka, Corridor, Delhi Calm, The Barn Owls Wonderous Tale, Devi, This Side That Side, Sita's Ramayana, Kashmir Pending, Munnu,*

Moonward, Hush etc. Comics is a medium, graphic novel on the other hand is a format through which visual narratives are presented. Graphic novels are a format of that medium; it's a part of the new media, a new medium of telling the tales. Many Graphic novelists place Graphic Novels somewhere between Comics and Animation.

Scholar Arocika Licy Monika divides chronologically the evolution of Indian comics into graphic novels into three broad periods, these are the 1990's, the 2000's and the present decade i.e., 2010-20. The graphic novels and comics reflect the cultural and socio- political set up and developments of that period. Indian comics other than *Amar Chitra Katha* and tinkle which contributed to the boom in the 1980's and early 1990's was *Diamond Comics* established by Ghulshan Rai in 1978 whose original creation *Chacha Chaudhary* was quite popular; *Raj Comics* 1984 played a prominent role in popularizing the desi comic book along with indigenous superhero characters like *Nagaraj. Amar Chitra Katha* is one of the results of 1990's liberalization and globalization which paved the way for early graphic narrative fiction in India. Hence cultural, mythological and historical comic books was a dominant influence on the early graphic novels of the 1990's.

Globalization and the Indian Publishing Industry

South Asia specifically has powerful visual narrative or visual language and the visual in most cases is the material claims author Emma Dawson Varughese. She also points out the fact that Indian graphic novels efficiently utilize this visual language and its potential by using it to narrate and depict testimonies, memoirs, critique as well as self-appraisal. Indian graphic novels push visual engagement which deals with intellectual and emotional analysis. Varughese adds that the changes in fiscal policies the opening of domestic markets in 2007 pushed the growth and development of the book publication industry. International companies and publishing houses entering Indian domestic market like harper Collins, penguin publications etc., produced, published, and nourished many Indian graphic novels. The current generation is very visual since they are surrounded

by images and words everywhere from school to social media. This new generation of readers equipped with visual literacy is ready to create and consume graphic novel content. This is one of the factors responsible for the rise of Indian graphic novels in the Indian publishing industry.

Post liberalized Indian economy of the late 1990's or early 2000's focused on the domestic Indian markets. Similarly, the publishing industry too looked inwards towards the domestic reading public and domestic genre fiction writing in English. Eventually the advent of Indian graphic novels was able to create an appealing niche within the category of Indian writing in English for itself. In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi shifted creative focus to Indianness and Indian capabilities under "Make in India" project. This led to investment in Indian businesses. This impacted the literary scene of that period. Foreign publishing houses like *Harper Collins* and *Penguin Books* had already entered India and were now moving to the fore. Market policy changes and the trend of literature festivals like The *Jaipur Literature Festival* affected Indian graphic novels and their creators in a positive way. Such events led to better connection between authors and publishers. The entry of global publishing companies and slacking of market rules of distribution, led to the publication of more Indian graphic narratives and its circulation domestically and globally. Author Emma Dawson Varughese observes that this shift in production and distribution within the literary scene of India led to a type of domestic knowledge production and consumption. She adds that the expansion and opening of domestic markets has led to emergence of many domestic independent publishing houses like *Zubaan Books*, *Rupa Books, Jaico Books* etc. sales of eBooks versions helped boost sales as well. All these factors contributed to establishment of publishing houses and collectives which published Indian graphic novels and Indian comics like *Liquid Comics, Campfire Comics, Graphic India*, *Vimanika Comics, Level 10, The Pao Collective* etc. In support scholar Arocika Licy Monika adds that globalization and opening of Indian economy led to entry of the western graphic novel and the western publishing system in India. This encouraged the Indian

publishing industry to establish their own independent publishing houses.

The 1990's comics culture in India mostly included India comics like *Nagraj, Motu-Patlu, Chacha Chaudhary, Batul-The Great* and western comics like *Phantom, The Adventures of Tintin* and *Asterix W*hich were translated into Hindi and other regional languages. The most influential of all were the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, which were a step towards the emergence of Indian graphic novels. The similarity between Indian graphic novels and *Amar Chitra Katha* can be seen in its content, themes, narration, and larger aim behind its creation. Similarly Indian graphic novels accommodate and responds to the contemporary period's cultural trends, fears, hopes and dreams while serving to be a platform for socio-cultural and political awareness and expression. Scholar Arocika Licy Monika characterizes the 2000's Indian graphic novels as depicting stories that dealt with the daily lives of people, stories of lust, greed, hate, search etc. These graphic novels represent the political and the macrocosm by mediating through personal individual life stories. Similarly, Indian graphic novels like *Kari* (2008) by Amruta Patil and *Munnu a boy from Kashmir* by Malik Sajad, depict individual personal tales which are highly politicized. Some Indian graphic novels present an alternative traditional narrative by re-visioning, restructuring, and re-imagining Indian mythological tales, legends, and folklores for example *Devi* created by Shekar Kapur, published in year 2006. The graphic novels of the current decade i.e., 2010-20 notes scholar Arocika Licy Monika are geared toward finding and establishing their Indianness, while incorporating influences from the modern globalized world. Indian graphic novels explore one's identity and the culture that one lives in by bringing out the past suppressed voices in the present. This may employ by creating original stories or by reworking mythological tales. This in a way follows the mainstream trends but also disrupt the traditional narratives although there are exceptions like. *Ramayana 3392 AD* (2007) by Shamik Dasgupta, *In Defence of The Realm* (2010) by Sanjay Deshpande and *Shiva: The Legends of Immortals* by Kshitish Padhy (2018) which try to meet the originals aesthetic standards and narrative

complexity. These Indian graphic novels celebrate the silenced voices in Indian mythologies. Some examples of such Indian graphic novels are *Ravana* by Abhimanyu Singh Sisodia, *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* by Saraswati Nagpal and Mani Kandan, *Draupadi: The Fire Born Princess* (2012) by Saraswati Nagpal and *Sita's Ramayana* (2011) by Samhita Arni etc.

The decade of 2010-20 Indian graphic novels published which dealt with autobiographies or lives of famous Indian personalities. Some of them were *Ambedkar: India's Crusader for Human Rights* (2019) by Kieron Moore, *Buddha: An Enlightened Life* (2017) by Kieron Moore and Rajesh Nagulakonda, *Tales of Young Gandhi* (2016) by Janhvi Prasad, *Bhimayana* (2010) by Srividya Natarajan, *Delhi Calm* (2010) by Vishwajyoti Ghosh. In addition to these there were many Indian graphic novels on contemporary socio-cultural and political issues like *Munnu- A Boy from Kashmir* (2016) by Malik Sajad, *The Harappa Files* (2011) by Sarnath Banerjee, *Pashmina* (2017) by Nidhi Chanani, etc.

The socio-political power and impact of graphic novels in India is immense. One way graphic novels are able to tap into such potential is by presenting individual expressions in connection to larger cultural issues and societal structures. Scholar Arocika Licy Monika observes that illustrations utilized by Indian graphic novels are nativized, done by using vernacular art forms such as *Gond art*, *Paval, Pattachitra Scrolls* patterns etc. They expose and shape grassroot expressions of being Indian. Fantasy and fiction are popular genres in Indian graphic novels. these genres create an excellent arena or unrestricted political expression within the format of graphic novels. In some Indian graphic novels use imaginary lands to present the flaws of one's own real world's political setup and the domination of certain classes and questions the idea of 'nation', some examples of this are Appupen's *Moonward* (2013), *Asyprus* (2014) and *The Snake and The Lotus* (2018).

The Indian Graphic Novel *A Hybrid Socio- Cultural Product*

The comics medium is employed to depict nonfictional stories via forms like comics journalism and graphic anthologies. Wikipedia defines Comics/Graphic journalism as a form of journalism that reports news of real-life events via the framework of comics, meaning that the news about real life events is conveyed to the readers/viewers through a combination of the visual and the textual. Some examples of this are the graphic novels- Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994) and *This Side That Side: Restorying Partition* (2013) edited by Vishwajyoti Ghosh, respectively. *The River of Stories* (1994) credited to be India's first graphic novel by artist turned graphic novelist Orijit Sen. Although it did not claim to be a graphic novel, yet it depicts the tale via sequential art and words. The 63 pages long graphic novel visually-textually narrates the struggles of the villagers; mostly tribal people who were displaced from their villages due to the building of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on Reva (Narmada) river. The visual narrative interweaves the controversies, social concerns, environmental crisis, and political debates around the event. It increases public social awareness around such socio-political issues. It was sponsored and published by the NGO, *Kalpavrishka*. Creator Orijit Sen co-founded the People Tree, an organization which creates indigenous comics and graphic novels to spread social awareness and ensures preservation of culture. The publishing house *Navayana* was established by S. Anand and D. Ravikumar in 2003 with the aim to advocate the anti-caste cause. Their put efforts to publish anti-caste writings and popularising consciously forgotten anti-caste activists like Ambedkar and Jyoti Rao Phule. S. Anand was left dumbstruck to see the utterly low number of writings on the Dalit cause and shocked to see how mainstream media deliberately hides news of Dalit injustices in the present period. *Narayana* attempts to publish anti caste works in an innovative format, to make aware the mainstream readership of the same. Examples of such efforts are the Indian graphic novels *A Gardener in The Wasteland* (2011) and *Bhimayana- Experiences of Untouchability* (2011), which was a domestic and global success.

Hush (2011) written by Prateek Thomas and illustrated by Rajiv Eipe explores the sensitive and tabooed topic of sexual abuse of a minor within the family by a family member. In a traditional society

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like India such a topic is not only discussed openly it's to discuss at all. The graphic novel narrates the event in black and white sketches dark shadings at crucial points the reveal dark moments that are depicted. The graphic novel is a silent one has only a few words which means the readers need to be well acquainted with visual grammar and visual literary to comprehend the implied meanings. Such a volatile topic is handled efficiently so that it does not take a vulgar and violent turn. Yet the reader is left with a haunting sense of fear, disgust, and sympathy. Such works gives courage to its readers to speak up against any injustices and makes one vigilant of such issues.

Conclusion

Earlier objects of arts were commissioned but since the 20th century counterculture trends have led to production of art, which was relatively free, blunt, and sometimes even revolutionary. Visual textual narratives were now produced by individuals as a way of self-expression and response to the contemporary society scenario which has potential great socio- cultural impact when they find their way into the mainstream narratives since they have the power to change societal rules and alter opinions. The Indian graphic novel is one such cultural products. Graphic novels represent narrative works in the form of sequential art, which was traditionally is associated to the comics' medium. Some critics say that graphic novel is a neologism of the 21st century publishing industry, as it helps classify the work with a sea of new works and give a prestige. Others claim it is a new, hybrid form of narrative.

Scholar Aibhi Biswas notes that Indian graphic novels are complex visual-textual narratives, which utilizes personal stories to address larger socio- cultural, political, and often economic issues.Indian graphic novels are generally created to explore particular social and cultural issues, spread awareness regarding the issue alongside suggesting valid solutions for the same. The social issues addressed in such works are intwined with cultural situations and political conditions surrounding it. Social transformation and cultural awareness are the end which these works aim for. Hence, they attempt to link themselves to NGO's or governmental or private projects which work for a socio-cultural purpose. Indian graphic novels like *A Gardner in the Wasteland* written by S. Anand and illustrated by Subhash Vyam and Durgabai Vyam and *Bhimayana* by Srividya Natarajan and Aparajita Ninan , published by *Navayana* press was established for the purpose of giving a voice to Dalit literature and Dalit voices in the mainstream publishing industry in India .Nonfiction Indian graphic books, use of comics journalism and developmental communication in Indian graphic and utilizing Indian graphic novels in education within India is an area that needs to be studied further.

The contemporary Indian graphic novel balances the elite literary modes and the cultural mass of images. It is not completely traditional nor foreign. It is hybrid form which is sophisticated and global. It does not pretend to be western, but it is cosmopolitan yet indigenously rooted. These are written in the English but has an Indian sensibility, which is distinct feature of Indian graphic novels. Indian graphic novel is powerful medium to interact with the society since it has the advantage of both literary and visual devices. In an oral storytelling tradition like India's this new form of storytelling liberates the readers from a rigid storyline and easing comprehension via the application of a hybrid textual- visual form. Diversity in Indian graphic novels are increasing since the 2000's and it is competing for cultural space and relevance with other mainstream cultural media like cinema and popular fiction writing, trying to reach to a general readership. They explore the socio-political concerns prevalent in India critiquing the contemporary socio-political set up. The aim of these works is to make the community vigilant, urging them to engage in problem solving.

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