

INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Lecture11

Pre-history of Comics

Hello, welcome to Module 3. Today we will be discussing comics and graphic narratives. We will look into the discourse of comics and its emergence from cartoons and caricature. and then we will be discussing graphic narratives and novels. What is the difference and why is it called graphic novels, graphic narratives and not graphic novels? Bringing in the prehistory of comics in India, John Lent identifies the root of Indian comics in the caricatures of the temple sculptures. He's talking about finding the roots in four places or four phases. First, which is the caricature aspects found in the temple. Second, he says in the satires of 19th-century Kalighat paintings. Third, he says visual narratives of Patachitra. Fourth, in the 16th century, illustrated Daastan-E-Amir Haamza's manuscripts. These are the four places to locate where the prehistoric comics could be looked from. we see two other people, Vidyun Sabhaney and Shohei Emura, doing archival research and in that research, they find out that it can be again located into Rajasthani kaavads and shadow puppets of Karnataka, Bengali painted Pata scrolls. So these are again other instances where they could be located and this adds to the prehistory of comics in India as well.

Though it was discovered later in later times, again, if we talk about how old the Rajasthani Kavads are, we can still locate that it belongs to prehistoric times. One of the most commonly successful publications was a family-owned monthly children's magazine called Chanda Mama, which was founded by Reddy and Chakrapani. and it came just around the time of independence. That is 1947. So this is how we are locating the prehistory of Indian comics.

Another significant person without whom the history of Indian comics will be incomplete is Anand Pai. Anand Pai is the guy who started Amar Chitra Katha when he was working for the Times of India group. and he worked together on Indrajal comics at that time before starting Amar Chitra Katha. and it was focused on children, and started in 1964. But Pai left after some time.

Almost after three years citing that these comics were lately becoming too educational and therefore, he did not like them. Before departing, he'd managed to persuade the Times of India group that Lee Fox Phantom was better than Superman. and therefore he moves out of Times of India. Later, we see that the Indrajal's manager, A.C. Shukla, worked with Abid Surthi and others, including Govind Brahmania, to create India's first indigenous superhero, which was called Bahadur and Bahadur was a detective, adventure detective, used to wear an orange tunic. With multiple languages and a diversity of characters in that comic. and Indrajal towards the 1980s became very famous.

The inception of Amar Chitra Katha and how Anand Pai came up with the concept of Amar Chitra Katha. It is a story where Anand Pai is in Delhi and he is in a book exhibition in that book exhibition, a quiz show is going on and, in that quiz, show he passes and listens when the students are unable to answer a question related to the Indian mythology and it saddens him questions from mythology and that was his inspiration to start Amar Chitra Katha. After his time in Amar Chitra Katha After Pai's time in Times of Group, he again went back to them with his idea of Amar Chitra Katha.

But it did not work. Finally, he sold them to India Bookhouse in 1967. We see Amar Chitra Katha starting in 1967, and he established this series. Initially, the first 10 issues were not what Tamar Chitra Katha later looked like. It was initially based on Western fairy tales and published in Kannada. Only in the 11th episode, do we see that what Pai wanted Amar Chitra Katha to be gets established. in the 11th episode, when he shifts to English, we see the characteristics of mythological and educational approaches coming together. What began with sales of 20,000 issues? In three years, following this, the Krishna episode that came soon exploded into 5 million per year.

That's a huge number. and due to this tremendous success with the launch, which happened in 1967, it boasts a print run of 80 million copies in 38 Indian languages with 400 titles. So this is immense what Amar Chitra Katha did. While approving scripts for Amar Chitra Katha, it has come to notice that Pai remained acutely conscious of multiple textual and oral narratives in Hindi text that make it difficult to claim one correct rendering. What happens when he's taking episodes from these mythologies like Ramayana and Mahabharata and other Puranas?

There are several versions of these Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas. the question is who decides or who gets to decide which is the correct version or which version to use. So, it was indeed a challenge but Pai admits to his role in deciding the version he left best suited for his comics. We see this landed him in criticism. Though Amar Chitra Katha is one of the famous comic children's books, as it is called, it had its fair share of criticism as well, which we will discuss.

Two years after Kalpana Chawla's death, Amar Chitra Katha came up with an episode where Kalpana Chawla was in the same frame as other historical great people, such as Gandhi, Vivekananda and she was placed amongst these people. This extends the cultural paradigm to the contemporary, the old and the new, the fusion in a way. what happened with Amar Chitra Katha is there were many tales, but we will discuss a few that received criticism. Many of the stereotypes were propagated by Amar Chitra Katha to inform the popular imagination.

Whosoever is reading the books, if it is children, it is again, it could be equated to Disney's pedagogy of how it started with children, right? Buddhism was politically co-opted in the main fold of majoritarian religions. This majoritarian religion narrative included Buddhism also in its manifold in Amar Chitra Katha. Buddhism and Ambedkar's reactionary politics were mellowed in a deliberate attempt where he is trying to mellow down the reactionary politics of Buddhism Ambedkar to accommodate or make the majoritarian narrative seem happy.

To please the majoritarian narrative, he received a lot of criticism. Since its debut in 1967, Amar Chitra Katha has been reinforcing many of the problematic tenets of Indian society by trying to push forward masculinity, fair skin dominance high caste and Hinduism at the same time.

He was talking about untouchability one is colonialism, and the other is caste system. We also see that in one of the instances, while discussing the Hindus and the Muslims. It does not call out the upper-class Hindus as he calls out Muslims for the Parda system.

This is again very interesting where he has left out one particular religion but has called out the other religion for similar tropes, in another episode of Padmini where she performs Johar or Sati a powerful image evoking women's bodies as a side of nationalist tropes. he is using the body of women as a nationalist trope. It is also a reductionist portrayal of women couched in culture and tradition.

You ask women, what do you want, whether you want to kill yourself or want to live? The obvious answer would be, depending on the circumstance, as he is trying to bring in the meaning that they committed Johar to save their virtue. He is glorifying this event. The glorification of Johar in Amar Chitra Katha is quite disturbing.

Forced in the nationalist imagination, he is trying to push this into the nationalistic imagination, making the woman's body a nationalist trope and further glorifying Johar. Another episode is of Jhansi of Rani in a way women are either hypersexual or silent, meek like Sati and are embodiments of virtue. So women are seen in two types. One is very docile, meek, and shy and the other category is hypersexualized.

So Jhansi of Rani in Amar Chitra Katha. She only became a warrior post her husband's demise, clenched in domesticity. So how domestic it could be made while talking about a warrior like Rani Lakshmibai? Baba Sahib Ambedkar's episode where shows him as a pedagogical authority and He has kind of not included his contribution to the Dalit community for the people that he contributed and it has been critiqued and also allegations that he promoted Hindutva ideology and he related other religions. So he used photographic images and critics say that photographic images last long used it to sow the seeds of religion. So, if you look at a photograph, it remains in your memory. So he used to promote it through these photographic images.

Another episode on Dayanand Saraswati, where he focused largely on the good that Dayanand Saraswati did, which was contributing to the Arya Samaj and the contribution of education. But he forgot to mention that Dayanand Saraswati believed in the Varna system, again, very casteist in nature. In another episode in Rani Padmini, where he talked about Johar, we also see that Pai himself says about Padmini that a lesser woman would not have been able to face Allaudin Khilji.

So what does he mean by a lesser woman? He is in a way questioning the whole integrity of women, and how they are perceived. And Amachitra Katha, Also largely talks about the larger nationalistic partition narrative in India where Muslim rulers have always raped women, showed deceit and debauchery. So this is how he has represented the Muslim rulers in India.

But Bhutalia contests and says Hindu men's tolerance led to the fight or plight of being incapable of protecting their women. So again, coming back to the discussion on Padmini, Bhutalia has made this comment that it is the problem with the Hindu men who could not contain the problem and the price the women had to pay they were they failed to protect their women with this we come to the golden age of mini-comics revolution that happened in India and it started in the late 70s, moved through 80s and witnessed a shift from Amar Chitra Katha's national readership to diverse regional ones. So we see the coming of regional comics also into play.

We see that comic publishing mainly moved from liberal Mumbai to conservative Delhi, where we see the rise of Diamond, Raj and Manoj comics, the prominent ones, which also had their subsidiary in Pulp. Diamond Comics entered the world of comics in 1978, almost 10 years after Amar Chitra Katha, a subsidiary of Hindi pulp publisher Diamond Pocket Books, and has continued till today. This is one of the comics that still has sustained. Next, we have very prominent what we know as Chacha Chaudhary and Sabu.

and these famous comics were brought in by Pran Kumar Sharma. The publication was created and known as Pran's Features. He began initially as a newspaper and magazine cartoonist in the 1960s. But later moved to what they call a satirical Chacha Chaudhary series about a relatable grandfather. And everyone in the audience, in the readers, amongst the readers could associate with Chacha Chaudhary, be it kids and even older people.

Diamond also published action-adventure stories and films. Chitra Katha was one of them. Moving into western prints as well. There was a time in India when western comics were cheaper and therefore many comic industries or many comic publication houses also invested in Western reprints. They came

Then came India Book House, Monthly Tinkle magazine and it was very famous among kids. And in 1980 with memorable characters such as Ram Varikar's Supandi. Supandi, this boy, his face is a very animated kind of character that resembles a little bit of Popeye. And this again became very famous.

We have action comics or action superheroes in India. A time when many of the leading comics came up with new superheroes as well. In the year 1986, three brothers, the Gupta brothers as they are famously called, Sanjay Manish and

Manoj came together to form Delhi Raj Comics, a pulp publisher of Raja Pocket Books. Influenced by Marvel and DC movies, they brought in a new Indian superhero called Nagraj who used snakes as much as Spider-Man used webs. The secret to Nagraj was snakes just like in comparison to Spider-Man he has webs. Raj remains a powerful publisher even today and as such publishers fuel the 1980s golden age of comics through the broad explosion of mini comics. In the genre of mini-comics, we see these superheroes also making an entry. We have a very important superhero in the genre of what we call, Hindi adventure comics.

The Hindi adventure comics made their entry, we see another set of superheroes making their entry. By 1990, national comic industries or the readership was becoming unsustainable. and leading publishers such as Amar Chitra Katha to cease regular publication and Indrajal to close. So by the 1990s, we see that Indrajal has closed. Amar Chitra Katha somehow relatively surviving, but again not with regular publications.

The smiling Buddha detonation between India and Pakistan which gave birth to characters like Parmanu and Parmanu was a superhero whose identity was a dual identity. In the daytime, as a normal, ordinary human being, he was a police officer called Vinay and, in the night, to fight evil, he transformed himself into Parmanu. We have the Raj comics and the superheroes coming from this. One first is Brahman Rakshak as the name suggests protector of the universe. Second, we have Parmanu and next, we have the super commando Dhruva or Dhruv as it is called. They all had a good lifetime but as compared to Dhruv the other two were not as famous as Dhruv.

Again, with these three, we have Nagraj. He was a muscular snake. He had a muscular snake-like physique. Another one, we have Tiranga, flag-totting, sharp-minded detective. Next, we have Doga, dog-masked anti-hero conceived as Mumbai's saviour just like Spider-Man, who is the saviour of his city. The cyborg super cop, Inspector Steel, and superheroine Shakti; in this list of superheroes, we have only one superheroine that is Shakti.

She is a nurse by the day. She turns into a wild-haired powerful Shakti at night to save women. As the name suggests, Shakti, is also one of the seen associations with Shiva. She dresses in a cheetah print dress. Very symbolic

If people have seen the image of Shiva, he also wears cheetah prints and the same is Shakti. The relevance of the name, and the symbolism is what we can find here. Also, it talks about religious symbolisms because of Shakti, which is power, which is also what Shiva means. We move on to Gendering Hindi Adventure Comics Symbiotic Masculinity. How the idea of masculinity has been developed, redefined or brought into the popular imagination through these characters or these superheroes?

The evolution of Indian superhero comics from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, coming from Nagraj, reflects broader socio-political shifts, particularly in the context of masculine nationalism, and Hindu civilization narratives, and we see characters like Dhruv, Doga and Nagraj who exemplify these changes. , we will be dealing with each particular character. and we try to situate the symbiotic masculinity in their characters as they have been represented, also bringing it into the national narrative. Initially, Dhruv is the super commando. And he has been shown as relatively very flat and a very docile kind of a character. But after a few episodes, it's seen the transformation. , this transformation into a moody, angst-ridden character with a muscular physique in later comics like Codename Comet. So this is happening in 2013, started to happen in 2013. and we also see that his physique, which we just talked about, is very masculine in nature.

It parallels India's aspiration for national and regional supremacy, symbolized by Dhruv's depiction as a millennial masculine figure. In the discourse on masculinity, we see this particular superhero. The changes in his masculinity are observed during episode 13-14. The development around or the power politics changing around 2013-14, (Congress govt was replaced by BJP) right? In a way, this represents change observed initially in Dhruv when he was shown not as masculine as he is now drawing from the national narrative. But later, we see it happening and it symbolizes his depiction as a millennial masculine figure what is the difference between a patriotic masculine figure or a prehistoric masculine figure as compared to a millennial masculine figure?

This imagery aligns with the rise of the new popular India or new powerful India, reflecting the country's emergence as a global power in the post-liberalization era when we talk about millennials, they have been perceived in ways very different as compared to the earlier generations. and therefore, Dhruv is a representation of millennial masculinity. where he is being represented by the state, getting

integrated into the nation-state discourse. and we also see the imagery aligning with the powerful India.

He is becoming powerful. So, his journey is that of India's journey from being meek and docile to becoming a powerful nation. and his emergence as... Relatively to the to be more national coming in as a global player in this era of post-liberalization. Now Dhruv is also situated in the heteronormativity where his love life is often shown as having women around him. But again, what is more important for Dhruv is the security of the nation, like that, the portrayal of him. there are three females always surrounding Dhruv. One is her sister, who is also a superheroine, Chandika, who is introduced later in the series and we have another old friend. This friend is called Richa. She is like a black cat. and the third is Natasha. and Natasha is the girlfriend.

Mostly he has to rescue Natasha. and in other adventures, her sister Chandika and Richa, her friend, his friend joins him in these rescue missions and adventures. Doga, has a dog mask and is also very masculine.

In fact, he is hyper-masculine as compared to Dhruv, the commander. He is six foot, 5 inches his frame is, and he has a very intimidating appearance. Embodies hyper-masculinity and physical prowess and is also portrayed as a masculine vigilante often depicted working out in the gym with his friend Suraj. Both are often seen in the gymnasium doing workouts. It reflects the societal emphasis on physical strength and national security. His working out is seen as with the physical strength of the society. The physical strength of the nation also. So, in nation-building, strength is required that is what Doga is building and it is also important for national security the metallic sheen of his skin suggests a fusion of human and technological elements symbolizing India's technological advancement and military strength so the way he looks very muscular like all the muscles in his body are protruding and We also see his body looks like very metallic finish, which is a fusion of what they call as technological elements and human. It also symbolizes the nation because our nation is seen to be developing and making a lot of technological advancements. and our military is also one of the top five militaries in the whole world. So this is how...

Doga is representing the nation, but again with a portrayal of the anti-hero kind of image that he has. In one of the episodes, we see that it is called Ravan Doga and

Doga has another nine heads, and he is walking past. He looks more realistic. The characteristics that he has of this anti-hero, a person who has both good and evil inside, are more realistic. The definition of perfect is imperfect, a person cannot be perfect so that person will have all limitations he will be evil at the same time therefore Doga seems to be more realistic with his anti-hero image. Nagraj is known for his association with snakes and mystical powers. We already discussed how Nagraj is more like Spider-Man because he has webs and Nagraj has snakes. Represents a more egalitarian approach within the superhero pantheon. So he is more of this egalitarian approach as compared to Doga or Dhruv or other superheroes.

His female allies are two. One is called Saudangi and the other is called Visarpi. Saudangi which comes from the snake. Because snake hisses that are in Hindi called Dug. And Visarpi; Sarp again is another name for snake, in Hindi. and vish is the venom. Visharpi and Saudangi both play significant role in his adventures. These two are brought along with Shakti and Chandika. But they are, again, secondary to the stereotype superhero.

We see challenges in traditional gender roles as Saudangi, a shape-shifting Egyptian cobra and Visarpi, a former empress of Nagadweep (the name Nagadweep, Nag is a snake and Dweep is an island.) of the island of snakes demonstrates the complexity and diversity of female characters within the comics.