The Development Of Graphic Novel In India: Why Is It Growing A Class Apart?

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Abstract

The graphic novel is one of the recently popular forms of storytelling. It has had a steady growth in the last couple of decades, flourishing into becoming a favourite of young adult audiences across the globe. However, it is only very recently that the graphic novel has made a considerable growth in India. Even though the first Indian graphic novel was published in the 90s, it was poorly received. In the present scenario, there are many successful and dedicated publishers for graphic novels in India. When the genre of graphic novel became overpowered by superheroes and science fiction around the world, Indian graphic novel stood apart with its different themes that are especially regional. It tried out different approaches, often sharing its motif with mythology. It is only very recently that science fiction has become one among the many flavours of graphic novels in India. This paper studies the development of graphic novels in India, trying to trace its roots as well as its features that help them remain independent from global influences. In addition, the Indian graphic novel seems to be in pressure to keep itself from following the strong, historic undercurrents of the comic tradition.

Keywords

India, Graphic Novel, Comics, Graphic Literature, Visual Narratives

Introduction: The Origins

The graphic novel has its origin in comics. It is still a matter of dispute how a graphic novel is systematically different from a comic book. Studies have focused on certain works published in the 1980s as catalyst to the growth of graphic novel. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980) and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1987) are considered highly influential in helping the mode gain popularity. On the contrary, both these writers have expressed that the 'graphic novel' is a term they have found difficult to fit into. These writers come from the comics tradition, and the change in the form of their works have resulted in creating differences in the field of production and publication as well, even at a time when there was no formally addressed distinction between comics and graphic novel. *The Graphic Novel, an Introduction* traces the evolution of the medium and it recalls Alan Moore's own words about the graphic novel that, it is different from comics in terms of "density, structure, size,

scale, seriousness of theme, stuff like that"(Beatens 2). Apart from all the turmoil that the introduction of a new medium had made, the field of comics was hardly affected. The graphic novel gradually started growing away from its roots, developing its own set of aesthetics, principles and styles. Spiegelman's *Maus* displayed a deeper understanding of life with its symbolic retelling of the holocaust experience, whereas Moore's *Watchmen*, a combination of superheroes and science fiction, was extensively celebrated by young adult readers. It is apparent that science fiction had a guaranteed chance of reception through graphic narratives, the reflections of which were evident in the Japanese 'manga' comics as well.

The field of comics developed a consistent relationship with the film industry in the 80s. Blair Davis observes that the alliance between movies and comics had been in existence since the beginning of narrative cinema, and that the period from 1930s to 1950s can be considered as a peak time when the comics characters had the most screen time. The *Superman* series and the *Batman* series were huge success and it helped publishing studios gain worldwide popularity. Most of these developments were focused on America and Hollywood.

There was similar development in other parts of the world as well. *The Incal* (originally published between 1980 and 1988) a science fiction graphic novel series of French origin was extremely influential. Later on, its prequels and numerous sequels were published. Japanese manga artist Katsuhiro Otomo created *Akira* (serialized in a manga magazine from 1982 to 1990) which was later published by Marvel comics in America. Its plot dealt with a post-apocalyptic, cyberpunk world. The growth of technology during the second half of the 20th century energized the illustration of science fiction/techno fiction in every form of literature and art.

The success of the movies brought the comic studios to great fame, part of which was evident in India as well. The comic market in India was already a thriving segment of print media by the 1990s, with a large distribution network selling millions of copies a month in different languages altogether. Even though comics giants like DC and Marvel found their way into the Indian market, the young minds of India were captivated by characters brought to them by Diamond Comics, Tinkle, Raj Comics, Balarama, Amar Chitra Katha, and the like. These were available in more than one language. Most of these Indian comics studios deviated from the superhero tradition of the world, presenting its readers with detectives, mythological characters, children, and ordinary working-class people as central characters. Among the aforementioned publishers in India, only Raj Comics focused on the idea of protector / superhero character. They worked out the superhero – science fiction combination to a success in India. But it is questionable whether a non-Indian reader will be able to enjoy reading one of Raj Comics' superhero works because of its innate Indian flavour. On the other hand, publishing houses such as Diamond Comics produced licensed copies of spider man, superman, batman, etc. in India. But they did not have the impact and circulation as much as Amar Chitra Katha, which was the dominant publication. As Mandira Sen, who studied the tremendous impact of paperback publishing on reading culture, comments,

> "These are published in the comic format in colour, retelling stories from Indian classics or history. Published by India Book House, which acts itself as one of the dominant wholesale distributors to the Industry, they are found in bookshops, pavement stalls, railway stations, in the stock of itinerant book and magazine seller in trains-in brief, in every conceivable outlet throughout India. They appear in many Indian languages and in English, and sell lakhs of copies. Not exactly a book or a magazine, it is one of the most successful mass market reading materials in India"(462)

The Amar Chitra Katha focused on mythology and the cultural heritage of India. It is safe to assume that they had successfully presented the cultural history and the vast mythological stories of India to its young readers. Nevertheless, the beginning of the graphic novel in India was entirely different from the tradition brought forth by these Indian publishing houses.

Graphic Novels: The Indian Way

The River of Stories (1994) is considered as the first Indian graphic novel. It was written and illustrated by Orijith Sen, an artist and designer. This work hardly exhibits traits of influence from the Indian comics in its form and structure, but the theme, like many of the comics, is deeply rooted in the Indian experience. *The River of Stories* is not a fictitious account of a relatable event, but a journalistic retelling of the plight of a group of people in relation to the construction of a dam in the Narmada River. The work was born out of Sen's involvement with the Narmada Bachao Andolan movement. It was published by Kalpavriksh, a non-profit

organization. Despite its striking ecological relevance, the work was not received well. The work did not reach readers like the comics did. With the graphic novel itself being a new medium in the country, *The River of Stories* failed to create a successful network of distribution. Hence it can be understood that the graphic novel in India had a turbulent take-off.

Ten years after The River of Stories, came *Corridor* created by Sarnath Banerjee in 2004. No other Indian graphic novels were published between 1994 and 2004. *Corridor* was published by Penguin India, a firm that has a long and active retail network that the work did not find it difficult to reach the reading public. Banerjee's debut work was received well, besides raising questions about the structural integrity of the graphic novel as a medium. Not being entirely drawn by hand, *Corridor* is formed of a unique mix between photographs, drawings and text. It portrayed the life of a couple of ordinary men dwelling in the dense urban jungles of Delhi. What makes it even more interesting is its expertise in portraying the urban livelihood around Delhi, a reason by which it is easily relatable to Indian readers. In an interview covered by Ratik Asokan, Banerjee revealed that he was an avid reader of Amar Chitra Katha and certain popular comics of western origin such as *Tintin* and *Asterix.* Acknowledging the difference between the two, he also mentions that both of these comics failed to connect with him, a typical Indian middle-class boy. Perhaps this resentment kindled the ambitions in the author to create something that captured the life of modern India through different perspectives. As Ratik Asokan observes;

> "Though rooted in the local textures of Delhi street life, *Corridor* was driven by an assured, cosmopolitan sensibility. Banerjee made it his business to gleefully make collide east and west, culture and kitsch, high and low—to make Baudrillard wash himself with the local Liril soap. His early aesthetic, in which characters drawn in a sparse western comic style are often superimposed on billboards and street photographs of Delhi, brilliantly mimicked the mentality of post-colonial urbanites who straddled different cultures."

Even though *Corridor* did not sell out in huge numbers as any other bestselling work of fiction, it certainly was a successful venture as it gave hope for the future of the Indian graphic novel. As with the many other creators of graphic novels that are popular today in India, the *Corridor* might have been inspiring. Compared to its predecessor the *River of Stories,* Banerjees's work is entirely different in style, theme, design and content which makes it unable to trace out whether a trend was starting to develop –if any- among Indian graphic novels.

Banerjee joined hands with Anindya Roy to create Phantomville in 2006, a publishing house exclusively for graphic literatures and budding artists in the field. Their first work *The Believers,* written by Abdul Sultan P P and illustrated by Partha Sengupta, was published in the year 2006 itself. Even though it did not catch up in the market as the *Corridor* did, it reassured the integrity and commitment of the firm towards the progress of graphic literature. Phantomville's growth was nothing short of clever. It produced *Kashmir Pending,* which became a successful and widely discussed Indian graphic novel in the year 2007. With illustrations from Saurabh Singh, *Kashmir Pending* was written by Naseer Ahmed who grew up in Srinagar. The work mainly gathered attention for the issues it discussed, as Kashmir remains one of the most politically sensitive parts of India even today. The author was praised for the maturity and unbiased perspective with which the subject matter was dealt with. Sarnath Banerjee published his second graphic novel in the same year as well, published by Penguin India, to which Banerjee is indebted for his debut. At this point of time, international publishing companies had a firm grasp over the Indian market that they encouraged products in the interest of popularity, consumption patterns and themes of relatively high readership, which in turn, took away the focus from critical acknowledgement and scholarly merit. Harper Collins, another publishing giant and a strong competitor to Penguin, published *Kari,* written by Amruta Patil, in the year 2008. The target audience of all of these graphic novels was distinctively Indians, and the particularly Indian 'setting' of these works were inseparable from the plot. When large publishing firms brought western works to global audience outside India, they seem to have strategized the exact opposite in India by encouraging works that are innately Indian which supposedly had an upper hand in the market of the world's largest democracy. Even as they brought forth each edition, the works were meant to be sold in India and in India only. Evidently, the graphic novels published from 2004 to 2008 portrayed life that concerns a specific geographical area. Be it cityscapes or rural landscapes, these Indian graphic novels extensively relied on the dynamics of the Indian infrastructure. Yet, they were surprisingly vibrant in the subject matter they dealt with. In the decade that followed the publication of the *Corridor,* numerous graphic novels were published and the graphic literature market in the country obtained a lucrative appeal.

Fairly addressing the literary merits, one may also assume a plausible relationship between the success of these Indian graphic novels and the exponential surge of commercial fiction in India. Suman Gupta, through the *Economic and Political Weekly* opines that the Indian publishing industry gave way to the development of the kind of fiction that was specifically designed for the young Indian adult audience but escaped scholarly attention (pioneered by authors such as Chetan Bhagat) which resulted in a sudden "boom" in the industry. Moreover, he observes that 'these register a rapid proliferation of commercial fiction along the lines of "genre" categories' which includes graphic novels as well.(46-53).

Sarnath Banerjee's second graphic novel, *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* was published by Penguin India in the year 2007. The work illustrates Kolkata with the same sharpness as *Corridor* did with Delhi. The plot of this graphic novel revolves around the Protagonist's quest to find a book written in the 18th century. One might sense a pattern beginning to build up – that of life portrayed indivisible from its physical surroundings which usually is a famous Indian city. Amruta Patil's *Kari* and Tejas Modak's *Private Eye Anonymous* enters the scenario with interesting deviations from the trends that the Indian graphic novel was about to follow. *Kari* introduces themes of homosexuality in Indian graphic novels. Although it follows the path led by preceding works to set the plot in an iconic Indian locality, *Kari* evades the inevitability of the illustrious cityscapes to drive the plot forward. The novel is set in a big city that mysteriously resembles Mumbai. Nevertheless, *Kari* focuses on the internal struggles of its eponymous lesbian heroine. It is also apparent that the story of *Kari* could take place in any other city as well.

Kari might as well be regarded as a ground breaking novel for its exquisite narration of the life and struggles of a homosexual woman. It is only very recently that homosexuality as a theme began to appear among graphic novels worldwide. Amruta Patil gained immediate recognition for the work and she bagged the *Nari Shakti Puraskar,* a prestigious award given by the Indian Ministry of Child and Women Development. Looking back at the ancestry of Indian graphic novels, the comics and *Amar Chitra Katha* always lightened up the mood, and are intended to teach a good old life lesson. Clearly, the Indian graphic novels have evolved to become entirely different from its roots and a denser work of art that demanded to be approached seriously.

In the same year that *Kari* was published, came India's first graphic novel that belongs to the tradition of detective fiction. Modak is an artist who comes from the comics and design tradition. It is only natural that his first graphic novel should reflect the rich Indian tradition of comic. *Private Eye Anonymous* tells the story of how the eponymous hero solves the case of an expensive piece of art being stolen from a gallery. Like most of the detective heroes of the world, this one also comes with a side kick named Chiki. India had its own set of favorite detective characters that come from various genres. Even when Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot stories delved deep into the Indian book market, there was always a nostalgic space reserved for Chacha Chaudhary in the heart of the Indian readers. Chacha Chaudhary is a renowned character from the 70s comics. There were also several other detective heroes in the comic world that captivated the young minds of India. For that matter, one could say that India's rich comic tradition still has a fair chance of influencing the graphic novel scenario.

The rapidly developed interest for graphic novels in India sure had a relation to India's comic tradition. In 2008, Sarai Media Lab published a study around this, titled *Raj Comics for the Hard Headed.* It was researched and designed by Amitabh Kumar, a designer/Artist who used to work with the Sarai Media Lab and it is written in the form of a graphic novel as well. Apparently, by this time, Raj Comics had grown to become India's largest comic studio with over 5000 titles to their credit. Amitabh Kumar explored the vast universe of Raj Comics along with the developing culture of graphic literature around New Delhi. *Raj Comics for the Hard Headed* is a unique text that plays with the borders of graphic novel. It begins as a first-person narrative where the author shares a quotidian experience of city life. This escalates to another time space when a superhero character from Raj Comics takes the author to another world; a world where all the raj comics are created. The book then walks the readers through milestones in the development of Raj Comics, its characters, design, publication etc. with its layout gradually dissolving into text, and finally concluding like a journal. It can be considered to be a result of Amitabh Kumar's enquiry on why Raj Comics is "the single largest comic book publication house in India today" (Kumar).

The years 2004 - 2008 can be considered as the phase of the development of graphic novel in India (It should have been 1994 – 2008 counting from the very beginning of graphic novel in India but from 1995 to 2003, there was hardly any contribution towards the cause of Indian Graphic Novel). In 2004, the graphic novel was a fresh product in the Indian market, whereas by 2008, the graphic novel had become an established genre. Counting on the tremendous improvements that the Indian graphic novel has had in the publishing industry, commercial elements, readership, competition and accessibility, the year 2009 can be earmarked as the

beginning of the next phase in the development of Indian graphic novels, this was flagged off by Parismita Singh's famous work, *Hotel at the End of the World.* This novel could also be considered as a milestone for its liberation from the particularly Indian features that former Indian graphic novels used to posit. In other words, it was an Indian graphic novel that was really meant to be sold out to the world, and not "to be sold in India only". It was published by Penguin India. This graphic novel takes its readers through multiple stories that take place in different parts of the world. Strangely, *Hotel at the End of the World* abstained from using colours other than black or white. It is in the same year that *Moonward* by Appupen (George Mathen) was published by Blaft Publication, a publishing house based on Chennai.

Moonward was noted for its strong visual language. The illustrations were complex and the details were intrinsic. Appupen's use of text is at a bare minimum, which is probably a reason why the novel's illustrations feel dense. The novel is subtitled *Stories from Halahala.* The term 'Halahala' comes from Hindu mythology. Here we can see that an important substance in the making of this story originates from myth as in the *Amar Chitra Katha* tradition. On the contrary, from its illustration of the dystopian world, strange robots and artificial intelligence, one would also observe traits of science fiction. The visual language is universal and consequently, the more a work of art relies on its pictographic side, the more universal it becomes. It is also one of the achievements of *Moonward.* Both these Indian graphic novels published in the year 2009 invited the attention of global audience. Two years later, Appupen's *Moonward* even made it to the Angouleme Festival, a globally acclaimed convention held in France for graphic literature. However, in the following years, the themes of graphic novel in India kept on diversifying. In 2010, Viswajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* was published which tells about India in the 1970s, especially during the period of emergency.

It is for the first time in the history of graphic novels in India that national politics became a major theme. *Delhi Calm* had a significant and sensitive role of narrating an important segment from the history of the nation to its young minds because they had only heard of the emergency and those who really lived through it were too old to remember! Moreover, *Delhi Calm* is noted for how it brilliantly explores the possibilities of combining texts and images as well as how it makes use of intertextuality. Junik-Luniewska considers it an original work as it employs verbal and non-verbal expression plus all the cross-media expressions arising from juxtaposing images with images, text with images, and images with text. The year 2010 also witnessed the release of two other graphic novels that were in a whole new league compared to *Delhi Calm.* Aniruddha Sen Gupta's *Our Toxic World* and Gautam Bhatia's *Lie* deal with matters that concern quality of life (In physical and sociological sense as well).

In 2011, we can see graphic novels turning towards biographies as themes. *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* published by Navayana talks about the life of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Navayana published another book in the same year; *A Gardener in the Wasteland* written by Srividya Natarajan, which is also a biographical account based on Jotiba Phule's struggles for liberty. Sarnath Banerjee published his third novel titled *The Harappa Files* during the time as well. It is a collection of stories tied together. The author himself appears in it as a character. It is roughly a satirical work, humorous and thought provoking. The intent of this work runs parallel to those of the good old Indian comics from the 70s, especially the *Amar Chitra Katha.* It is interesting to observe now that the graphic novel in India had achieved a strong footing and yet it displays tendencies to go back to its roots. The 2012 work *Adi Parva – Churning of the Ocean* written by Amruta Patil, brings about a new interpretation of a significant segment of the Hindu epic, *Mahabharata.* During this period, numerous self-publishing companies set up in different parts of the country and publishing was made easier and cost effective through online media.

In 2012, Viswajyoti Ghosh, the author of *Delhi Calm* published *This Side, That Side*: *Restorying Partition* which is a collection of stories written by a large number of authors around Partition. It serves a purpose similar to *Delhi Calm*. Interesting and informative at the same time, *This Side, That Side* is not only about India but the region of Asia to which India belongs to. Perhaps Ghosh is attempting to develop his own style by standardizing his themes –that are basically from history and politics. Likewise, in the following years, Appupen published two of his works that can be considered spin offs to his much celebrated *Moonward.* He published *Legends of Halahala* in the year 2013 and *Aspyrus* in 2014. Both tell stories from the dystopian world of Halahala. Spin offs, prequels and sequels are methods commonly used by giant comic studios like DC and Marvel. Similar to what we have observed in *Raj Comics for the Hard Headed,* Appupen might be on his way to creating an imaginative universe where all his stories take place. The author also adhered to the style of minimum text in these two novels, providing hints that this is his signature design. His latest work was published in 2018 titled *Snake and the Lotus* which, obviously, is a 'Halahala' story. However, Appupen's novels are not just mythical stories or fantasy but they also serve the purpose of instruction. For a keen observer or an

enthusiastic reader, Appupen's intention to warn the public about dangers in life was very clear. It may be because of this characteristic of his that his works depended extensively on illustrations which could help overcome the boundaries of language and attain larger readership.

The themes set around a city/region was meant to be in action for longer than expected; *Hyderabad- A Graphic Novel* written by Jai Undurti presents the cityscapes of Hyderabad through images that mixes facts and fiction. It was published by Syenagiri as part of a project to sketch the life of iconic cities called *Every City is a Story*. *Hyderabad* was the first product of this initiative. They published *Bangalore: A Graphic Novel* three years after their first venture. The project 'Every City is a Story' appears to have its structure inspired from Sarnath Banerjee, a major contributor when it comes to graphic novels that are set around Indian cities. Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* was published in the year 2015 (Harper Collins) while the taste of mythology was still lingering in the minds of graphic novel fans in India. On the other hand, this graphic novel can also be considered as Banerjee's attempt to portray the typical middle-class life, as we have observed true from many of his former works and from the author himself. Sukanya Gupta, observing the work in context of climate fiction states that "There are many indicators that in *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*, as the title of the novel also suggests, Banerjee implicates primarily the middle class Indian living in urban areas for their participation in, and silence about the assault on the environment often enacted in the name of *vikas* or progress". The novel deals with Girish's quest to find the mythical river Saraswati, a source that can put an end to the gruesome battles in the capital city of the nation. The protagonist Girish the plumber was introduced in his previous work *The Harappa Files*. There are other characters of Banerjee like Digital Dutta (first appeared on *Corridor*) who make their way into more than one work, creating the impression that all of his works seemingly follow a time space continuum. As works based on mythology ran their due course successfully into the fandom and the market as well, narratives that focused on regional issues did not lose its charm either.

Cartoonist Malik Sajad's first graphic novel *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (Fourth Estate 2015) walks us through the life of a young boy whose childhood is caught between the ever-growing political struggles of Kashmir. *Munnu* is the second Indian graphic novel that deals with issues in Kashmir, after *Kashmir Pending*. Yet, Sajad's work is as intriguing and enjoyable as the previous work that dealt with similar issues. It also implies the density and vastness of issues in Kashmir. On the contrary, the black and white illustrations of *Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir* resembles in its style to that of Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980). One may doubt that the western pioneers of graphic novels may still have an influence over the Indian arena of graphic novels although it took a while to have become noticeable. By this time, sequels and spin offs had become a trend and beyond that, there was considerable demand from the reading public for it. Amruta Patil made the most of this demand through her work *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* (2016) a sequel to her very successful work *Adi Parva*, again based on *Mahabharata*.

The years 2017 to 2022 witnessed the rapid growth of Indian graphic novels. Numerous graphic novels and graphic novel adaptations were published in various parts of the country. Some of them were in regional languages as well. One major setback faced by the Indian graphic novel is its dependence to English and the difficulty of the medium to be produced in multiple languages. Even as it grew into a vibrant field, escaping every precarious chance to fall into stereotypes or standardization, there have been recurring themes and styles. For instance, in the year 2019, came out *Chhotu: A Tale of Partition and Love* written by Varud Gupta. The plot of the novel is crafted around partition. Likewise, novels that contextualize or re-interpret mythology also kept on coming.

Once we turn towards the international trends, we are in for no surprise but rather to be let down to find that the superhero centric stories are still dominating the market. Other than that, there is a large array of dystopian and science fiction graphic novels. In contrast, some works are being published which can be categorized under life writing. However, the reading public seems to have taken good notice of them, which is encouraging. It is also noteworthy that themes like feminism, homosexuality and eco criticism are gathering more and more readers, every year. Over the last two decades, numerous works have been published in these categories. Yet, the so-called fan base has a strong command in the market to keep the superhero stories running.

Science fiction and techno-culture have also become favourite themes of the graphic novel/comics fanatics which can be understood as a reflection of the overpowering growth of science and technology over humanity. Most of these works are published online and thus accessible to anyone from anywhere in the world. The trend in publication is to serialize online publishing and to print hard copies once the work is completed. Compared to prose fiction, the complete collection of most of these graphic novels are very expensive. It is a

very profitable approach but these deluxe editions, however, did not find its way into the Indian market except for a very small percentage of enthusiasts.

Influences Beyond Creativity

The graphic novel originates from Comics. Most of the pioneers of graphic novel across the world, have a history of working around comics and cartoons. It is, therefore, only natural that the graphic novels carry forward its legacy through its structure and theme. India had a very successful market for comics during the later years of the 20ᵗʰ century. It was a commercially viable field, having produced hundreds of thousands of copies every year. As the spectrum of graphic literature in India was undeniably wide, it is highly unlikely that the graphic novelists in India relied on western comic giants as to explore novel possibilities. The Indian graphic novel, arguably a distinguished variety, cannot obviate the possibility of the rich comic tradition of the country being an impact factor on the development of its distinctive features. However, some of the creators of the graphic novel argued that these comics failed to connect to its readers on a personal level. These comics could not entail themselves with the quintessential properties of traditional literature that allowed its readers to subjectively identify the 'self' within these works. *Amar Chitra Katha* mostly relied on mythology or history dating back to the period of the emperors, to develop its setting. Their modern competitors, Raj Comics and Diamond Comics, produced a large number of heroes, superheroes and detectives who could seamlessly amalgamate into the Indian imaginary. However, the setting of most of these works were quite detached from the 'ordinary' Indian experience, to the extent that most of them appears to have drawn inspiration from Hindu mythology in character design and development of the setting. The young readers who make up lion share of the audience to these comics, might not have been susceptible to its intrinsic shortcomings. It can thus be problematized that the comics in their own way had kept its young audience away from the hard realities of Indian local livelihood. It provided an opportunity to the graphic novelists in India with a serious gap to build their works on. The Indian graphic novel, in its developmental phase extensively tried to narrate the Indian experience of life, in its purest forms, perhaps, as a part of their attempt to mend the void which its predecessors, the good old comics, left unattended. Much of early Indian graphic novels retell crushing human experiences from issues such as the partition of India, struggles of Kashmir and caste biases. Pramod K. Nayar, in his book *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique* claims that "The detailing of stories of individual survivors, refugees, displaced and marginalized – the microhistories – enables the graphic narrative to develop a new language of human rights" (194). Eventually an inseparable bond had been developed between the setting and subject of these graphic novels that this indivisibility was not in much favour of the foreign audience who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of the setting being described. On the other hand, this repeated affinity towards the importance of the setting may have contributed to the momentum that the Indian graphic novel, as a new genre, gained in a market exclusive to the country.

The first couple of Indian graphic novels published after 2004 ambiguously established that illustrating local setting or sensitive real-life issues had the potential to capture market. Followed by this, graphic novels set around an iconic locale stayed continuously in business for over a decade. Today, there are graphic novels created for the sole purpose of narrating the culture and history of specific cityscapes in the country.

One of the crucial forces that navigated the course of the Indian graphic novel was market trend, as this relatively new genre was far more expensive in its production, an issue that inversely reflected in its reception. The price of retail units terribly exceeded the price of a traditional work of fiction with the same number of pages. Consequently, the publishers were forced to adapt new modes of publication such as kindle editions and e-books. Even when majority of distribution could be serialized and done through digital media, the making process of graphic novels remains a strenuous task that required more working hours than traditional 'textual' literature. In order to be welcomed by the general public, this new format of literature was required to present itself with a minimal price, as it is an established initiation ritual of the Indian market. The publishing industry may have had some unsettling claims as well. The Indian graphic novel had to rely on English, and a vast majority of the readers are from the urban region. In Pramod K. Nayar's own words,

> "The graphic narrative, in the English language in India, is thus constitutive, like Indian literature, of Indian urban social imaginaries among the English-speaking classes to which it offers alternate readings of Indian history, draws attention to the lacunae and follies of our cultural practices and makes visible hitherto taboo subjects. But unlike Indian literature in the vernacular, for instance, the graphic novel represents a far more elite – sophisticatedly produced, expensively priced – medium, catering to a small percentile of the population" (7)

It is discouraging after all, but the fact remains so. Yet it is quite surprising that the graphic novel, even after it had flourished so much in India, has not crossed the sales figures enjoyed by Diamond Comics, Raj Comics or Amar Chitra Katha.

Conclusion

Some authors believe that the real coming of age for Indian graphic novel is yet to come. In order to bring this new art form to it's maximum potential, experiments and developments are being conducted at various facets. As a stratagem to cut cost, restricting the division of labour benefited in multiple levels. The task of writing, designing layout, drawing, colouring and lettering mostly relied on the skill of not more than two creators. The foreign publishing giants could afford to divert each of these tasks to its own expert handles, a luxury that most of the Indian graphic novels chose to forfeit. However, such a mechanism favoured the structural integrity of the works, unlike the method in contrast, where the colourist, or designer has a fair chance of being alienated from the true content of what they are working on.

Despite all their efforts to keep the cost lowest as possible, the graphic novel has not yet become a common presence in the middle-class households as much as the romantic Indian English fiction of Chetan Bhagat or Ravinder Singh. Consequently, the market pressures would keep on pushing the creators to try out different approaches. It won't, therefore, be completely arbitrary to assume that the background economics had propounded socio-political issues and sensationalism as thematic additions on to the field of graphic novels. *Kashmir Pending* (2006), *This Side That Side* (2012), *Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir* (2015), *Chhotu: A Tale of Partition and Love* (2019) are all graphic novels that deal with some of the still lingering traumatic issues of India. Besides the sensationalism that helped with the success of these works, India's incurable affinity towards mythology was also successfully utilized by the graphic novels. Since mythology is an inevitable part of India's cultural heritage, literary works that deals with, interprets or recreates mythology has always enjoyed a minimal guarantee about its acceptance, as proved true by movies, comics and cartoons as well. The effect was no different when graphic novels exploited this opportunity. India's large mythological oeuvre opened a world of possibilities for the artists in the field. In the last decade, the field of graphic novel enjoyed a steady development, with the increase in the number of works being published, every year. Authors and artists from across the country experiment with various innovative themes and styles today, which is a reflection of the confidence that the new genre had gathered recently. What appears to be most promising about the solitary journey of Indian graphic novels is the rise of small-scale production studios, keeping monopoly at bay. Today, there are numerous graphic studios across the country, each doing an important and integral work to contribute to the burgeoning field. Although the era of printed comics has almost come to an end, graphic novelists envision a brighter future for themselves in India and across the globe.

Reference

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