A Creator's History of the Comics Medium in India

Before the early 1970s, the only comic books in India were Western ones, including the adventure stories of *The Times of India's* Indrajaal imprint, namely *The Phantom*, *Archie*, *James Bond*, *Flash Gordon*, and other Western comics, as well as those published by Diamond Comics. However, they foreshadowed the then-soon rise of some of the most popular and important publishers in Indian comics culture. These included religious and historical stories for children, as well as stories modeled on American superheroes and contemporary Indian politics.

Despite this variety, though, much scholarship has tended to focus on just a small sampling, mainly the most widely distributed among India's comics narratives. In an insightful analysis of India's comics culture, Aruna Rao, in "From Self Knowledge to Super Heroes: the Story of Indian Comics," describes the shift from the first Western comics in the 1970s, to the nationalist comics of the 1980's, and the regional, often superhero-focused comics of the 1990s. Although Rao details the history of both religious and adventure comics, she places a great value upon the *Amar Chitra Katha* series of the 1970s and 80s because its stories deal with religion and history instead of superheroes and pulp storytelling. Similarly, Karline McLain, in 2010's *India's Immortal Comic Books*, focuses upon the *Amar Chitra Katha* series; she analyzes the roots, artistic processes, and cultural contexts for *ACK* in great depth.

As the most widely published and read Indian comics, books from this series are the ones that most scholars have focused upon, to the detriment of understanding the wider context of India's comics, storytelling, and visual cultures. While Indrajaal and other publishers set a strong precedent for the comics medium in the 1960s and 70s, *Amar Chitra Katha* would eventually transcend them in popularity. *ACK*'s religious, historical, folkloric, and other stories would build upon rather than imitate these earlier examples. Yet, these works are important for their ability to

engage local or regional arts and international comics culture. More importantly, few have addressed the work of contemporary comics creators or the graphic novels and comics currently coming out of New Delhi and the rest of India.[1]

This article provides a historical account of the path from comic books to the later rise of graphic novels grounded in one creator, Amitabh Kumar's, experiences as an author and researcher on Indian comics and culture.[2] As an artist, he graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts, MSU Baroda. He has been a researcher with Sarai Media Lab, within the larger Sarai Center for the Study of Developing Societies, since 2006. As a researcher there, Kumar pursued an interest in comics by interviewing comics creators as part of the Research Project on Raj Comics and Graphic Novel Culture in Delhi. Through this research, he began a collaboration with Raj in creating a comics narrative to celebrate and historicize the Raj Comics repertoire.

In the resulting book, *Raj Comics for the Hard-Headed*, published in 2008, Kumar argues for the importance of Raj Comics in the history of India's comics culture. In particular, he celebrates their historical role in maintaining comics as a narrative medium while other publishers ceased. Kumar would continue his comics work with short stories, the illustration of *Tinker. Solder. Tap*, a short graphic novel written by Bhagwati Prasad on the transition to television in a Delhi suburb, and as a muralist, particularly in his *Projectile Prophecies* series (Images 1 and 2).[3] Kumar's perspective serves as a strong foundation for a broad account of the history of comics in Indian culture as he works to establish a historical narrative himself while engaging with that precedent in crafting his own comics. This history is important for creators, as well as scholars, because both build upon the comics narratives that have come before, from political cartoons to superhero comics and graphic novels.

Finding the Roots

With the recent rise of graphic novels in Delhi in the 2000's, creators have generally asserted

that the comics medium is, in and of itself, a distinctive medium. In fact, creators have often

turned to international comics culture in defending their narratives as more than just children's

stories. This is because comics have historically been defended as children's literature in India,

and incorporated as such into education systems in India, where the medium could be

approached as more than a vulgar medium capable only of entertainment. Unlike in the United

States, comics as a medium has long been associated with education in this context, largely due

to the importance of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, which was the earliest indigenous comics

series. The development of comics in India thus involves a move not only from nationalism to

regionalism, and even localization, but also from the defensive posture of incorporation into

existing children's literature to independence as a medium unto itself.

As the earliest indigenous comic books in India, the *Amar Chitra Katha* series set a

strong precedent, one which has dictated comics content and style for decades since.[4] However,

the earliest example of comic strips in India is the *Avadh* or *Oudh Punch*, a late 19th century

satirical magazines that was inspired by the British *Punch*. The *Punch* was originally a satirical

magazine of comic strips and other material started in 1841 in London (Hasan 2007). Many

countries under the yoke of the British Empire imitated the *Punch* in order to criticize their rule.

As the first newspaper with recognizable comic strips or cartoons, *Oudh* inspired many authors

and artists in its weekly publication of poetry, essays, and comics from 1877 to 1936 (Hasan

2007).

Kumar, meanwhile, links the development of the Indian version of the *Punch* to the

longer, historical process of comics' development. In particular, he connects the Indian medium

to progenitors of Western comics in England, namely 'Ally Sloper's Half Holiday,' which is

extraordinary for being the first comics magazine to be titled after and illustrate the adventures of

a regular character (Sabin 2001). "If you try to connect with the history of comics globally, and

'Ally Sloper's Half Holiday' and the distribution, it [comics] started as a weekly, an illustrated

weekly. After the weekly, there was this illustrated pamphlet called the *Punch*, and a version of

that was imported to India." Kumar thus references the international context for comics culture

in India. Before "Ally Sloper's Half Holiday," the history of comics in Britain was a movement

from the Edwardian broadsheet of the early 20th century to youth-focused funny papers in the

1930s, and later forms that would evolve into what is now recognized as comics (Sabin 2001).

Kumar demonstrates that his own understanding of comics history is grounded in an

international perspective of its history as a Western medium. Furthermore, *Avadh* and the other

seventy or so *Punch* magazines published in over twelve Indian cities by the end of the 19th

century were part of the print revolution in Delhi and the Northwest provinces of Agra and

Awadh (Hasan 2007).

Accordingly, the *Oudh Punch* is generally recognized as the earliest root of comics in

Indian culture, as well as the roots of the vernacular press.[5] Kumar further notes that "*Oudh*

Punch was this spoof on *The Punch* basically, and that to my mind, is one of the earliest forms of

illustrated texts. But then again, the argument is that illustrated texts have always existed in

India." Several creators and readers have connected the Indian comics medium to pre-existing

artistic forms and traditions, particularly folk storytelling forms like the *patua* scrolls of Bengal

and the *Gond* painting tradition. Kumar notes in a blog post for the Pao Collective that the roots

of Indian comics are difficult to solidify, as they may begin with *Oudh*, with the illustrated

Daastan-E-Amir Haamza manuscript of Mughal Emperor Akbar, or any number of image-texts

(Kumar 2008).[6] When asked about the place of Indian, visual culture or storytelling in the history of comics, Kumar pointed out that defining the medium is a tense and difficult process. "It automatically gets into a very complicated territory when you use the word Indian. Because there are just so many layers to that. Because now it has also entered the domain of the sort of graphic, published books found in book shops. There is this *katha* form of storytelling, there is this *patua* tradition, which is also a form of storytelling, there is various traditional forms all around India." While the *Oudh Punch* serves as an important entry point for creators to draw together Indian and international comics culture, by the 2000s, local, visual culture influenced comics in a different, more contentious way. Yet, in terms of the roots of the comics form, Kumar chooses to focus on the rather clearer history of the comics medium after independence, as focusing on earlier works seems, at best, unfruitful (Kumar 2010). He points out that arguing over what is or is not '100% comics' is futile. In *Raj Comics for the Hard-Headed*, he asks, "how fruitful would it be to hold onto an imagination of the 'puritan' or an 'original?' (Kumar 2010). This is an especially vivid point in the context of various creators, who each draw on a variety of sources for inspiration.

Before the widespread distribution of comics, though, the Oudh provided a precedent for comics storytelling. From there, as noted earlier, the comic books present in India before the early 1970s were largely Western ones, from adventure comics like Lee Falk's *The Phantom* and tales of World War II in the popular *Commando* series, to children's comics like *Archie* (Rao 2001). In large part, this saturation of Western comics was the result of British influence and import by soldiers or expats living in India (Rao 2001). In the case of the *Phantom* series, though, these earliest comics were imported in order for publishing houses to take advantage of as yet un-tapped younger audiences.

As Rao and Kumar both note, many involved in India's comics culture trace the development of comics back to Anant Pai, the man who started *Amar Chitra Katha*, due to his involvement in persuading *The Times of India* to publish *The Phantom* rather than the then-editor's favorite, *Superman*, in their dailies (Rao 2001; Kumar 2010). Based upon interviews with potential readers, Pai argued that the jungle setting would be more familiar to readers while still telling adventurous tales that appealed to young readers. From his point of view, merely importing Western comics was not enough and likely reinforced problems with the Indian education system. (Rao 2001) Through him, and based upon the precedent set by both the *Times* dailies and Western comics, production and distribution shifted to the national level.

As writer, editor, and publisher of *ACK*, Pai was the leader behind the series, but he drew on several precedents in Indian culture. For one, *Chandamama*, a family-owned monthly children's magazine, had already been publishing stories where both illustrations and an oral storytelling style played an important role since 1947 (*Chandamama* 2012). Similarly, several other publications intended for children, such as the *Champak* magazine, had already set a model for producing stories for young readers that engaged both visual and textual media. Later, in the 1960s, several creators and political cartoonists were publishing some of the earliest comics narratives in India based out of West Bengal. Within that culture, Pratulchandra Lahiri focused on strips for local newspapers, Mayukh Choudhury created action/adventure and historical stories, Tushar Kanti Chatterjee did detective comics for the magazine *Shuktara*, and Narayan Debnath crafted strips later published as books (Mukherjee 2011). Debnath is significant, in particular, because his Batul the Great is likely the earliest of India's superheroes, having been created long before Raj Comics began publishing (Deb 2007). Within this context, it was thus

neither the educational approach nor the similarities to Western comics that made *Amar Chitra Katha* an innovative series.

Yet, Pai did uniquely work to develop comics as an industry, primarily through a divided model of production, much like that of the later Raj Comics.[7] As Nandini Chandra notes in recognizing the roots of *ACK* comics as "…products of the capitalist mode of production which [seek] to mask [their] commodity existence," Anant Pai was likely drawing on international discourse in the creation of India Book House and *ACK* (Chandra 2010: 202). In particular, as Pai turned from Indrajal's intended mix of Western and local stories to *ACK*, he was likely influenced by UNESCO's 1967 endorsement of the use of comics for communicating cultural values (Chandra 2010). His use of the term "cultural heritage" thus related to international discourse at the time, a relationship that shaped much of India's comics culture afterwards. At the same time, though, as a result of the generally Western quality of imported comics, Pai was driven by a desire to focus on daily life in contemporary India. However, by 1967, despite his initial enthusiasm for Indrajal, only three years after the publication of its first issue, Pai grew dissatisfied as the local comics section, which he valued most, became replaced by quizzes and other educational content (McLain 2009; Chandra 2010).

Pai would then turn to the *Amar Chitra Katha* series and developing it into one of the most important publishers in Indian comics culture. Despite later criticism of the *ACK* series, Pai expertly argued for its stories as educational and helped to incorporate them into school curricula. Through his work, what began with 20,000 issues in the three years following the first run of *ACK*'s "Krishna" then exploded into five regional languages, in addition to English, and beyond, as well as five million issues sold per year (Kapada, cited in Rao 2001). *ACK* thus laid a strong foundation for Indian comics, albeit one firmly grounded in a young readership.

Relating to Readers

At the same time, another comics publisher attempted to rely more directly upon indigenous culture in storytelling than *ACK*. As Kumar described to me, Indrajal Comics came out of the same creative shift as *Amar Chitra Katha*. "With the risk [of publishing original comics] paying off, the *Times of India* group (who were Pai's former employers and had rejected his proposal to launch the *Amar Chitra Katha* series) then launched a comic book series of their own – Indrajal Comics. Indrajal is credited with bringing an entire galaxy of 'foreign' comic characters to India. Characters like Flash Gordon, Phantom, and Mandrake captured the imagination of readers" (Kumar 2010). Indrajal thus began as a project attempting to tap into the phenomenal success of *ACK* and its attendant readership. Kumar specifically notes that Indrajal's tactic of publishing in multiple languages was likely inspired by *ACK*'s distributing comics in thirty-eight different languages at one point (Kumar 2010). Where Pai appealed to readers through Indian and visual culture, Indrajal began by relying on the popularity of the comics medium itself.

Later on, though, Indrajal Comics began to appeal to readers in a different way. While it began as the publisher of *Phantom* and *Mandrake the Magician*, its then manager, A.C. Shukla, worked with illustrator and writer Aabid Surti to create an Indian version of the adventurer-detective by then familiar to readers from Western comics. The result, *Bahadur*, which occurred off and on with *Mandrake* and *Phantom*, was different in that it was able to relate to daily life more so than *ACK*. *Bahadur*'s stories occurred in contemporary India, with the titular detective chasing down criminals like the then-infamous dacoit bandits of Chambal Valley in Madhya Pradesh. (Rao 2001: 51). Still, as Aruna Rao notes, the *Bahadur* series generally shows a nationalist bias similar to that of the *ACK* series, in that the detective makes villagers aware of their obligations to the Indian nation and in that class remains fixed despite any liberal

tendencies in the stories (Rao 2001). *Bahadur* was relatively grounded in the changes and

conflicts of then-contemporary India, though, unlike the grandiose and mythologically-oriented

Amar Chitra Katha.

Although stories by later writers and illustrators would show Bahadur fighting dacoit

bandits who had by then been captured, the earliest issues showed a hero dealing with at least

some of the realities of everyday life for Indrajal's readers. This appeal to everyday reality

contributed to a monthly sales of 580,000 copies in 1981, as well as more liberal storylines to

appeal to the more liberal readership of Mumbai (Singh 1982, cited in Rao 2001). Accordingly,

Bahadur's girlfriend was able to be a modern woman without compromising her traditional roots,

defending herself with karate while remaining a loyal and ideal partner (Rao 2001). This

stemmed from the creative genius of Surti, who, as the lone illustrator-writer in the early comics

industry, carried an experimental style into other adventure-themed comic strips. Yet, just as

later creators transformed Bahadur into a more muscular and even more cosmopolitan character,

the comics industry began to shift from Mumbai to Delhi, a generally more conservative city, as

shown by a shift from Indrajal's original Marathi and English to Hindi and Bengali, which are

both North Indian dialects (Rao 2001). In the end, however, *Bahadur* fell out of popularity, at the

very least with *The Times*' editors, and Indrajal closed in 1990. The earliest comics by Surti,

though, in appealing to the social and cultural reality of a changing India, were able to ground

comics storytelling in lived experience.

Meanwhile, Anant Pai introduced a new means of keeping comics narratives relevant to

readers by incorporating fans' stories and interaction: *Tinkle*. While *ACK* and Indrajal both

ceased regular publishing at the end of the 1980s, Pai's other publication, *Tinkle* magazine, has

continued through over 500 issues into the present (Rao 2001). *Tinkle* began as a biweekly comic

in 1980 after *ACK* had taken off; in its pages, short comics were paired with activities and

educational sections, as well as stories submitted by readers that were edited and illustrated by

Tinkle's writers and artists (Rao 2001). With the name and picture of the child often published

alongside the submitted story, *Tinkle* was able to portray both content similar to *ACK* and stories

grounded in readers' own experiences (Rao 2001). In addition to reader-submitted stories,

though, certain humorous strips featuring particular characters also repeated in the pages of

Tinkle (McLain 2009). Similarly, Indian culture was not the only one to be addressed, and

several volumes have taken the folklore of other countries as their focus. However, the

readership for *Tinkle* seems relatively narrow, as Rao notes, since the comic mainly appeals to an

English-speaking middle class base. Despite a tendency to ignore the diversity within Indian

culture, as much of the submitted stories contain largely Hindu names, references, or content,

though, *Tinkle* provided a model for transforming comics into something more than a platform

for nationalist sentiment and educational reform. By appealing to everyday life in this way,

Tinkle laid a foundation of reader participation in comics culture, which later creators would

draw upon in crafting activist comics narratives and publishing companies.

  At the same time, a variety of other creators were influencing the comics medium

through stories told in comic strips. Among the important figures that creators referred to as

sources of inspiration or a sense of history for their art, Mario Miranda, Rasipuram

Krishnaswamy Iyer Laxman, and Manjula Padmanabhan stood out most strongly. Miranda,

having begun his career in cartooning in 1953 with the *Times of India* Group, later moved into

illustration and writing, including his own books *Goa with Love*, *A little World of Humor*, and

others (Miranda 2012; Ramakrishnan 2009). Meanwhile, R. K. Laxman's *Common Man*

cartoons have appeared in the *Times of India* for over six decades, within which the titular

character comments upon current events (Byatnal 2011). Following these and other cartoonists, Manjula Padmanabhan, who has worked as a playwright, artist, novelist, and continues to be involved in political cartooning, wrote and illustrated the strip, *Suki*, in Bombay's *Sunday Observer* in 1982 and later in Delhi's *Pioneer* in 1982. She presented the main character, Suki, as an Indian woman with modern sensibilities or, as *The Hindu* reviewer Mandira Moddie describes, as "…the quintessential free spirited urban Indian woman struggling to make her choices in a seriously unfriendly world" (Moddie 2005). Each of these creators, as well as several others, is remarkable because Indian newspapers seldom ran strips by indigenous authors and artists (Moddie 2005). By crafting stories about life in Indian culture today in a series of panels with all the trademarks of the form, Padmanabhan, Laxman, and Miranda each helped to develop Indian comics as a contemporary medium.

Pushing for Creativity

Before the development of long-form comics narratives, though, the medium had to be re-established. Following *ACK*, Indrajal, and *Tinkle*, several other magazines featured comics strips: *Target* magazine hosted several, including the high quality *Detective Moochwala* by Ajit Ninan (Rao 2001). By 1990, a national production and reception system proved unsustainable with the end of regular publications by *ACK* and Indrajal. At the same time, just as comics with a nationalist bias and English language base experienced a downturn, regional comics experienced a boom. The most important company to come out of this period, Raj Comics, began publishing superhero and other comics in 1986. Its rise demonstrates a broad pattern of publication coming out of Northern India and resembling the model set by *Tinkle* more than that set by *ACK*. As Kumar notes, "Then there was the mini-comic revolution in the late '80s, post the success of Raj

Comics in Hindi. There were two comics centers in India, in independent Indian history. And there has been a very large migration of artists. Earlier, there was Bombay. And there was Indrajal, there was India Book House [the publisher of *ACK*]. And then the migration happened to Delhi, with the rise of Raj Comics and Diamond Comics." Raj Comics in particular set the standard for this next shift in Indian comics' history, as creators and publishers alike turned to regional audiences over national ones. As Rao demonstrates, publishing houses in Delhi shifted focus, publishing less in English and more in Hindi or Bengali than the earlier companies had in Mumbai, and they tended to give more freedom to the creators behind the comics (Rao 2001).

At the same time, Delhi-based publisher Diamond Comics led the way for Hindi pulp publishing houses more generally to enter the comics form. Diamond grew out of Diamond Pocket Books, a pulp publisher, and focused on what Rao categorizes as the following: short gag cartoons like the famous Pran Kumar Sharma's *Pran's Features* series, action-adventure comics, and *Film Chitrakatha*, or Hindi film photo-novellas. Alongside Diamond, Raj Comics grew out of Raja Pocket Books, another Hindi pulp publisher, and specialized in Indian superheroes with clear Western influences, as well as other fantastic, humor, or action-oriented stories (Rao 2001). Raj Comics made its mark with Indian superheroes who dealt with both national and international injustice, as well as a visually detail-oriented style clearly influenced by *ACK* (Rao 2001). While other publishers like Manoj Comics also entered the comics scene in this period, Raj and Diamond have lasted the longest, with Raj described as a classic of Indian comics culture and Diamond as a benchmark due to the quality of stories like Pran's *Chacha Chaudhuri*, a satirical series with a relate-able grandfather figure as its protagonist (Rao 2001).[8] The regional focus of both of these companies allowed them to find a strong grounding among readers and to become the two leading figures in India's Golden Age of superhero comics.

Within that Golden Age, Amitabh Kumar's essay in *Raj Comics for the Hard-Headed* describes the need for a specific type of superhero. He notes that the three brothers behind Raj, namely Sanjay, Manish, and Manoj Gupta, were inspired by their own love of the comics form. He quotes Sanjay as stating that "'We were passionately in love with comics and with fantasy comics in particular. So, my brother, Manoj, and I would read *Amar Chitra Katha* and the other comics that was around at that point of time. What happens is that once something fascinates you, you begin hunting for it. We had read all the *Amar Chitra Katha* and then went to Indrajal Comic titles like *Bahadur*. But even that couldn't quench our thirst for comics'" (Kumar 2008: 22). Kumar includes their experiences in *Hard-Headed* in order to demonstrate their passion for the comics medium, especially superhero stories. Their fandom and love of Indian comics led the Gupta brothers to perceive a need for "…a uniquely Indian superhero influenced by the Indrajal superheroes" (Kumar 2008: 22). As a result, specifically after seeing a Spider-man cartoon on part of the Sunday National Television in the early 1980s, the three created Nagraj. He was envisioned as " 'a superhero who would rid the world of crime, corruption, and the newly formed word in the Indian psyche – Terrorism'" (Kumar 2008: 22). Rather than evoking any one, culturally specific vision of India, the Gupta brothers focused on the ideals of the superhero genre as a response to contemporary social problems in India.

As a result of their regional focus, Raj, Diamond, Manoj, and others tended to rely more heavily upon the creativity of the authors and artists involved as a means to appeal to local audiences. In contrast, for Mumbai-based companies like *ACK* and Indrajal, creators were generally employed freelance and were relatively less involved in the whole production process than those behind this new wave of comics, with notable exceptions like Aabid Surti and certain of Pai's collaborators (Rao 2001; McLain 2009). As multiple creators, including Kumar, note,

the lack of work available in Mumbai after the closure of these publishers led to the migration of many creators to Delhi for just such a comics production system. That same shift helped to support a particular model of production that continued despite increasing freedom for creators.

For Delhi-based publishers like Raj and Diamond, production occurs along an assembly line, from a story concept created by an editor, to a writer, illustrator, a dialogue writer, cover illustrators, and a final set of illustrators who would finalize the art, as well as any potential translators (Rao 2001). The result is often a relatively incoherent comics narrative, with multiple voices involved in the creative process who did not necessarily have the same goals or ideas for the final product. Kumar stated to me that "I don't make mainstream superhero comics. Although I'm vastly influenced and my ideas of dramaturgy are kitschy and derived from them, I cannot make those Raj Comics…Because you work with these guys and you understand what the conveyor belt is all about. It's very strange. Not one guy who makes a Raj Comic knows how to make the entire comic. The inker can't pencil, the penciller can't ink, the colorist can't do either, the person who writes just writes." Industrial models of comics production tend to focus on each aspect of the creative process as a separate job, performed by a separate employee, and coordinated by an editor or primary creator. However, as Kumar demonstrates through his commentary, this model often leads to frustration, especially as comics creators often long to do more than just one aspect of the production process. As a result, creators like Kumar draw on, but do not ascribe to, such a creative model.

Despite its controversial model of production, this period saw remarkable growth in comics culture. As Rao in particular notes, the overlap between comics readers and creators that begins in this period enriched even the pulp-inspired comics of this period with a vibrancy based upon an enthusiasm and love of the form. With such an experimental and often chaotic tone,

superhero, fantasy, and other genre comics publishers appealed less to *ACK*'s middle class readers and more to a wide variety of readers, as they were and are available more in bookstalls than bookstores. Their short form, small size, and low price made these mini-comics more accessible than the larger, educational comics of *ACK* and other publishers. Growing interest in comics like Raj and Diamond led to the development of lending libraries due to a growing practice of youths and even adults sharing copies of comics[9]. Furthermore, their vitality, irreverence, and tendency to push the comics medium toward innovation and more challenging stories set the stage for the next transformation of comics, from short to longer narratives.

Making a Place for Comics

In the move to regional comics production, long-form comics narratives too came to the fore. The work that creators most often cite as the first longer work and the impetus for the shift to longer narratives in comics culture was Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (Image 3). Sen's perennial work was first published in 1994, during the boom in regional comics like Raj and Diamond Comics. His story portrayed the experiences of *adivasi*, tribal communities dealing with the injustices created by the government's damming of the Narmada River. He describes the difficulties of finding a space for *River* at the time: "'No publisher would consider publishing something like a comic book,' Sen said. 'We were only able to publish it with the help of a small grant from the government, and the government didn't know what we were using it for, obviously'" (Sen as quoted in Overdorf 2010). Due to the lack of long-form or adult comics in book shops at the time, Sen had a great deal of difficulty finding a space for *River*. As graphic novels go, *The River of Stories* is relatively short at only 61 pages. In addition, current reproductions are distributed in a basic format: photocopied pages, spiral binding, and a clear

plastic cover; as a result, *River* remains a difficult to find but pivotal work: the first Indian graphic novel.

Yet, what defines a graphic novel in this case is not the design or format. For instance, Amitabh Kumar focuses instead on long-form comics as offering a change for creators. Instead of the industrial model of comics production generally supported in the U.S., creators like Kumar call for a focus on an auteur model of creativity through the shift to graphic novels. In such a model, "The graphic novel is pioneered by a figure. And that single figure is the artist, the singular creator. Or a collaborator. But 2 people or 3 people working together on it. But it's not something that is industry driven. It's extremely subjective and deeply personal. And that's the landscape that I operate within." While contemporary authors and artists are influenced by superhero and pulp publishers, they tend to argue against an industrial model's general abuse of creators (Sabin 2001). The graphic novel form thus offered an alternative to the industrial model of production by focusing on the power of creativity and innovation.[10]

Following Sen's pivotal work, in 2004, storyteller Sarnath Banerjee pushed for a shelf for comics and graphic novels in Indian book stores while promoting his work, *Corridor*, which was considered by some to be India's first fully realized graphic novel (Image 4). Through a combination of personal connections and persuasion, Banerjee was able to open up a space for comics in the Indian book publishing industry. At the same time, though, corporate comics culture in India was preparing for a boom that would lead to a digital model of comics publishing, albeit while generally continuing associations of comics with children and creatively shallow production models. Yet, it was as a result of Banerjee's work to open shelf space for comics in book shops that other authors were able to approach the creation of original, independent visual narratives.

An essential part of his appeal was likely grounding the creation of comics within an auteur model of creativity that is prevalent in international comics culture. In doing so, Banerjee and later creators could be understood through their exceptional creativity. Kumar describes this shift in creative philosophy as one that is simultaneously very interesting and challenging for those creators considering crafting comics narratives. "The moment that's very interesting right now, and which is something that I want to pick up my research again and carry on with it. Because there's this very interesting moment that we are a part of where, there's a great philosophy, compared to the earlier times, in the field of comics. Where a lot of amateurs are being pushed and trying to negotiate with publishing comics, web comics, modes of distribution, comic conferences…So what *Comix.India* is doing. What people from Project C are trying to do. What Pao is trying to do. There is a lot of activity. And a lot of energy, regarding the future of comics in India." A shift in focus to the independence and creative skill of comics authors and artists has led to excitement and innovation in the form.

Accordingly, comics creator Bharath Murthy spear-headed the anthologies of *Comix.India*, where amateur and more advanced authors and artists are able to collaborate and be published side by side (Murthy 2010). Similarly, the comics magazine *Project C* offers creators the opportunity to workshop their narratives and then find a home in the magazine's pages (*Project C* 2012). With the 2000s, the graphic novel has also grown into its own in Delhi's comics culture, as one aspect of a wider arts scene there. At the same time that corporate and activist publishers rose to prominence again, the boom of publications in Indian graphic novels was finally taking hold. Following Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* in 2004, he collaborated with Anindya Roy to publish *The Believers* (2006) and *Kashmir Pending* (2007) through their Phantomville Press. However, after the two parted ways as publishing partners, Banerjee

published *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* through Penguin Books. In addition, Amruta Patil published her *Kari* in 2008, to much critical acclaim, and Appupen released his socially critical *Moonward*.

From 2010 to 11, illustrator Priya Kuriyan worked with Aniruddha Sen Gupta, Aniruddha Sen Gupta in illustrating and publishing *Our Toxic World*, and Sen's former collaborator and current friend, Gautam Bhatia, published *LIE*, a work illustrated by traditional, Mughal miniature painters. The latter work became part of a wave of graphic novels that transformed the medium by re-structuring it according to traditional art styles. Thus, 2011's *Sita's Ramayan* and *I See the Promised Land* both reimagine *patua* scroll art as sequential comics narratives, while the creators behind *Bhimayana* use *Gond* painting style to tell the story of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Over that same time period, *Comix.India* published all four of its current anthologies, *Raj Comics*, *Tinkle* digest, and Liquid Comics were continuing their publication runs, and *Comics Jump* published their first runs of stories. The graphic novel was taking hold, even as various format anthologies also came onto the scene.

Most importantly, this period marked the establishment of a group of five comics creators called the Pao Collective in the publishing world, a group that includes Kumar, Sen, and Banerjee, alongside fellow creators Vishwajyoti Ghosh and Parismita Singh. Over that time, each of the five members of Pao had work published: *Tinker. Solder. Tap.* by Amitabh Kumar and Bhagwati Prasad, *A Home at the End of the World* by Parismita Singh, *The Harappa Files* by Sarnath Banerjee, *Delhi Calm* by Vishwajyoti Ghosh, and *When Kulbushan Met Stöckli*, a collection of Indian and Swedish creators' works that included Orijit Sen and Ghosh. Each of these narratives pushed the comics medium forward in the Indian context, from Singh's portrait of Assamese culture through the experiences of a young girl to Banerjee's mixing of short stories

to craft an overall narrative that is framed as the coming together of banned government files (Singh 2009; Banerjee 2011). Meanwhile, Ghosh's alternative account of the historic Emergency period in Delhi and Kumar's socially engaged and historically detailed account of television's arrival in one Delhi neighborhood both demonstrate the importance of representing not just the diversity of communities within in India, but also of experiences of history (Ghosh 2010; Kumar 2009). Finally, the collaborative landmark of *Kulbushan* shows the diversity and strength of India's comics creators, with each Indian creator working alongside another creator from Sweden in telling stories about what it means to travel across cultures.

The members of the Pao Collective are important to the larger history of comics in India because of their focus upon building a community for creators in Delhi. The Pao Collective as a group is directed toward raising the comics medium up as an independent art form or medium. Its individual, core members represent some of the most important names in Delhi and India's comics culture. Kumar originally brought the five of them together for his research with Sarai Centre for the Study of Developing Societies on India's comics culture. Following that, there naturally arose a desire to come together and share each other's work. As Kumar narrates, "It was actually all of us. Because all of us were not isolated, but we were all doing our own thing. Vishwa's book hadn't come out. Parismita's book hadn't come out. Sarnath's had. Both of them. And we really wanted to do something that was for us. Primarily, we, directly as comic book creators, profit from conversation, from responding to each other's works." Each of the members benefits from working together, like Kumar, because they are able to grow creatively based on feedback and reflection from one another. In so doing, Kumar and the other members of the collective also work to make it possible for artists and authors like themselves to make a living from creating comics alone.

In particular, they argue for the compelling quality of comics narratives and, in making such stories, they also work to develop a readership and larger community in India. Even the collective's title derives from the necessity of visual storytelling for its members; as Orijit Sen stated in an interview in 2009, "We hope to earn our daily bread from our art. Also, Pao has such a great punch-like sound to it" (Sen Qtd. in Jumdar 2009). The Pao Collective supports comics culture in India in a multitude of ways, from creating excellent visual narratives, to collaborating creatively, holding comics events, developing anthologies of creators' works for publication, and generally publicizing the creative potential of the medium as a powerful one. Separately, each of these five creators has contributed an individual voice and style to Delhi's comics community; united as the Pao Collective, though, they are able to do much more, from organizing gallery shows and book releases, to organizing and producing anthologies of creators' work, popularizing comics narratives, and changing public perceptions of their medium along the way.

Conclusion: A History of Creativity

The Pao Collective has grown out of the shift to understand comics based on authorial or artisanal skill. Thus, each creator works relatively independently, with all but Kumar illustrating and writing most, if not all, their work. Even Kumar, though, who illustrated *Tinker, Solder, Tap* but both illustrated and drew *Raj Comics for the Hard-Headed*, emphasizes author's views as central in elucidating why he works with comics. "I feel like what I do is more like a medium to transfer my thoughts, my half-chewed ideas, my sense of the world, my sense of the history of the world…Be it a writer, a philosopher, anyone, is to indicate his relationship with the world and the way he sees the world. And that is any man's journey, any man's journey is that. And that's the only real quest. So I don't know. That's what I think comics, or drawing, image-making is for me. I'm sure others would have a much more interesting answer, but for me, it gets

its importance because I can't do anything else." He places importance on the medium of comics because he, as an author, is able to communicate most clearly through that form.

Meanwhile, the comics community and culture in India, centered in Delhi, continues to grow in numbers, diversity, and strength. Each year, more artists, authors, and publishers pick up the comics form, for profit, communication, artistic experimentation, or otherwise. Within the history are many narratives that show the heights to which this culture can rise: narratives that speak to cosmopolitan and other communities in a form that grows out of comics, folk art, history, storytelling, and the experiences of everyday life, among the many other roots of Indian culture. While the strength of each entry into this tradition of comics-creation remains debate-able, with various voices criticizing artwork, storytelling, or even subject matter, each one adds to the strength of the medium and shows the importance of this kind of visual narrative in illustrating, understanding, and communicating about what it means to be a human, cultural being in the 21st century.

Within the history of Indian comics, the rise of the Pao Collective is important because they represent a means to maintain authorial control, quality production, and even artistic community. They show how contemporary creators are developing India's comics culture from an industry characterized by regionalized corporate publishers to one that, while less widely published or read and while still coming into its own, values creativity and stories true to everyday life. What is most important about this moment, historically, is the shift to a production model that emphasizes creativity, innovation, and community engagement. What is most important, creatively, though, is that doing so enables creators to craft a medium that is beyond literature and beyond art, but rather something else entirely: a living comics form that does not need justification in relation to other media.

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[1] The most notable of the few exceptions that address graphic novels and independent comics are Suhaan Mehta's "Wondrous Capers: The Graphic Novel in India" in *Multicultural comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* (2010), Paul Gravett's "Indian Comics: A Visual Renaissance" (2010), and Dipavali Debroy's "The Graphic Novel in India: East Transforms West" (2011).

[2] Throughout, I am basing my work on recordings and transcriptions of conversations with Amitabh Kumar, as well as many other creators and editors in Delhi in Fall of 2010.

[3] Kumar is incredibly productive, having also worked as a visiting faculty member for the Srishti College of Art and Design and has curated a year-long experimental art space in Sarai CSDS, as well as an exhibition in the Zacheta National Gallery in Warsaw, Poland.

[4] *ACK* published original material starting in 1967, while Indrajal only did so beginning in 1976, with Aabid Surti's *Bahadur*, though the latter began publishing Western imports in 1964.

[5] Hasan argues that the *Punches* led to the establishment of vernacular press, particularly concerned with independence from British rule (2007).

[6] In particular, Kumar is likely referencing the work of the *Dastangoi*, a group who retells several hundred year old Islamic stories through the use of language and expressive hand gestures. They draw on the historical evidence of storytelling traditions surrounding the *Daastan-E-Amir Haamza* in performing these traditional stories for contemporary, youth audiences (Kapur 2011).

[7] Similar to Raj Comics, *Amar Chitra Katha* separated the production of comics into each of the separate steps, such that each story was created by multiple individuals performing different tasks. Editors, headed by Anant Pai, coordinated the various members of the production team in order to make stories cohere. See McLain's work in particular on this process (2009).

[8] Created by Pran Kumar Sharma in the 1960s, Chacha Chaudhury has become a legendary figure in Indian comics culture and a continuing presence in narratives and at events. Pran himself has become an instructor at the Indian Institute of Cartoonists after publishing over 400 comic, along with several more comic strips ("Pran" 2012; Talwar 2008).

[9] See Karline McLain's *India's Immortal Picture Stories* (2009) for further references to comics lending libraries that proliferated in the past.

[10] This shift generally combines conceptions of folk artisans with the filmic model of auteur analysis to catalyze a reinvention of the comics creator as a master of visual storytelling.

Image 1

The cover of *Raj Comics for the Hard-Headed*, by Amitabh Kumar, (Delhi: Sarai Programme, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2008).

Image 2

Photograph of a mural by Amitabh Kumar painted in the Sarai Center for the Study of Developing Societies Media Lab. Photograph by the author.

Image 3

An image from near the beginning of *The River of Stories*, by Orijit Sen, (New Delhi: Kalpavriksha, 1994) p.9.
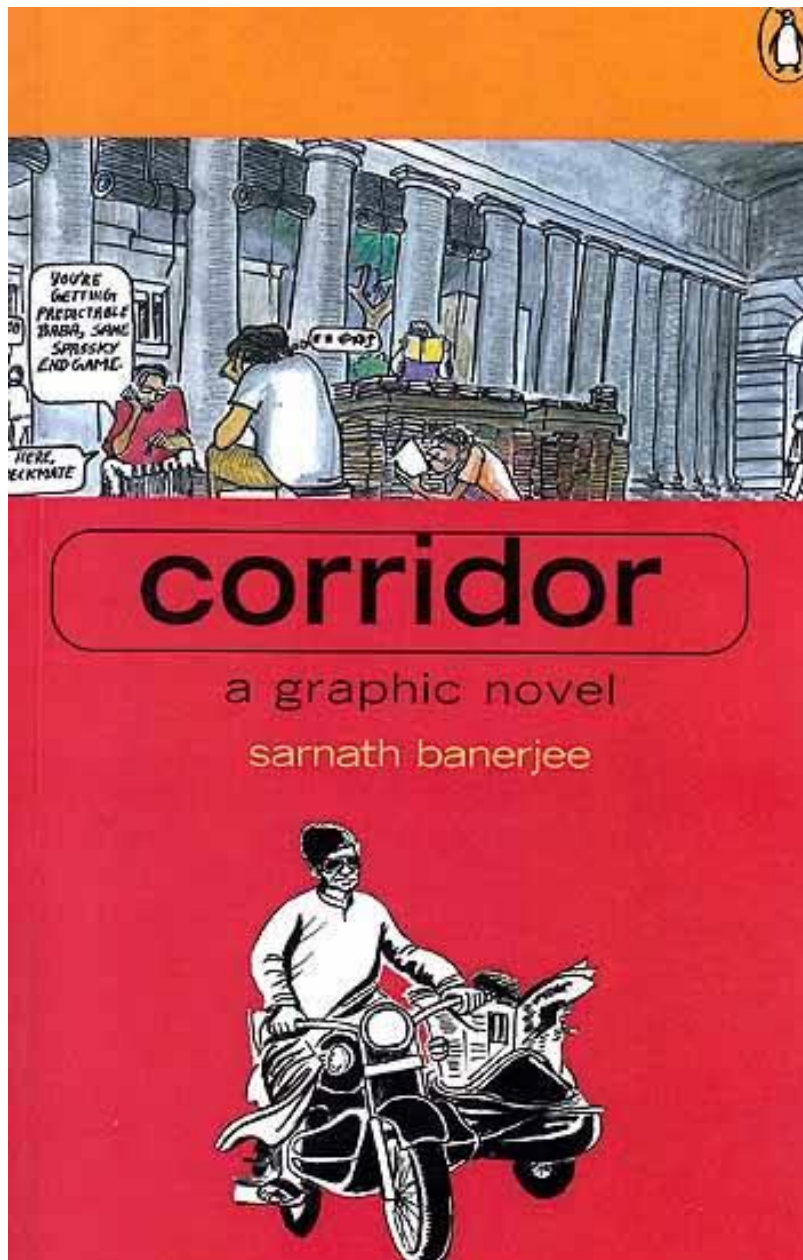
Image 4

Cover of *Corridor: A Graphic Novel*, by Sarnath Banerjee, (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2004)

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