

Politeja

No. 2(59), 2019, pp. 161-176

<https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.16.2019.59.11>**Marcin CIEMNIEWSKI** 

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INDIAN SPOOKS

WHAT HINDI COMIC BOOK READERS ARE AFRAID OF

ABSTRACT

The comic book industry in India began in 1950. Back then leading American comic books like *The Phantom*, *Flash Gordon* and *Rip Kirby* started to be published in India and translated into local languages. Indian youngsters in no time became interested in the new medium, especially in superhero comics known from the American popular culture. The success of these translations encouraged local publishers and cartoonists to create Indian themed comic books, set in India with Indian heroes (and superheroes) – even though Indian comics were still strongly influenced by American ones, mainly in terms of esthetics. However, around 1950, American comics publishing companies also tried to attract adult readers by presenting more adult content in a form of horror and thriller stories. Publishers in India quickly adapted this trend launching a very popular comic book series in Hindi of thrill, horror and suspense. In this way horror – till then almost completely absent from Indian literature and popular culture – was introduced to the local audience. The question remains, how different are those local spooks from the American ones and finally: what are Indians afraid of?

Key words: comic book, graphic novel, horror, India, Hindi, Raj Comics

India has a rich tradition of pictorial narrative. The tradition of telling stories from pictures painted on different surfaces goes back as far as to 11th century India. It was then when bards called *maṅkha* or *māgadha* were wandering the country with picture boards using them as a visual representation of religious stories they sang¹. Even today Indian folk traditions are full of visual narratives. Just to mention *paṭuā* storytellers from West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and Odisha or their counterparts, called *citrakathi*, from Maharashtra who present stories by narrating them frame by frame from a big scroll. There is also a *paṭ* painting of local priests from Bhopā community that depicts stories from the Rajasthani epic of Pābūjī², not to mention a strongly visual culture of Gondi people from central India, whose decorative patterns painted on the mud floors and walls have evolved over time into some kind of a visual language.

It seems that for Indians it has always been pretty clear that telling a story means also showing the story. No wonder then that Indians, who have always loved visual storytelling, eventually turned towards comic books. But even if they created such rich visual traditions, it cannot be said that a comic or a cartoon was indigenous to India, or that it was a natural result of the development of Indian visual culture. Firstly, traditional pictorial narratives in India were of a mostly performative nature and they were usually used for religious purposes. Unlike comic books, they were never meant for individual reading, but were presented by professional storytellers.

It is considered that Indian comic book industry dates back to 1850 when *Delhi Sketch Book* – the very first issue of western-imitating magazine of caricature and parody – was published in colonial India³. The magazine was inspired by *Punch*, the English satirical weekly magazine, and, in fact, it was not fully Indian since it was addressed to Britons and its content focused on their colonial life. Moreover, *Delhi Sketch Book* was full of cartoons – single illustrations, but not comics, understood as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer”⁴.

Comic books started to be popular in India only around 1950s and 60s when imported American and European comics (i.e. *Tintin*, *Asterix & Obelix*, *Superman*) appeared in the country. It was quite an expensive form of entertainment, so readers of those comic books were limited almost only to wealthy kids who had at least a fair command of the English language. Everything changed in 1960 when the publisher of *The Times of India*, Bennet, Coleman & Co., launched *Indrajal Comics* where American

¹ A.L. Basham, *History and Doctrine of the Ājīvikas. A Vanished Indian Religion*, Delhi 2002, p. 35; P. Balcerowicz, *Early Asceticism in India. Ājīvikism and Jainism*, New York 2016, p. 58.

² The epic of Pābūjī depicted on the scroll (*pābūjī ro paṭ*) is one of many Rajasthani religious stories which are presented in this form (e.g. *devnārāyaṇ ro paṭ*, *gogāji ro paṭ*, *tejāji ro paṭ*).

³ J.A. Lent, “Introduction”, in: *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning. Cute, Cheap, Mad and Sexy*, Bowling Green 1999, p. 2.; P. Mitter, “Punch” and Indian Cartoons: *The Reception of a Transnational Phenomenon*, in: H. Harder, B. Mitter (eds.), *Asian Punches. A Transcultural Affair*, Heidelberg 2013, pp. 57-64

⁴ S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, New York 1994, p. 9.

comic *The Phantom*, created by Lee Falk, was published in English. A mysterious figure sporting a mask, called The Ghost Who Can Walk⁵, was the very first American superhero introduced to the Indian audience on a large scale. Later on *The Phantom* and other popular American comics started to be translated into Hindi and other Indian languages. Only after that did the range of comic books readers in India significantly increase.

It did not take long before *Indrajal Comics* started publishing other American superhero comic strips as: Flash Gordon⁶ and Mandrake the Magician⁷. In no time Indians loved a new medium and new, larger than life characters who were equipped with incredible tools and had unusual superpowers. After that a huge wave of comic books flooded the country – new publishers lured by the popularity of a brand new genre appeared, and more and more American and European comics were printed in a form of cheap comic magazines. Soon enough also traditional Indian stories started to be presented in this form.

In 1967 *Amar Chitra Katha (Immortal Comic Stories)* was founded by Anant Pai (who even earned a nickname of the Indian Walt Disney). This comic book series presents stories based on great Indian epics, Indian history and religion. It all started when Pai, while watching a TV game show for kids, discovered that young contestants were not able to answer questions on Indian mythology and history⁸. Therefore, *Amar Chitra Katha's* aim is to teach Indian kids about their own heritage, and every single issue of this series is supposed to be thoroughly researched in terms of accuracy of a comic book's content.

Without any doubt, *Amar Chitra Katha* has been a great success⁹, and right now it is one of India's largest comic book series with 440 titles created and more than 90

⁵ Phantom is an immortal, legendary hero who has been fighting crime for more than four hundred years. That is why he got a nickname of The Ghost Who Can Walk. In fact, there is a whole dynasty of Phantoms and there have been more than twenty of them. Generally the task of fighting crime is passed from father to son, although there is one woman who played this role for a while, when the 17th Phantom got injured in a fight.

⁶ Flash Gordon is a hero created by Alex Raymond in 1934 and his adventures became one of the most popular comic strips of the 1930s in the US. Flash Gordon is a polo player. One day he gets kidnapped by a scientist, Dr. Zarkov, who wants to save the world from an evil emperor from the distant planet Mongo. Indian publishing house – Nutan Pocket Books even launched a series of comic books about Meghadoot (meghdūt), a hero inspired by Flash Gordon.

⁷ Mandrake the Magician is a hero created by Lee Falk in 1934. His main superpower is ability to create illusions and hypnosis which he uses to fight criminals. This character is regarded to be the first comics' superhero.

⁸ F.W. Pritchett, "The World of Amar Chitra Katha", in L.A. Babb, S.S. Wadley (eds.), *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia*, Delhi 1997, p. 76.

⁹ But even this did not protect Anant Pai from minor controversies when his so called educational and instructive comics were accused of misogyny, racial and religious intolerance. See: S. Aamin, "The Dark Side of The Comics That Redefined Hinduism", *The Atlantic*, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/12/the-comics-that-redefined-hinduism>, 19 January 2018]; J. A. Rao, *Goddess/ Demon, Warrior/ Victim: Representations of Women in Indian Comics*, in A. Lent (ed.), "Introduction", pp. 165-184.

million copies sold in 20 Indian languages up to date. It is also often considered to be the origin of the indigenous Indian comic book genre – most probably because it tells fully Indian stories, almost completely free from the influences of American comic books' esthetics¹⁰. Moreover, initially Anant Pai even tried to distinguish Hindu gods from American superheroes who were loved for their unnatural superpowers. In order to do so, he eliminated all the miracles and fantastical elements from the comics based on Hindu mythology. Hence, the first edition of a comic devoted to Krishna did not present him lifting the Govardhana Mountain, for this particular act could not be scientifically explained. Soon enough readers started showing their dissatisfaction and Pai was forced to publish a revised version of the comic book in 1980¹¹. That may prove not only Indians' attachment to the tradition, but also their interest in supernatural, that might have been aroused by American comic books of the superhero genre.

Almost 10 years later, in 1978, *Diamond Comics* from New Delhi introduced Faulādi Singh (faulādi sirh) – the very first Indian superhero who was not a god. This character was created from elements known already from American comics. Fauladi Singh, like many other American superheroes, gained his extraordinary talents thanks to the scientific experiment and, exactly like the Phantom, hides his identity under a tiny mask and a special shield-costume. The only thing that can remind readers that he is an Indian hero, is his characteristic mustache. Nevertheless, this was the first serious effort of the local comic scene to rival Western superheroes.

Readers had shown a great interest in a local superhero, so Indian publishers (Nutan Comics, Tulsi Comics, Fort Comics, Manoj Comics, Durga Comics, Raj Comics etc.) decided to strike while the iron was still hot and started publishing their own original comic books set in India with Indian characters. In the 1980s, even movie star Amitabh Bachchan became a superhero called Supremo in a comic book series *kisse amitābh ke* (in English published as *The Adventures of Amitabh Bachchan*) by Star Comics. The co-creators of the comic were equally as stellar as Bachchan himself – the series was developed by Pammi Bakshi, an editor of *Movie* magazine, Gulzar¹² – a prolific poet, songwriter and movie director – was responsible for scripts of the first issues of the comic, and a character of Supremo was designed by Pratap Mullick, who was an illustrator of *Amar Chitra Katha*. The fact that several big names of Indian popular culture of the time were involved in one series may only prove that comics became quite an important phenomenon in the country around the 1980s.

¹⁰ Sometimes the genesis of Indian comic book scene is linked to a monthly magazine *Chandamama* that was launched in 1947 by a Telugu movie producer Bommireddy Nagi Reddy. Although it was richly illustrated it did not have a comic book form. See: K. McLain, *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes*, Bloomington 2009, pp. 14, 47; F. Bramlett, R.T. Cook, A. Meskin (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, New York 2017, p. 89.

¹¹ K. McLain, "Holy Superheroine: A Comic Book Interpretation of the Hindu Devī Māhātmya Scripture", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, vol. 71, no. 2, p. 299.

¹² Gulzar is a pen name of Sampooran Singh Kalra (born 18 August 1934), he was awarded Padma Bhushan in 2004, one of the highest civilian awards in India.

LOCAL HORROR COMIC BOOKS

This brief history of the Indian comic book industry clearly shows that it has been under the great influence of American and – to a lesser degree – European comic culture. Even if everything would have had started from *Delhi Sketch Book* in 1850, as indicated before, it was still just an imitation of a British cartoon magazine that was extremely popular at the time. Esthetically wise, and to some extent, thematically wise, Indian comic books were based on the Western ones. And the reason for that is really simple – those were available in India in the 1950s and 1960s when the comic boom hit the country, and when the local comic books esthetics was slowly being shaped.

As far as American comics following the post-World War II period, new genres such as: crime, horror, and science fiction gained popularity. They were supposed to attract more adult readers by introducing more adult content into comics that had been seen simply as entertainment for children. Eventually even superhero comics incorporated horror motifs, thus vampires, zombies and other spooks started playing role of villains whom a hero had to fight with¹³. After some time, comics sold in the United States were mostly of crime and horror. Titles like *Crime Does Not Pay*¹⁴ and *Tales from the Crypt*¹⁵ were extremely popular amongst American readers¹⁶. Those, however, were not presented via translations to Indian readers of that time. In the 1950s and 1960s Indians were interested almost only in superheroes based on the American ones, and in Indian traditional stories published by *Amar Chitra Katha*. But publishers in India did keep an eye on the US market, and having observed a great boom of spooky comics in the US, they finally – almost thirty years later – decided to adapt this trend and introduce horror and thriller to the local audience. Through trial and error Indian publishers and cartoonists, mainly from the Hindi belt, have created a fully local horror comic, awash with Indian spooks haunting Indian citizens in Indian cities and villages. It is worth mentioning, that horror – till then almost completely absent from Indian literature and popular culture – was for the very first time introduced to the local audience on a large scale¹⁷.

¹³ For example Batman fights vampires four times (*Detective Comics* Issue 31 and 32, *Night of the Bat*, *The Batman Vs. Dracula*). There are even stories where Batman transforms into a vampire for a while (*Red Rain: Blood Lust*, *Night of the Bat*).

¹⁴ An American comic book series published from 1942 to 1955, known for its violent artwork. According to covers of *Crime Does Not Pay* it had a monthly readership of six millions.

¹⁵ A horror comic series published from 1950 to 1955. *Tales from the Crypt* stopped being published in 1955 when the Comics Code Authority (CCA) was created as a means of censorship of comic books in the United States. The CCA stipulated that vampires, werewolves, ghouls, zombies etc. could not be portrayed, also usage of words “horror” and “terror” in the titles was forbidden.

¹⁶ P. Lopes, “Culture and Stigma: Popular Culture and the Case of Comic Books”, in *Sociological Forum*, vol. 21, no. 3 (September 2003), p. 399.

¹⁷ One may argue that horror elements were present in Sanskrit folk stories from the collection of *Twenty Five Tales of Vetāl* (sanskrit. *vetālapañcaviṃśati*, hin. *vetāl pacīsi*) that are popular in India even today. The main character and a narrator of the stories is vetāl – a demon figure known from the Hindu

In the United States horror motifs appeared at first in crime and detective comics, where investigators, instead of regular crimes, started facing some weird and eerie elements¹⁸. Indian publishers accustomed their local audience to a new genre in the very same manner. Initially, paranormal and spooky elements had been included in superhero comics (i.e. Fauladi Singh Bhootnath¹⁹), later on in comics on adventures of popular local detectives (i.e. Bahadur²⁰, Ram-Rahim²¹). The new subgenre quickly gained popularity in India, and a few publishers (i.e. Fort Comics) tried to make profit out of this new trend by bringing out their cheap (in terms of price and content), bloody comics almost entirely deprived of not only plot, but also common sense²². Finally, the biggest publishing houses launched their own Hindi comic cycles fully devoted to horror and thriller. Manoj Comics issued a few such series, including: *bhūtpret-mantṛtantr* (*Ghosts and Magic*), *khaufnāk rahasyamay romāñcāk* (*Horror, Mystery and Thriller*) and *thrill ekśān adveñcar* (*Thrill, Action and Adventure*). They even run a series on indigenuous Indian eerie stories called *jāduī vicitr lok kathāēm* (*Magical Eerie Local Stories*). Without any doubt, however, the most popular and successful Indian horror comic book series has been *thrill hāmṛar saspaiṁs* (*Thrill, Horror and Suspense*) launched by Raj Comics in the 1980s. In this way Hindi became a mother tongue for the local spooks for quite a long time.

Covers and flashy titles of those horror comic books themselves can bring some interesting observations. Words that appear most often in the titles of these comics books are: blood (*khūn, rakt*) or bloody (*khūnī*), ghost or demon (*pret, bhūt*), corpse (*lāś, murdā*) and death (*maut*). The titles show that for Indians the scariest places are

mythology who inhabits cremation grounds. In European languages *vetāl* is often translated as a “vampire”, which is not entirely accurate, since this character does not feed on human blood. However, *Twenty Five Tales of Vetāl* are definitely not horrors – they are rather legends and fables. In 1985 a TV series, aired on public television channel *dūrdarsan*, based on *vetāl pacīsī* was created, and even children’s magazine *Chandamama* published stories of *vetāl*.

¹⁸ This early horror subgenre, called “weird menace” or “shudder pulps”, was popular in the 1930s and ‘40s. It was famous for its brutality. See: R.K. Jones, *The Shudder Pulps: A History of the Weird Menace Magazines of the 1930s*, Rockville 2007.

¹⁹ Yet another Indian comic book superhero inspired by Lee Falk’s Phantom. This hero was extremely popular in the 1980s. Comics that consists of horror elements are: *bhūthnāth aur khūnī kilā* (*Bhutnath and the Bloody Fort*), and *bhūthnāth aur havelī ke pret* (*Bhutnath and the Haunted House*).

²⁰ Bahadur is a popular Indian comic book hero created in 1976 by Aabid Surti. Comics about adventures of Bahadur were published in various Indian languages (Hindi, Bengali, and English) till 1990.

²¹ Ram-Rahim is a comic book series by Manoj Comics about two teenage secret agents (Double Secret Agents 00½). Apart from investigating robberies, kidnapping cases etc., they fight with different monsters, uncanny scientists, and creatures from outer space.

²² A perfect example of such titles are: *mahāpīśācinī* (*The Great Demoness*) and *narbhakṣī camgādar* (*Cannibal Bats*) by Fort Comics. The former tells a story of a wicked demoness who decides to rule the world because she is tired of eating innocent people only to upchuck them later in front of a statue of a dreadful god she worships. The latter is about a strange group of bat-people who feed on human flesh. Those comics are full of gore scenes like eating decapitated heads or grinding people in a special machine in order to extract their blood etc. See mahēś datt śarmā, *mahāpīśācinī*, forṭ kāmiks, saṁkhyā 13, dillī; vinay mohan, miḍve, *narbhakṣī camgādar*, forṭ kāmiks, saṁkhyā 16, dillī.

haunted houses (*khūnī havelī kā rahasyā* [*The mystery of the Bloody Mansion*], *bhūt mahāl* [*The Haunted Mansion*] etc), which is no surprise since abandoned, mysterious old mansions are scary to the audience in almost every single part of the world. They are also terrified by idols and statues (*khūnī mūrti* [*The Bloody Statue*], *khūnī mūrti kā rahasyā* [*The mystery of the Bloody Statue*]), family members who clearly are always ready to cast a curse or kill someone by accident (*dādīśāp* [*Grandmother's Curse*] *bhūtbaccā* [*The Haunted Child*], *MMS dādā* [*MMS Grandfather*] etc.), and detached body parts (*lās ke ṭukre* [*Parts of the Corpse*], *khūnī jabrā* [*The Bloody Jaw*] etc.). But those are pretty popular spooks all around the world. Interestingly, it seems that Indians find railway stations and trains scary (*hatyārī tren* [*The Deadly Train*], *gārī bulā rahī hai* [*The Train is Calling*], *maut kā sṭeśān* [*The Death's Station*]) – which are the places where an average Indian citizen spends a lot of their time. Also rich people or their wealth scare them (*daulat āī maut lāī* [*The Death Came after Wealth*], *jahrīlī daulat* [*The Poisonous Wealth*]).

What may come across as a surprise, since spooks were supposed to be of Indian origin, is the fact that Dracula is also present in these local comic books. However, Indian Dracula is nothing like the figure known from European and American horror stories. Firstly– Dracula in India is no longer a vampire. He was created by the wicked professor Satan (*śaitān*) by injecting a mysterious fluid into a toddler's corpse. Therefore, similarly to lots of American superheroes and villains, the local Dracula is a result of a medical experiment and remains more of a ferocious evildoer than a vampire.

Dracula visits India for the first time in *bhūtmahal* (*The Haunted Mansion*), a comic book from the Ram-Rahim series by Manoj Comics. The whole story of the series with Dracula playing the villain character, focuses on him plotting a dastardly revenge on teenage secret agents who are always one step ahead of the Satan's creature and disclose his evil deeds. Over several instalments of the series²³ Dracula keeps growing stronger, and evolves from a rather harmless, childish monster to a savage villain from outer space who is so powerful, that no one seems to be able to stop him. He even clashes with Spiderman, Superman and Batman [*sic!*] in *ḍrākyulā kā pretjāl* (*Dracula's Evil Net*). Proud American superheroes underestimate evil from South Asia, and, as a result, Indian Dracula effortlessly constrains them, and goes after more challenging foes – the local heroes. Only they have the right power to defeat the great villain created on Indian soil.

It seems that bringing Western superheroes, still extremely popular in India at the time, and making them fight with a local villain, was most probably calculated on evoking national pride amongst readers, who could see for the very first time their own homegrown heroes as more skilled, and more resourceful than their American counterparts²⁴. In a way the local Dracula ironically cracks down on Western elements present

²³ Comic books of Ram-Rahim series with Dracula as a villain are as follows: *bhūtmahal* (*Haunted House*), *ḍrākyulā bālak* (*Child Dracula*), *ḍrākyulā kī vāpsī* (*Dracula Returns*), *ḍrākyulā dillī meṃ* (*Dracula in Delhi*), *phir āyā ḍrākyulā* (*Dracula Strikes Again*), *ḍrākyulā kā pretjāl* (*Dracula's Evil Net*) and *ḍrākyulā āyā maut lāyā* (*Dracula Came Bringing the Destruction*).

²⁴ This is not the only time when American superheroes appear in Indian comic books, and their powers turn out to be useless in India. In a comic book titled *nāgrāj aur jādūgār śākūrā* (*Nagraj and Wizard*

in Indian comic book scene. He was created out of American ingredients of superhero mythology only to destroy them later in an uneven fight. This quick comic fight could have indicated that the time of local heroes, local villains and local problems has finally come to the Indian comic book culture, if not for the fact that the later avatar of local Dracula from *ḍrākyulā kā pretjāl* seems to resemble Red Skull²⁵ – an American arch villain known from Captain America comics by Marvel²⁶. The similarity is clearly visible in those drawings, where Dracula's skull-like face turns bloody red with anger.

In fact Spiderman, Batman and Superman do not fight a desperado from South Asia who shows some unusual cunning, but a slightly distorted mirror image of well-known Western comic book elements reflected in a character of the local Dracula. The Indian hero observes the way his American counterparts fight and emulates their style in a slightly different (local?) manner in order to achieve his private goals. Thus, one may wonder if this local Dracula was truly Indian, since he was brought to life in a way a lot of Western superheroes and villains were, and finally ended up looking like one of Marvel's evildoers. It appears that the clash between Spiderman, Superman, Batman and local Dracula was just a comic representation of Indian approach towards comic esthetics, where "local" was being created out of Western elements.

WHAT MAKES A HORROR?

The question arises, then, how those Indian horror comic books differ from American ones, if so? First of all, even though the local horror comics are quite often dark and brutal in terms of the plot, the drawings and the presented world are not as gloomy as one might have expected. The first page of such a comic book is usually full of information that a story should not be read by children or people with a weak heart because of its terrifying nature²⁷. However, this is just a gimmick. The next pages make it re-

Śakura) Superman, Batman and Spiderman cannot break a spell of evil Śakura, therefore a Hindu guru has to come to the rescue.

²⁵ A villain created by Joe Simon, Jack Kirby and France Herron in 1941. Red Skull is an alter ego of Johann Schmidt, who was trained by Adolf Hitler to become a spy. Schmidt wears a red, rubber skull-like mask given to him by Hitler. Although Red Skull doesn't have any superpowers, he has a great strategic mind and has access to powerful weapons, out of which the most infamous one is the "dust of death" – a poisonous gas that makes the skin on victim's head shrivel, burn and changes it eventually into a red skull. Schmidt gets exposed to the "dust of death" once, so he does not need to wear a mask anymore.

²⁶ An American comic book company founded in 1939. The most popular superheroes of Marvel are: Spiderman, Captain America, Iron Man, Thor etc.

²⁷ A few examples of such warnings: "Beware! Before reading this comic book check your heart first if it is not weak" (*sāvdhān! is kāmīks ko parhne se pable apne apne dil ṭaṭol leṃ kahīm vah kamzor to nahīm?*), in: vinod kumār, pradīp sonī, *bavāl*, saṃkhyā 542, dillī, p. 1; "Caution! Our sensitive readers are asked not to read – under no circumstances – this gloomy comic book at night". (*ceṭāvnī! kamzor dil ke hamāre pāṭhak is bhūtiyā kāmīks ko rāt meṃ hargiz na parheṃ!*), in: mīnu vāhī, rāhul va gopāl, *bhayānak*, rāj kāmīks, saṃkhyā 404, dillī, p. 1; "Beware! This is not a comic book, this is a current of 11000 volts!" (*sāvdhān! yah kāmīks nahīm, 11,000 volṭ kā karant hai!*), in: taruṇ kumār vāhī, *pratāp mulik*, *candū zindā mar jā*, rāj kāmīks, saṃkhyā 432, dillī, p. 1.

ally hard for the readers to believe in those warnings. Unlike American *Tales from the Crypt* or European horror comics of Italian *fumetti neri* movement²⁸, Indian comics are mostly full of bright colors. Hardly ever does a reader see large black spots or other dark colors here and there that could indicate that the presented story is a horror. Basically, the scariest elements of those comics are speech balloons with warnings, and their covers, that are generally quite dark and at the same time rather loosely related to the content of a comic book²⁹.

What decides, then, that a certain comic book was perceived by Indians as horror, since the spookiest elements of those were either adapted from the Western ones, or did not exactly match the local content? The answer is pretty simple: monsters and other beings, the existence of which science denies.

Monsters are never a natural part of the presented world, they come from inaccessible to mortals, distant, and marginal places, such as: graveyards, outer space, or cursed islands³⁰. The most popular monsters that appear in horrors all around the world include: ghosts, space monsters or demonically possessed children. Another popular motif of horror stories are creatures that are both living and dead (i.e. zombies) and inanimate objects that seem to be animate (haunted houses, dolls, cars). All of them can be found in Indian horror comic books as well.

Surprisingly, many of the monsters from Indian horror comic books tend to reside in cemeteries, where graves are decorated with crosses. This might seem a little bit odd, since those are not a noticeable part of the Indian landscape. One would expect haunted cremation grounds or Muslim tombstones, rather than a stereotypical vision of Christian cemeteries so characteristic of Western horrors. However, in this regard local horror comic books are pretty consistent – Western-like graveyards seem to be the natural environment for spooks, like zombies, adapted from Western eerie stories. Moreover, those monsters need to be neutralized by methods and tools known from Western world, and a comic *cikhtā kabristān* (*The Screaming Graveyard*)³¹ makes that pretty clear, when a local Christian-like cemetery gets taken over by zombies. None of the Indian characters know how to control the situation, but luckily all of the sudden a Christian priest comes to the rescue with a bottle of holy water in hand (regardless of the fact that vampires, not zombies, are afraid of holy water). After this momentous victory, the situation gets even more complicated, as it turns out that the swarm of zombies was summoned by an undead Hindu tantric who was performing profound meditation at the very same graveyard. To free a restless Hindu spirit, so that it could rest in eternal peace, the priest now has to perform Hindu rites (*samādhi*). Apparently,

²⁸ *Fumetti Neri* (Black Comics) is a comic subgenre born in Italy in the 1960s. Those comics were designed for an adult reader and present dark, brutal stories quite often of sexual nature. The most popular *fumetti neri* comic magazines are: *Kriminal*, *Satanik* and *Diabolik*.

²⁹ In fact, this was not a new thing to Indian readers. Lots of local pulp publications (i.e. Hindi detective and erotic novels) had flashy, eye-catching covers that had nothing to do with their content.

³⁰ N. Carroll, "The Nature of Horror", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 46, no. 1 (1987), p. 57.

³¹ rājā, surendr suman, *cikhtā kabristān*, rāj kāmiks, saṁkhyā 337, dillī.

what works on the Western menace, seems totally of no use when it comes to the local spooks. But this is not the only case when encountering a spook in India seems quite problematic.

INDIAN FRIGHTS

Every horror story also needs to consist of a monster of supernatural origin who acts as an obstacle, as a representation of chaos and a disturbance of the natural order³². What can surprise a reader accustomed to Western horror stories, is the fact that local monsters tend to guard the natural order, and execute justice, rather than disturb it. Even if they resort to somewhat extreme methods, Indian ghosts, zombies and all sorts of spooks haunt mainly wicked people who had committed a crime before. So, what goes overlooked by the law enforcements, does not go unnoticed by the netherworld.

It is about time to encounter a few of local spooks. The first of them is Baval (*bavāl*)³³ – a horrifying tree-like monster whose half-rotten body is swarmed with worms. Who would have known that this unpleasant monster used to be a fair and square pharmacist? One day he learns that his nephew used his company to trade fake medicines. Upon that, the nephew along with a couple of friends kills him. And now Baval is after the ruthless relative and his partners in crime. Only after the last member of the gang has been killed, Baval reaches peace, for he cleared the earth from the criminal element.

Another example of an atypical Indian spook can be found in a story of *khūn sane hāth* (*The Bleeding Hand*)³⁴. It all starts when a group of moviemakers kills a shark while shooting a movie. Soon enough a reader learns that if one is able to kill an animal, they eventually will not turn away from killing a human being. And this is exactly what happens. The moviemakers have to stay at the sea because of the storm. They have nothing to eat so rather sooner than later the idea appears that one of them should be killed in order to be eaten. Soon after that a severed hand starts to haunt the movie-makers who brutally dismembered a friend of theirs. Of course, this is the hand of justice that belongs to the eaten member of the group.

There is also a story of mutant amoeba (*amibā*)³⁵ that seeks a revenge on its creators. In order to grow the amoeba, Doctor Kambali tricks an innocent boy, who is worried about his dying father, into stealing a bucket of blood from a devoted follower of goddess Kali. The boy loses his father, and the follower of Kali, deprived of blood is no longer able to pay homage to the goddess. The natural order has been disturbed and now only the mutant amoeba is able to restore it. And the amoeba does it nicely by killing the evil Doctor Kambali.

³² N. Carroll, "The Nature of Horror", p. 32.

³³ vinod kumār, pradīp sonī, *bavāl*, rāj kāmiks, saṁkhyā 542, dillī.

³⁴ taruṇ kumār vāhī, sañjay aṣṭputre *khūn sane hāth*, rāj kāmiks, saṁkhyā 473, dillī.

³⁵ *amibā*, rāj kāmiks, saṁkhyā 563, dillī.

Finally, there is also a demonical hearse (*śav vāhan*)³⁶. The possessed vehicle tries to call attention of Indian officials to the issue of burying poor, homeless people who live and die on the streets of Indian towns.

Sometimes it happens that local monsters even cooperate with law enforcement authorities. In a comic *tahalkā* (*Panic*)³⁷ a group of creepy demons led by the ghost of Professor Panic saves India from plunging into chaos. The demons themselves would not even think of disturbing Indians if not for the evil brother of Professor Panic, who tries to misuse the dark power he does not understand. Therefore, spooks need to advise police officers how they should send them back to the netherworld. Along with that, the ghost of the professor helps police to collect clues in order to piece together the details of the person responsible for that entire spooky mess. Without this kind of demonical help, the police would be more than clueless and capturing the evildoer could be impossible.

Moreover, local spooks tend to have moral dilemmas, too. Such a story is presented in a comic book *pret ankal* (*Ghost Uncle*)³⁸, where a terrifying ghost Jacob³⁹ makes friends with a little girl who is threatened by a gang of bandits. To save the girl, the ghost takes her to the underworld where – the plot is pretty clear about it – she feels safe. This plot twist gives a reader a very rare opportunity to learn the rules that are observed in the place that should inspire awe. As it turns out, in the Indian branch of the netherworld, drinking blood, among other things, is strictly prohibited, but – what is more important – local spooks cannot feel any kind of desire for revenge. That becomes quite an issue for the kind ghost uncle, for he would love to teach a lesson to the bandits who bothered the girl, especially that the very same bandits have killed him before. Now Jacob has to decide whether he should follow the netherworld's noble-minded principles or abandon them to make things right.

Indian comic horrors are full of stories of this kind, where what is supposed to horrify a reader, what is supposed to be an obstacle, in reality upholds the law, order and decency. In most cases the local spooks turn out to even be quite nice. And why is that? Don't Indians know how to scare a reader?

It seems that two factors need to be observed here. First of all, in India – as in the rest of the world – comic books used to be considered poor-quality entertainment for kids. In the US, horror comics were introduced in order to attract an adult reader, so publishers and cartoonists started focusing on the dark corners of the human soul, exposing readers to brutality and terror. In India this trend was just blindly copied from the US market – horror comic books started being published, but still as a source of entertainment for the youngsters. And since India has a rich tradition of instructive stories (i.e. *Pañcatantra*, *Akbar Birbal* stories), also a new genre of comic books have served

³⁶ taruṇ kumār vāhī, vivek mohan, nareś kumār *śav vāhan*, rāj kāmiks, saṁkhyā 664, dillī.

³⁷ mīnū vāhī, taruṇ kumār vāhī, *tahalkā*, rāj kāmiks, saṁkhyā 14, dillī.

³⁸ *pret ankal*, rāj kāmiks, dillī.

³⁹ Jacob the ghost appears in nine more comic books by Raj Comics, (i.e. *bhūtrājā* [*The King of Ghosts*]), which all together make up the *Ghost Uncle Series* (*pret ankal sīrīz*).

an instructive function. Therefore, a young reader of those horror comic books can learn that lust for someone else's wealth and fortune can only bring misery and death, that being cruel to the weaker ones does not pay, and being deceitful is never a solution. The moral that comes from this is quite simple – as long as one is a decent human being with a pure heart, they do not need to worry about creatures of supernatural origin, for those care only about bringing the wicked ones to justice.

The second factor is the fact that in India superhero stories were extremely popular when the comic culture was growing. At first Indians enjoyed American superheroes, and after some time they shifted their love to the local ones. For an average Indian comic book reader, a comic was almost always linked to a superhero figure. When the horror comics were introduced in the country, they had to reestablish a superhero figure and set it in a new gloomy world of crime and the supernatural. That is why the Indian horror comic books are full of spooks that in the end turn out to have a moral fiber.

WESTERN AND LOCAL SPOOKS

This trail leads directly to Anthony the Dead (*murdā enthonī*) – a superhero created by Raj Comics. Basically, Anthony is some kind of a zombie who gets up from his grave every night and fights crime in order to cleanse the world of evil. And he does so because he dreams of a better world for his beloved daughter and her son. Anthony also has a pretty unusual sidekick – a faithful crow that cries out loud over his grave whenever something disturbing is happening in the town, and innocent people are about to suffer. Anthony, as befits a superhero, has a bunch of superpowers that help him fight injustice. He possess incredible strength that allows him to pick up and throw all kinds of heavy objects with ease, he is able to create a cold fire (*thaṇḍī āg*) that subdues enemies, and his shield-like skin makes him immune to physical attacks. But the most spectacular of Anthony's superpowers is his ability of teleportation as far as the eye can see, which he uses in a very creative way. In the comic book *bhūt se barā murdā* (*The Dead Is Way Better than a Ghost*)⁴⁰ Anthony clashes with a wicked wizard who creates dark mirages using a hypnotic gaze. The only way to save people from a dangerous curse is to make the villain blind, so the dead superhero, having shrunk to the size of a fly, teleports himself inside the wizard's eye only to fly out of it with a vengeance making the eyeballs (both of them at once!) break into a fountain of blood.

Although the entire concept of neutralizing the power of the wizard seems pretty vicious, especially in combination with suggestive drawings, there is little darkness in that scene, since – similarly to previously discussed comics – every frame is full of bright colors. Even Anthony himself is not that dark as an undead should be, for his boots as well as his skin are both... pink.

The character of Anthony the Dead made his first appearance in a comic book *kāmv kāmv* (*Caw Caw*) published by Raj Comics in 1996, where a reader learns how

⁴⁰ taruṇ kumār vāhī, vivek mohan, *bhūt se barā murdā*, rāj kāmiks, saṁkhyā 454, dillī.

he became an undead. Anthony Gonsalves used to be a successful rock star with a happy family, but his blissful life was ended brutally by one of his rivals who murdered him driven by jealousy. Once a peaceful, sensitive artist and a loving householder gets resurrected in a mystical way and turns into an undead who stands guard over morality.

All of this very much resembles *The Crow* – a comic book created originally by American artist James O'Barr in 1989. Eric – the main character of O'Barr's comic – was attacked by brutal gang members when he and his girlfriend Shelly were getting back from a date. The criminals shoot him in the head and rape Shelly. Eric dies in a hospital, but after a year he gets brought back to life by a mysterious crow that helps restless souls to punish the people responsible for their grief⁴¹.

Although resurrected, Eric and Anthony are both pretty similar when it comes to their postmortem biography, appearance, and pet friends, the differences between them (and comic books about them) are clearly visible. Firstly, the story created by O'Barr is extremely dark and violent. Eric is just driven by vengeance – he only wants to beat the living daylights out of the gang members, so every single killing is more brutal than the previous one. O'Barr's hero does not care about other innocent people who might be threatened by the gang. This kind of a story would not exactly match Indian horror comic esthetics, therefore Anthony is focused on fighting every single case of injustice, and he does not even seem to remember about his own killer.

In this regard, all of the discussed Indian spooks are pretty similar to Anthony, who is concentrated on the bigger picture, and not distracted by individual grudges. Indeed, Baval does want to kill his murderers, but not only to punish the criminals, but also to stop them from distributing fake medicines that could harm innocent people. The mutant amoeba has at least several killings on its account, but it just makes its way to the wicked doctor who conducts his disturbing experiments at the expense of a religious man, and a desperate boy who will do anything to save his father's life. Not to mention a demonical hearse that, though in quite a creepy way, increases social awareness and sensitivity to the suffering of unprivileged ones. What is even more important here, Indian spooks reach peace only when the lesson has been learned by the evildoers and the society has been freed from criminal elements. O'Barr's character, however, does not obtain this blissful feeling of peace and completion – having killed all of the gang members, he goes back to the grave as distraught and desperate as he was rising from the dead. This considerably differentiates Indian horror comic books from the Western ones, where awe and fear are usually the main goals of a story.

Despite the fact Indian publishers and cartoonists tried to distance themselves from the Western comic book scene, they still used to adapt and borrow not only American heroes of different universes (i.e. DC Comics⁴², Marvel Comics), popular Western motifs (haunted houses, possessed family members etc.), but also Western ways of arousing fear.

⁴¹ In a film adaptation of the comic starring Brandon Lee (*The Crow*, 1994), Eric – similarly to Anthony – used to be a musician, although O Barr's comic does not mention Eric's previous occupation at all. The movie probably had a bigger impact on Indian publishers than the comic.

⁴² An American comic book publisher established in 1934. The most popular superheroes of DC universe are: Batman, Superman, Green Lantern, The Flash and Wonder Woman.



Caption: *White Dwarf*, no 19, (June-July 1980), USA



Caption: *bhūtmahal*, manoj kāmiks, dillī

It also happened that almost entire covers of the local horror comics were simply copied from various types of American publications. A perfect example of such a borrowing is a cover of the first episode of Ram-Rahim series with Dracula as a villain (*bhūtmahal*). It is an almost exact copy of a cover of an American edition of role-playing games (RPG) magazine⁴³. This may be the reason why the image of Indian Dracula from the cover hardly corresponds to the figure a reader can find on the comic book's pages. Instead of an athletic monster with long claws and a pair of eyes filled with blood portrayed on the cover, the comic frames present a chubby, crooked, green monster dressed in a diaper, who obviously does not raise that much terror. And there are several such examples where a cover of an Indian horror comic book was strongly inspired by Western esthetics. A cover of *hatyārī tren* (*Killer Train*)⁴⁴ – a horror comic book by Raj Comics – presenting a rushing locomotive with a gigantic skull on its front was copied as well from the cover of an American comic book magazine (*Mysterious Traveler*)⁴⁵ which was drawn by Bob Powell in 1948.

Apart from the issue of copyrights – which no one in India at that time worried about – it becomes pretty clear now, how much the Indian comic scene was dependent on the American one. In Japan, for example, comic developed in isolation from Western

⁴³ See: *White Dwarf*, no. 19 (June-July 1980), USA.

⁴⁴ *hatyārī tren*, rāj kāmiks, saṁkhyā 64, dillī.

⁴⁵ *Mysterious Traveler* is a collective name for an American radio series, a magazine and a comic book presenting stories of mystery and suspense. First issue of the series was published in 1948.

culture, and that is why it bears no resemblance to American and European comics. But this was not the case in India. It is a common fact that Indian culture has a great ability to absorb foreign ideas and include them as a part of its own tradition. The same happened with comics in general. But, as Indian culture usually does, a certain Indian flavor has been added to it, for Indians have not been frightened of the Western comic book's shadow.



Caption: B. Powell, *Mysterious Traveller*, vol. 1, no. 1 (November 1948), Trans-World Publications USA



Caption: *hatyārī tren*, rāj kāmiks, saṁkhyā 64, dillī

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