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100 years of Bengali comics—100 years of history

An exhibition aims to gain old Bengali comics some new respect, but it seems like an uphill task as most contemporary artists prefer to work in English rather than Bengali



When I was young I subscribed to a popular Bengali children's magazine, *Anandamala*, in Kolkata. My parents thought it might help to add some Bengali fibre to a literary diet that had too much Enid Blyton, Richmal Crompton's *William Brown*, and *Tintin*.

But the Bengali magazine also carried *Tintin*. In Bengali.

"I think the golden age of Bengali comics came to an end when magazines started to carry translated comics like *Tintin* and *Tarzan*," says Abhijit Gupta, professor of English literature at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, and comics collector and researcher, at the opening of a new exhibition, *Comics in Bengal*, in the city about Bengali comics from the 1920s to the present day.

Gupta isn't dissing the translations. *Tintin* in Bengali caused a sensation when it first appeared in 1975. The renowned Bengali writer Narendranath Chakraborty did the translation, the first one in an Indian language. Even now translators marvel at how he rendered Captain Haddock's "billions of blue blistering barnacles" into "*jotto shob gneri gugli ghuank*" (all those swarms of clams and molluscs). Sophisticated Bengalis regarded *gneri-gugli* as lowly food that poor people scrounged from river banks, giving Haddock's outburst a piquantly Bengali punch while preserving the crustacean flavour of the original.

"It was great," says Gupta. "But did it happen at the expense of homegrown comics?"

The homegrown Bengali comics struggled to compete against the cosmopolitanism of *Tintin* and *Asterix*. Gupta's own nickname testifies to their cultural footprint. It's *Tintin*.

Tintin was not the first international comic to make landfall in India. In 1958,

Phantom Of The Jungle got an authorised Bengali translation as *Aranyadev*. But long before that, Bengali comic book artists were happily "borrowing" international comic book characters and sending them on local adventures. The exhibition shows Laurel and Hardy heading off on a nautical jaunt in the 1940s. Characters that look very much like Mickey Mouse pop-up in 1938. The chipmunks Chip n Dale get Bengali avatars in 1961.

"The European or American influence is clear," says Pinaki De, illustrator and member of the group Comics Culture Collective that put together the exhibition. "But the ethos is very Bengali." The *Mysterious Robin Hood* owes its name but little else to the outlaw of Sherwood forest. Brishchik looks like Batman's long-lost brother, but his Gotham City is very much Kolkata.

At first De did not know if there was enough quality material to fill a gallery. After the group worked for over a year and half on the project, scanning thousands of comics and whittling them down to about 230, De realised there was far more to the story than just haha hehehe.

"There has never been a serious archive," he says. Biswadeb Gangopadhyay, one of the collective, ran a magazine called *Bishoy Cartoons* for 35 years. Another member, Debasis Gupta, collected hundreds of periodicals dating back to the 1920s as a passion project. Their collections form the bedrock of the show and it includes what's regarded as the first full-fledged Bengali comic strip complete with pictures and speech balloons.

Shukhalata Rao was Satyajit Ray's aunt, his father Sukumar's sister. In December 1921, she drew a strip for the magazine *Sandesh—Jemon Kormo Temni Phol* (As you sow, so you reap). It shows a little boy trying to douse Sidhu the milkman with water to punish him for adulterating his milk. Instead, he drenches his own schoolteacher by mistake. But De says as they went through the silverfish-riddled collections, they found even older strips that could well be the "first Bengali comic".

But that is ultimately just historical trivia. What's more interesting about



A Narayan Debnath comic strip on the Bangladesh War.

100 years of comics is what they show (and what they don't show) about 100 years of history.

The 1940s and 1950s were years of great social upheaval—the Bengal famine, World War II, independence. The happy-go-lucky world of comics seems immune to those changes, though political cartoons of the period did not pull their punches. "Comics were always playing catch-up with cartoons," admits De.

Shukhalata Rao was the "mother" of Bengali comics but women are missing in action, both as creators and protagonists. The prolific Narayan Debnath

started a series about two girls called Shutki and Mutki (Skinny and Fatty) but the backlash was so severe that it shut down quickly. Meanwhile, his male characters, Bantul the Great with his barrel body and chopstick legs, and Handa Bhoda (Dumb and Dim), happily revel in stereotypes but readers relished them. It was like a reverse patriarchy where women had to be protected from a cartoonist's pencil.

The real world sneaks in between the lines. One strip featuring women mocks Bengalis for their obsession with caste and class. Another shows a union leader leading a strike of demons in hell

demanding better pay. In the *Dressing Room Of Europe*, artist Kafi Khan only needed a few strokes to transform the same figure from Mussolini to Hitler to Stalin. The same Kafi Khan (whose real name was Prafulla Chandra Lahiri) drew a strip where Muhammad Ali, Jinah and Jawaharlal Nehru build a wall while Mahatma Gandhi looks away and asks, "Have minds ever met by building a wall?" While Debnath's Bantul and Nonte Phonte stick to schoolboy antics, Bantul does have a cameo in the 1971 India-Pakistan war. But Abhijit Gupta says the Bengali comic heroes were by and large not co-opted into a nationalist project the way a Captain America became part of the Cold War and a Superman came from an alien planet but became more red-white-blue American than most Americans.

Instead of selling ideology, Bengali comic heroes are used to sell products. A famous science fiction writer and an artist team up to sell Benzyl soap through the story of a fierce demon queen trying to find a soap that will protect her precious daughter from germs. Miss Bose, a schoolteacher, gets her groove back thanks to Horiicks, while one-page adventures of Ram and Shyam promise readers one *Amar Chitra Katha* comic for every 20 Pop-pins candy wrappers.

All this is not surprising. The artists were no-nonsense commercial work-horses. Kafi Khan, the pithy political commentator, also has a strip selling Cookme spice pastes. Narayan Debnath produced so many comics in so many styles, from thrillers to comedy to adventures over decades, that he lost track of his own work. Sometimes the same characters were done by different artists as publications tried to see what would click with readers. "They were entirely driven by the market and whatever the print magazines were demanding," says De. "The agenda was entertainment."

For that reason we sometimes look askance at comics, regarding them as a lesser art. The fact is most of us spend our lives looking for entertainment, not social change. Comics delivered that in spades. The artwork feels cinematic, going in for extreme close-ups and chiaroscuro mid-shots and then

panning away as if giving the readers a movie on the page. The exhibition shows that everything is ultimately comic book fodder. History, whether it's Alexander the Great or the exploits of revolutionaries Benoy, Badal and Dinesh, can turn into comic book story (with liberal doses of fictionalisation). A svelte woman in a sari brandishes a revolver and thunders "You dirty fox" in full pulpy splendour. *Andho Mahorsha* (The Blind Spider) begins on a bone-chillingly cold midnight in December when even the jackals are silent. In one of the most famous Bengali comics, Mayukh Choudhury's *Agantuk* (The Stranger) from the 1960s, the alien hero has retractable talons long before the Wolverine.

Choudhury died in poverty, a lonely and forgotten man. Few of these artists are household names anymore. Comics are hard work and time-consuming, says artist Debasish Deb. Each frame has so much detail, and each character has to be painstakingly hand-drawn to look like the same person in terms of features and proportions, no matter the angle. Few artists could afford to stick to comics in Bengali as a full-time profession. While newer artists like Sankha Banerjee and Sambaran Das tackle more "adult" issues like gender, sexuality and climate change, most contemporary artists prefer to work in English rather than Bengali. Bengali feels too limiting and has scant web presence.

The show and a forthcoming book on Bengali comics by the collective hopes to give old Bengali comics some new respect. But as I wander around the show, I realise it's an uphill task. The exhibition comes with a little bookshop stocking comics. But there's only one Bengali comic available—*Chakrapurer Chakkar*. More titles are coming soon, the store attendant assures me.

But until then there's shelves and shelves of manga.

Comics In Bengal is on till 9 March at the Kolkata Centre for Creativity.

Cult Friction is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against. Sandip Roy is a writer, journalist and radio host. He posts @sandipr