

Indian comic books have a long tradition but only recently have they started tackling more mature themes, writes **Charukesi Ramadurai**

Sketches of the past

A few years ago, an unlikely goddess was added to India's already overpopulated pantheon. Going by the name of Savita Bhabhi (meaning sister-in-law), she gave a new twist to the term comic strip: she was India's first pornographic cartoon character.

A 29-year-old housewife, Bhabhi had a dedicated website and thousands of dedicated followers. But just a year after its launch in mid-2009, the government, in a fit of moral policing, banned the site and Savita's sexual shenanigans were no longer available for free viewing.

Around that time, another powerful woman appeared on the scene – but this time offline. Devi, created by filmmaker Shekhar Kapur (*Elizabeth*, *Bandit Queen*), was a sassy heroine from Virgin Comics with flashing eyes and a luminous bodysuit. And then there was Sachin Tendulkar, the cricket star who was reinvented in a series called *Master Blaster* which proved that a short, stocky frame meant nothing to a superhero. Mock him, and he vaporises you with a flaming cricket bat.

What a great distance India's comic book industry has come. It's been a long, colourful journey involving Western imports doing battle with heroes from the nation's extensive mythology, and an appraisal of the evolution of the art form has been under way since the death of Indian comic book pioneer Anant Pai last month.

India's earliest comic strip heroes were imports from the West. In the mid-1950s, publishing group Bennett, Coleman & Co launched Indrajal comics, bringing to India characters such as *Phantom* ("the ghost who walks"), *Flash Gordon* ("he'll save every one of us"), and *Mandrake* (the magician who "gestures hypnotically"). Indrajal also later introduced home-grown hero Bahadur (meaning "brave")

who with girlfriend Bela and dog Chamiya, struck terror into the hearts of the baddies.

And during the next decade, entire generations of comic fans struck gold when, in 1967, India Book House editor Anant Pai created the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics. Literally translated as "immortal picture stories", these comic books featured stories based mainly on Indian mythology. The hero was always noble and valiant, good always triumphed over evil, and the difference between the two was sharp and unambiguous. But who cared? The *Amar Chitra Katha* comics were packaged in an appealing manner, interspersed with small bite-sized morals, and were easy for kids to digest. The themes expanded to include modern history – the lives of freedom fighters, for instance, and popular legends.

For a long time, Indian comics were all about larger-than-life heroes and their exploits. Superheroes (of the Indrajal variety) regularly pulled off six impossible things before breakfast. And in Indian mythology, gods have superpowers. Some goddesses too, for many Indians believe in the equality of women where it is least relevant. They carried mountains on their hands, flew in the air and

vanquished entire armies singlehandedly.

With the 1980s came fresh characters from new publications. Chacha Chaudhary (*Diamond* comics) and Detective Mochwala (*Target* magazine) were instant hits. They solved problems not with extraordinary powers but with their wits and cunning. Chacha Chaudhary's brain was said to be "faster than a computer" – but we all know the speed of computers in the 1980s.

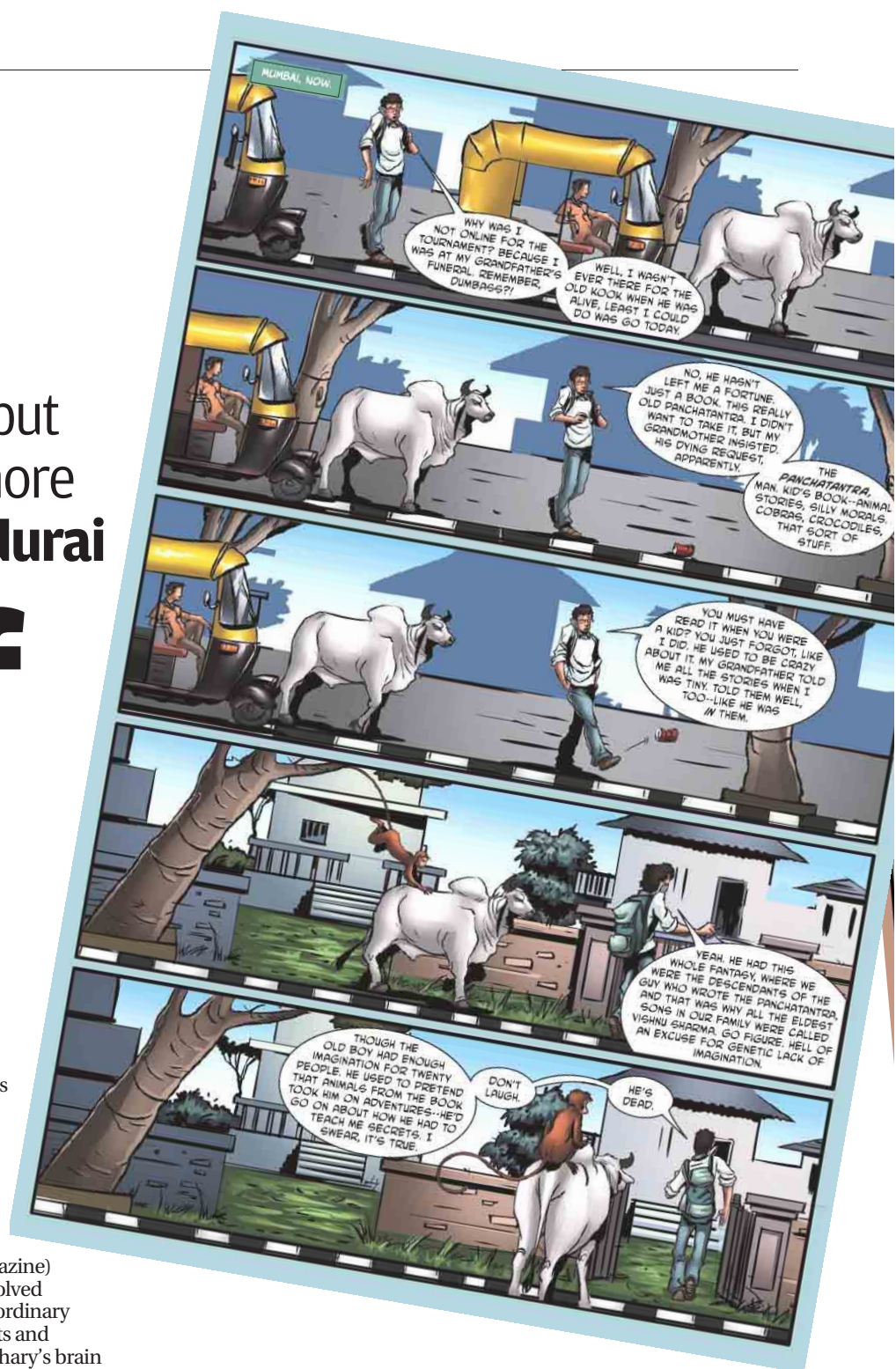
Pai also introduced the classic *Tinkle* with stories based on folk tales from India and faraway lands. Each issue also carried contests and

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Samit Basu, author of *Devi*, on India's first comics convention, held in New Delhi last month



Anant Pai, pioneer of many popular comic books, who died on February 24



snippets on science and world cultures. By then, Anant Pai had come to be called Uncle Pai, and regularly received letters from young readers. *Tinkle* characters such as Shikhari Shambu, stupid Suppandi, Tantri the Mantri and Kalia the Crow all live in the collective memories of Indians of a certain generation. After Pai died from a heart attack on February 24, a wave of nostalgia spread over blogs and newspapers carried a range of tributes to the creator of the nation's original cartoon network.

After the success of Pai's *Tinkle*, comic books also started appearing in regional Indian languages, featuring local characters. But the strips remained exclusively for children, with simple humour instead of clever wordplay. There was none of the sophistication of say, *Asterix*, or the cynicism of *Calvin and Hobbes*.

The arrival of satellite television brought an end to the glory days of comic books on the subcontinent with its wide variety of cartoon shows. Comic book publishing houses found it difficult to survive in a market where children's reading habits were already in decline. Indrajal was the first to go in 1990. *Shaktimaan* was reduced to endorsing biscuits on television, something of a comedown for India's *Superman*. But somehow, *Amar Chitra Katha* adapted and survived by adding more contemporary themes and heroes

such as Mother Teresa (humanitarian), Kalpana Chawla (astronaut) and J.R.D. Tata (industrialist).

After the lull, a renaissance has been seen in the past few years with new publishing companies appearing on the scene. In 2006, Virgin Comics came to India with sleek offerings which combined the storylines of *Amar Chitra Katha* and the graphic stylings of *Avatar*. The company was shut down in 2008, but has been relaunched as Liquid Comics. *Ramayana*, set in AD3392, is one of Liquid's best sellers, while Vimanika is another company that offers comic books based on Indian mythology.

In the past few years, the industry has started to target adult readers with complex narratives and non-linear presentations. Protagonists have also begun to show shades of grey; between the divine and the diabolical, there is *Devi*. As Karan Vir Arora, chief executive of Vimanika, says: "Our comics bring out both the rough side – the anger and aggression of some of the gods in our mythology – and the soft side of our ancient history. This shows our culture, our values and our *dharma* [code of conduct]."

Comics are also now looking beyond the successful staples of Indian mythology. Campfire, which has been coming out with a series of graphic novels since 2008, publishes stories derived not just from Indian and Western mythology but also

Grassroots focus for indie documentaries

Two pages from *Tall Tales of Vishnu* Sharma and the cover of an issue of *Ramayan 3392AD*, all published by Liquid Comics



biographies and classics. Titles have focused on Nelson Mandela, the Wright brothers, Frankenstein, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Oliver Twist* and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

Samit Basu, the author of *Devi* and other graphic novels, says: "The growth of Indian comics has moved in two different directions now. On one side, action-based comics about superheroes remain popular and on the other, graphic novels in the tone of mature narratives are emerging."

The most notable of these novels are *Kari* by Amruta Patil and *Corridor* by Sarnath Banerjee, with casual references to aphrodisiacs, lesbians and postmodernism. Of late, blogs devoted to comic books and characters, as well as original comic strips, have begun to mushroom. Merchandising is also finally in. "The stories and the characters created by Vimanika will be brought to life through animated films, live action films, games, toys, theme parks and much more," Arora says.

As if to acknowledge this, the first Indian comic book convention was held in New Delhi in the last week of February. It saw fairly heavy attendance and included a book fair with more than 50 publishers. Arora, whose company was an associate sponsor of the convention, remains

excited about the response. "It was a blast. Nearly 20,000 people came over two days." Basu agrees: "It is clear there is no lack of enthusiasm among readers of comic books. I could sense genuine excitement when I walked around."

Basu adds something that bears out the trend towards comics targeted at adults. "If you say 'comic convention', you would expect that in India, people would bring their children. But most visitors were adults. They were all well-versed in international comics and came wearing American and Japanese character costumes." The choice of venue for the convention was also interesting: Dilli Haat, a perennial market showcasing traditional Indian arts and crafts, now played host to an emerging Indian craft.

Considering that the word "comic" comes from the Greek *komikos* for comedy there is still a startling dearth of humour in Indian comics. Any element of humour is to be seen only on blogs (called webcomics) such as the popular *FlyYouFools* and *Arbit MBA*. Perhaps here, too, the future is digital. Ask Savita Bhabhi if you don't believe me.

The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement edited by Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu and Lisa Rofel
Hong Kong University Press, HK\$195
★★★★☆
Nicola Davison

In May 1999, Chinese independent filmmaker Wu Wenguang ran into the police. He was on a road trip with an underground performance troupe in Shaanxi province when they were accused of "staging obscene entertainment".

The leader of the troupe was taken in and their equipment confiscated. When Wu was questioned about his role, he had two answers: "I'm making a documentary" and "I'm an author". Although the police let the troupe off with just a fine, Wu remained troubled by these definitions of his work, neither of which quite fitted.

Wu is one in a small group of determined filmmakers who, during the past few decades, have been documenting China outside of censorship and on shoestring budgets. Although a handful of academic books in Chinese have looked at the issue, *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement* – a comprehensive collection of essays written by filmmakers and academics – is the first book in English to discuss the phenomenon.

Part of Wu's difficulty in defining his own work is that it developed separately from the mainland's mainstream film culture that was dominated by lush, stylised Fifth Generation films that rejected the socialist realism of the communist era. In his essay in the book Wu, who's regarded as the forefather of the movement, writes about his more natural digital video (DV) camera "like a pen".

"Getting up in the mornings, I would pull on my shoes, walk out of the tent, and take a p*** in the wilderness, the air incomparably clear and fresh and perfectly silent," he writes. "A young roadie would be squatting not far off ... we would greet each other: 'You're up.' At times like those, Beijing felt really far away. All that modern art – really far away."

The origins of the book can be traced back to a casual meeting of a dozen people in 1992 at the then independent filmmaker Zhang Yuan's house (Zhang went on to become one of the Sixth Generation filmmakers). In the first essay in the book, which acts as a short history of the movement, Lu Xinyu says there's significance in the fact it was born out of rebellion against mainstream media. In the late 1980s documentary making was state-run and news presenters were little more than mouthpieces for the Communist Party.

It's no accident that the first independent documentary, *Bumming in Beijing*, was made by Wu in 1990, just one year after the crackdown in Tiananmen Square. The early New Chinese documentarists were part of a backlash seeking those marginalised by the mainstream – to go back to the grassroots, the "common folk". *Bumming in Beijing* examines five artists who, like Wu, are struggling to survive independently outside the state system. It's a topic that wouldn't have been covered by the mainstream media.

In his essay – which is arguably the highlight of the book – Wu describes his filmmaking style, which got a considerable boost from the introduction of DV equipment. "One after another, people and things enter my lens; I do not go looking for them with the idea of making a movie, they just naturally happen in the course of my life," he writes. "An art exhibit, a rock concert, a dinner party with friends, or just walking along the street ... all kinds of people and things, entirely without theme, intention, or plot, crowd together onto the DV tapes."

Like all of the New Chinese documentaries, *Bumming in Beijing* is also remarkable for its style. Termed *jishi zhuyi*, which roughly



translates as "on-the-spot realism", aesthetically it's very much at odds with the glossy mainstream and is closer to *cinéma vérité*, or "truthful cinema", a French-born documentary movement that uses naturalistic techniques in which the director's presence

is often felt. In *Bumming in Beijing* Wu uses a hand-held camera and no artificial lighting, simply shooting things as they happen. People ramble in and out of the frame.

As Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel note in their concise introduction to the book (which doubles as an accessible overview of the movement), this style was enabled by the introduction of DV. Digital tools allowed directors to work without a crew and, as editing could be done on a computer, on the cheap. The influence of DV and its on-the-spot aesthetic can be seen not only in the New Chinese documentaries, but also those of the Sixth Generation filmmakers who started making films in the late 1990s.

Jia Zhangke, who makes independent documentaries beside his commercial work, and often employs an on-the-spot style, has hailed the post-DV age as "the age of the amateur".

Though separated into four themed chapters, as an almost purely academic text (with the exception of Wu's chapter, which has a refreshingly personal tone), *The New Chinese Documentary Movement* is difficult to penetrate at times. Some of the essays, such as *Translating the Unspeakable: On-Screen and Off-Screen Voices in Wu Wenguang's Documentary Work*, get bogged down in technical jargon which is only of interest to niche readers. For most, the book will be heavy reading, and basic knowledge of Chinese film is helpful.

One must-read chapter, however, is *Documenting Marginalisation, or Identities New and Old*, which focuses on the most important aspect of the documentaries: the attention they cast on those neglected by the state-controlled media. Films such as Wang Bing's epic nine-hour *West of the Tracks* (2003) is living testament that criticism of the state did not wither with the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989.

Lu Xinyu provides an ample dissection of the film in her essay, *West of the Tracks: History and Class-Consciousness*, that has been translated for the book (Lu, who is a professor at Shanghai's Fudan University, is perhaps the expert on the movement, having written the seminal book in Chinese, *Documenting China: The New Documentary Movement in China* in 2003). She writes deftly, if at times in a too-dense academic tone, about the significance of Wang's work.

In the film Wang documents the drawn-out decline of Shenyang's industrial district, Tiexi, an area that was once vibrant in the socialist economy. Much of the genius of the film lies in the entwined relationship of filmmaker and subject: Wang spent a year and a half there, shooting more than 300 hours of footage which map the closing of all three remaining plants – effectively the death of Tiexi.

Lu calls the first three minutes of the film, in which a long take filmed from a slowly moving train takes in the snow-muffled, abandoned factories of Tiexi, "a rite of passage into history".

As a window into this "other" Chinese world, these films (and by extension this book) are important works.