

A Ramayana for Our Times: Superheroes, Science Fiction and Myth

Society and Culture in South Asia

10(1) 120–135, 2024

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DOI: 10.1177/23938617231196641

journals.sagepub.com/home/scs**Roma Chatterji¹****Abstract**

Recent retellings of Indian epics draw upon science fiction. This article discusses an Indian superhero comic based on the *Ramayana* in which Rama, the central figure in the epic, is portrayed as the superhero Nagraj. The story uses the figure of the *avatara* (reincarnated one) to align the world of the epics with the contemporary world by incorporating science-fiction elements into their stories. It may seem that these retellings are drawing on strategies within science fiction to update the epics for the present so as to make mythic figures equivalent to superheroes. However, these strategies are not new. Parallel compositional techniques within folk epics prefigure these science-fictional strategies. This is borne out by the fact that Nagraj is an *avatara* of Rama, said to be reborn in the dark Kali age to fulfil unfulfilled desires from the past. In other words, instead of being for the sake of the present, superheroes are in the present to complete a quest from another time, drawing the present within the ambit of the mythic. There is a juxtaposition of a cyclical view of time associated with myth with the eventful linear time of superheroes, reorganising assumptions about chronicity in both superhero comics and epics.

Keywords

Indian superheroes, epics, myth

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Introduction

Anthropology's contribution to the study of India as a 'literary civilisation' is largely in terms of ethnographies that show the diverse ways in which texts are received by ordinary, often non-literate people—heard, seen, or read—and actively reconstituted by their audiences (Das 1986, 1). Anthropologists have also demonstrated how there are significant cultural differences in narrative styles and gestured towards what modes of textual constitution and reconstitution can tell us about the societies that produce them (Barber 2007). Despite this nudge from anthropology, the nascent field of cross-cultural comics studies often neglects the (re)constitution of texts, focusing instead on the figure of the superhero. For instance, comics scholars have studied the adaptation and transcreation of the predominantly American superhero model in different countries. These works have shown how such a figure, usually identified with the nation, serves to forefront particular cultural values. At the same time, they have also explored moral complexity in such figures by showing how they push even culturally favoured behaviours to their logical extremes (Berninger et al. 2010). Inspired by yet another thread of anthropological work on oral culture, Wandtke (2012) argues that superhero comics are forms of secondary orality, and even forms that are the product of corporate creation take on aspects of artisanal practice. In spite of incorporating cues from anthropological studies of comics, these works continue to neglect stories featuring superheroes. In the present scholarly landscape, it is assumed that superhero stories travel easily across cultures, undergoing only superficial modification in the process. In contrast, this article argues that these stories, their movement and reconstitution in different settings, and their subsumption of cultural specificity deserve our attention.¹

This article discusses *Nagayana*, an Indian superhero mini-series loosely based on the epic *Ramayana*, in which Rama, the central figure in the epic, is portrayed as the superhero Nagraj. The series uses the figure of the *avatara*, or reincarnated one, to align the world of the epics with the contemporary world by incorporating science fiction elements like time travel into their stories. Some recent studies have shown that these retellings are drawing on genre strategies within science fiction to update the epics for the present and make mythic figures the equivalent of superheroes and thus useful to the present (McLain 2009).

¹ Some of the work of Africanists who study comics seems to be an exception in this regard. Scholars such as Ute Fendler show how comics artists from Nigeria, South Africa and Ghana merge the cyclical structure of myths with the serial storytelling of superhero comics (2013, 92).

However, these strategies are not new. This essay argues that parallel compositional techniques within folk epics and traditions of narrative performance prefigure these science fiction strategies. This argument is borne out by the fact that the superhero Nagraj is an *avatara* of Rama for the Kali Age, with *avataras* of Rama said to be reborn in the dark Kali Age to fulfil unfulfilled desires from the past. In other words, instead of being for the sake of the present, superheroes are in the present to complete a quest from another time, drawing the present within the ambit of the mythic. The final text is a syncretic juxtaposition of a cyclical view of time associated with myth with the eventful linear time of superheroes, reorganising assumptions about chronicity in both superhero comics and epics.

Nagraj, an Indian Superhero

Nagraj (Serpent King), one of the main protagonists of the *Nagayana* mini-series, a Ramayana-inspired superhero series published by Raj Comics between 2008 and 2009, seems at first sight to be an adaptation of the American superhero figure. Inspired by the Marvel Comics' character Spider-Man, he was conceived by the teenage brothers, Sanjay and Manoj Gupta, who were avid fans of the Spider-Man animation series that was broadcast on national television in India in the early 1980s. In an interview with the two brothers, they relate:

From the beginning we talked about what an Indian superhero would be like and we were encouraged to actually create our own superhero character by our father. Nagraj is inspired by Spiderman but is not a copy. We lived in Old Delhi as children and often heard stories about snakes being found in the basements of old houses. As you must know snakes are supposed to guard treasure and we always fantasised about finding ancient treasure in the house in which we lived then. Snakes are mysterious—we worship them and also fear them. There are old stories about *ichhadhari nagas* (shape shifting snakes) who are benefactors of human devotees and also *vish manav* (poison men). We tried to incorporate as much as we could from folklore into our conception of the Indian superhero so that he would be based on a purely Indian way of understanding the world.²

² Interview with Sanjay and Manoj Gupta in their office in Delhi on the 6th of March 2019. Raj Comics, the publisher of Nagraj comics is an offshoot of Raja Books, a publisher of pulp fiction started by Raj Kumar Gupta, the father of the two Gupta brothers. Indian folklore is replete with stories about children who are groomed as assassins by being injected with poison from a young age and trained to bite their intended victims.

In trying to understand what the Gupta brothers understand by their claim that Nagraj is ‘based on a purely Indian way of understanding the world’ and that he is an Indian superhero, it is useful to first sketch how Nagraj and the series of which he is the central figure are understood within the Indian scholarly landscape. Suchitra Mathur sees figures such as Nagraj as an instance of globalisation—a negotiation between the influence of American culture brought on by a liberalised consumerist economy and a resurgent Hindu nationalism in India, both characteristic of the 1980s, which is also when Nagraj was first conceived (2010, 179). Nagraj is marked as different from the adaptations and transcreations of superhero characters by international comics publishers such as Gotham Comics and Graphic India, which produced an Indian version of Spiderman and a science fiction transcreation of the Ramayana story, respectively. These publishers are rooted in a global economy at every stage of production and consumption, unlike Raj Comics, which caters to a primarily North Indian Hindi-speaking public (Dave 2013). Raminder Kaur and Saif Eqbal, whose monograph is one of the first extended studies of Nagraj and their publisher, Raj Comics, consider Nagraj to be a form of mimicry of the American superhero monomyth. Unlike copy mimicry is not considered a form of faulty imitation but is an autonomous entity that invokes distinctively Indian cultural traits and is appreciated independently of its American model (2019, 181).

Mythology-based fiction has become increasingly popular in India in the last few decades, with novels inspired by the epics published by Indian presses becoming best sellers (Dawson Varughese 2017, Sharma 2019). In the field of comics, *Amar Chitra Katha* (Immortal Picture Stories) is a pioneer in this sphere, having brought out its first mythological comic book in 1969 (McLain 2009). Part of the appeal of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics lay in the way in which myths were presented as adventure tales, with divinities like Rama as superhero figures. More recently, other imaginative transcreations, such as *Ramayana 3392 AD* by Graphic India, have taken this theme even further by re-contextualising the Rama story as science fiction, setting it in a dystopian, post-apocalypses, futuristic society. Common to both projects is the way in which narrative time is ordered in terms of a linear succession of events. In contrast to these comics, *Nagayana* plays with the idea of time itself, juxtaposing linear and cyclical modes of temporality that are similar to the ways in which time is ordered in traditional narrations of myths (ibid.). These differences in figuration, appeal, and temporality of the *Nagayana* in comparison to similar comic books within the Indian context require us to delve a bit deeper into the story itself to understand better how classical epics and

the comic book form work together in ways that go beyond serving as the medium for superheroes.

The Nagayana Story

In the Raj Comics' universe, there are many characters who feature as archetypal heroes, as described by Campbell (1949), in which a person moves out of the ambit of the ordinary into one of supernatural wonder in which their strength and courage are tested through conflict with superhuman forces forging them into a hero. Within this universe is the Nagraj series, in which *Nagayana* is a crossover production with characters from two popular superhero series published by Raj Comics—the Nagraj and the Dhruv series. This is a limited, nine-issue series that claims to be a 'new Ramayana', featuring protagonists from two superhero series who are cast as characters from the epic. Dhruv has no superhuman powers apart from the ability to communicate with animals and extraordinary intelligence. Nagraj is considered the most popular superhero in the Raj Comics universe, much less within the *Nagayana*. He figures as the central protagonist in three different series set in parallel timelines. Successive ret-cons, short for retroactive continuity, referring to a literary device by which a previously established story has been changed, have elaborated on his origin story. Nagraj is human, but because he was forced to ingest large doses of venom as a child, he has acquired snake-like attributes such as poison breath and a lethal bite. Instead of white blood corpuscles, his blood contains microscopic snakes that give him superhuman strength and agility.

Nagayana sets itself to be different from other crossover stories produced by Raj Comics that are set in the present as it claims to be a Ramayana for the dark age of Kali—a claim that is emphasised by the phrase *Jab, jab paap dhara par aayi katha puni, puni dohraai* (whenever evil appears on earth, the story is repeated again and again) (Sinha and Sinha 2017). Sanjay Gupta, the creative director of Raj Comics, wrote in one of his letters to the readers that the Raj Comics production team accepted the challenge³ of making a *Ramayana* for our times, set in a

³ Stories based on the Ramayana themes are extremely popular among all sections of Indian society. While many Indian comics' publishers have brought out stories based on Ramayana characters, for Raj Comics it was important to integrate the Ramayana story into the storyworld of their superhero characters. This involved not merely adapting the Ramayana characters to their heroes but also re-conceptualising all the events in the Ramayana that have achieved an iconic status without offending the religious sentiments of their readers.

new environment with all the key episodes in the epic re-contextualised in new settings (Gupta 2017). The story is set in the not-too-distant future, but in a world that has been radically altered due to the prediction of a comet crash. A large proportion of the earth's population now lives in technologically advanced subterranean megacities. Political formations such as nation-states are relics of a past era, and humans are united against a new extraterrestrial force—the demonic 'black powers' who were released from their underground prison by the comet crash and are threatening to take over the world. The humans are helped by two other humanoid species—the technologically advanced *devas* from the Dhruv series and *ichhadhari nagas* (shape-shifting serpents) from the Nagraj series.⁴ The black powers that were last seen in the world during the Treta Yuga (the second age in the cosmic cycle) and suppressed by Rama when he defeated Ravana's demonic army have been released by the comet crash.

There are repeated references to the Treta Yuga and to similarities between the major protagonists in the Ramayana and characters in this series.⁵ Thus Nagraj and Dhruv are the Rama and Lakshmana of the Kali Yuga (fourth and most decadent age), and Nagraj's evil uncle, Krulpasha, is the demonic Ravana.⁶ He appears to be the leader of the black powers and the king of Lanka, which had been shifted to another dimension after Ravana's death to prevent any further attacks by the demons or black powers. There is also an enigmatic character, Mahakala Chhidra, who controls Krulpasha behind the scenes and directs the course of events. Mahakala Chhidra literally means 'the great crack in the fabric of time' and is supposed to be an embodiment of the black hole. He is a time traveller and claims to have been Ravana's mentor in the Treta Yuga.

⁴ Devas are gods in Hindu mythology. In the Nagraj universe they are presented as a technologically advanced species who live under the ocean. Another humanoid species, *ichhadhari nagas* also figure in this universe. They too have extra-human powers but their technology is more primitive than that of humans and their powers are magical. They live in a hidden island that is not known to humans. They too interact with the outside world through Nagraj.

⁵ In Hindu cosmology time is organised into a cycle of four ages (*yugas*), Satya, Treta, Dwapara and Kali. The Kali Yuga is the time of history.

⁶ Rama, the crown prince of Ayodhya, his wife Sita and his younger brother Lakshmana are sent into exile. Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, abducts Sita and is killed by Rama who invades Lanka with an army of *vanaras* (monkeys). Rama is an incarnation of the god Vishnu, reborn as a human to kill Ravana who had a boon that he could be killed by no other than a human being. The events of the Ramayana took place in the third age of the cosmic cycle known as the Treta Yuga. The historical time that we live in is the fourth age—Kali Yuga.

Mahakala Chhidra travels to the future on the comet, guiding it to the location where the black powers were imprisoned—his aim is to achieve his ambition of becoming the ruler of the universe was thwarted by Ravana's defeat and death at Rama's hands in the previous age. The story ends on an unexpected note. Nagraj manages to kill Krupasha by bombarding him with his explosive snake power. Krupasha disintegrates, and his atoms scatter through the atmosphere. It is at this point that Mahakala Chhidra's true intention is revealed. By allowing Krupasha to die in this fashion, the indestructible black energy released from his body can spread through the galaxy, engulfing everything within it, thus enabling Mahakala Chhidra to fulfil his long-standing ambition of becoming its master. He is able to accomplish through deceit what he was unable to do by force in the Treta Yuga through Ravana. According to Ramayana folklore in North India, Rama killed the seemingly indestructible Ravana by aiming at his navel, where the *amrita* (nectar of immortality) that made him invincible was stored. Having learned from his past mistake, Mahakala Chhidra made sure that his next agent, Krupasha, was truly indestructible since *amrita* lined every single cell in the latter's body. But all is not lost, and true to their calling as saviours of humanity, the superheroes disincorporate, sacrificing their earthly bodies so that they can continue their battle against the black powers as immortal souls (*atma*).

For those who are unfamiliar with the serialised nature of commercial superhero stories, the lack of a proper resolution at the end of the series may be a disappointment. Open-ended stories and stories with narrative threads that are left loose are features typically found in this genre and leave open the possibility of further stories in the series. The superhero does not have a stable image, which is a function of the adventures that he encounters. A finite story with a definitive beginning and ending would limit the possibility of new adventures and ignore the serial nature of the superhero character.

Oral Epics and Multiple Chronicities

Time is rendered much more complicated than in the conventional science fiction claim upon the future through the specific technical relays between the stories of the epics and comic books. Traditional ritual performances and narrations enact myths on a double register—a synchronic register in which the whole story is always already known and a diachronic register in which events unfold in the open-ended present. The creators of the comics mobilise this traditional form of narration using the possibilities offered by the comics medium, which enables modulation between different temporal registers. The comics' medium uses the

science fiction mode of indicating temporal disjunction by spatialising time through the arrangement of panels on the page. This strategy allows it to juxtapose different *yugas*, thereby allowing synchronic and diachronic dimensions of time to co-exist (Ursini et al. 2017). In *Breaking the Bow*, a science fiction anthology inspired by iconic themes from the *Ramayana*, time travel is used as a meta-narrative device to align the time of the epic with the contemporary world (Menon and Singh 2012).

As I have already mentioned, speculative fiction set in India's pre-history, inspired by the classical epics, is becoming increasingly popular. While this trend may be partially inspired by a sense of Hindu assertiveness that is prevalent in India today, these writings follow an old tradition of epic re-envisioning that cannot be completely explained away by Hindu nationalism and that speaks to epics being mobilised to address more varied desires. Temporal estrangement is a device commonly used in science fiction to re-interpret myths. The 'what if' mode that frames the stories cast in this genre creates a sense of a present future in which contemporary concerns can be explored.

Oral narrations that partake of the universe of epic myths use the palimpsestic quality of these myths created through multiple retellings to juxtapose diverse chronicities in their narratives. Folk heroes are considered *avatars* of the protagonists of the classical epics, reincarnated in the Kali Yuga to complete the unfinished business of the epics (Hiltebeitel 2001). Thus, Pabuji, a Rajput who lived in the fourteenth century, is deified and considered to be an incarnation of Lakshmana, Rama's brother, in the epic. Other *Ramayana* characters that appear in his story are Ravana and the latter's sister Surpanakha, whose sexual overtures Lakshmana violently rejected by mutilating her face and ears. She is reincarnated as Pabuji's bride in the Kali Yuga (Smith 1991). The oral epics re-employ select themes from the classical epics to create alternate destinies for their heroes, thereby casting a shadow of another time on the events of the past and opening them up to unexpected possibilities (Morson 1994). Unlike the closed time of the heroes of the Homeric epics, whose destinies are fixed by fate, the protagonists of the classical Indian epics do have the possibility of leading other lives through the oral epics that have grown around the narrative universe of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (Bakhtin 1981, Hiltebeitel 1999).

Whose unfinished business is the *Nagayana* dealing with? It is Mahakala Chhidra who seems to have unfinished business left over from a previous age. A mythic figure, he transcends history. In this aspect, he is different from deified heroes such as Pabuji, who are captives of time and are reborn repeatedly with no knowledge of their destinies.

Their destinies are shaped by the law of *karma*,⁷ and they reap the consequences of actions they performed in previous lives. As sentient beings, the heroes of *Nagayana*, like their counterparts in the oral epics, also experience time as diachronic. Mahakala Chhidra occupies a different temporal register since he is the only character who experiences time as synchronic and cyclical, that is, with the memory of events in previous *yugas*, and is able to link it to the present and the future in ways that are unavailable to the superheroes. It is as if they are living within his memory, their actions directed towards correcting the mistakes that his denizens made in the past.

The word '*avatara*' is never used explicitly in connection with the protagonists of the *Nagayana*. Nagraj and Krurpasha are the Rama and Ravana of the Ramayana by analogy and not by descent. Unlike the heroes of the oral epics, they are not figures of myth. This position is occupied exclusively by Mahakaal Chhidra, who is a complex, syncretic figure. He is a time traveller in the science fiction mode who also connects *Nagayana* to a living mythological tradition. He transcends the law of *karma* since he does not act but creates situations that force others to act on his behalf. It is only by shedding their corporeal bodies that the superheroes are able to combat their powers. Yet he is a relatively minor character; his brief appearances on the pages of the comic book are belied by his wider influence on the course of events in the story.

Mahakaal Chhidra's image as the embodiment of a black hole in time seems to have been inspired by the image of Krishna as Time, the Devourer of Worlds, in the *Bhagavad Gita* (Piatigorsky 1993).⁸ In a poem that takes the form of a dialogue between the god Krishna and Arjuna, the Pandava hero, on the eve of the Great War between warring cousins in the Mahabharata, the *Bhagavad Gita* expounds on the impermanence of personhood and the phenomenal world, both of which will be swallowed by Krishna in his aspect as Time the Destroyer. It is the soul (*atma*) that is timeless and takes on repeated incarnations through

⁷ Karma refers to the spiritual principle of cause and effect in Indian philosophy.

⁸ Compare the image of Mahakala Chhidra as the black hole in time with the image of Krishna as Time the devourer of worlds in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

I am Time grown old to destroy the world,
Embarked on the course of world annihilation.

(from the *Bhagavad Gita*, quoted by Piatigorsky 1993, 130).

However, images of gods as devourers of time are common in folk narratives about cataclysmic events in West Bengal (Chatterji 2014).

the ages. It is fitting that the superheroes are able to combat Mahakaal Chhidra only by shedding their corporeal bodies. But unlike the *atma*, or immortal soul, in Indian philosophy that transcends the sphere of *karma*, the *atmas* of these superheroes, in keeping with the sensibility of this comics' genre, continue their battle against evil!

Krishna in the *Mahabharata* is a mysterious figure, often appearing to be devious in his dealings with the Kaurava cousins of Arjuna and the Pandavas, also revealing himself as an *avatara* with knowledge of the past, present, and future to his devotees, the Pandavas. Mahakala Chhidra certainly claims such knowledge for himself, as is evident from his repeated references to the events that he is supposed to have orchestrated in the time of the *Ramayana* and his boasts about a future black universe over which he will rule. But these bombastic claims are belied by his panic-stricken reaction when Nagraj and Dhruv sacrifice their bodies to continue their fight against the incorporeal black energies released from Krurpasha's disintegrating form. Thus, we see how science fiction tropes and the serialised architecture of commercial superhero comics are used in the *Nagayana* mini-series to re-order the events in the *Ramayana* in novel and unexpected ways.

The Lives of Minor Characters

Why is the *Bhagavad Gita* image of Krishna applied to Mahakala Chhidra and not to Nagraj? It is Rama, after all, who is an *avatara*. Comics creators whom I have interviewed repeatedly stress that their intention is not to subvert tradition but to play with it instead. As Anupam Sinha, the primary writer and artist of the series, says, 'It is the villains who are the creative force in superhero comics. The superhero only serves as a reactive force—to restore order, not to change it'.⁹ According to Sinha, Krurpasha is an accidental villain who acquired his powers when the comet crashed into the earth but is actually rather stupid. All his actions serve Mahakala Chhidra's secret ambition, which he is unable to decipher. If he were intelligent, he would have overpowered the heroes, and that is not possible in superhero stories, he said. Sinha's statement gives a clue to Mahakala Chhidra's actual role in the story. His character has significance far in excess of the amount of space that he occupies in the series since it is through him that the complex temporal structure of the narrative is revealed.

⁹ Interview with Anupam Sinha on 31.1.2019.

Recent re-envisioning of the *Ramayana* in speculative fiction have recast minor characters in the epic as subversive figures used to critique social inequalities based on caste and gender (Khan 2018; Menon and Singh 2012). In a different vein, the Bengali poet, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, in his epic poem, *Meghnadvadha kavya*, used literary devices to subvert the conventional representations of Ramayana characters. Thus, similes that allude to Krishna and his companions are used to align the villains of the *Ramayana* with heroic characters in the *Mahabharata*, thereby allowing readers to view them sympathetically (Seely 1991). This does not happen in the case of Mahakala Chhidra. Instead, his role is to establish the relationship between the linear chain of events that make it a superhero adventure and the mythic idea of cosmic time. This is achieved by evoking iconic scenes not just from the *Ramayana* but from the mythological universe as such suggesting that these events are embedded in multiple temporalities (Woloch 2003). The comedic inversion of scenes from the *Bhagavad Gita* that align Krishna with Mahakala Chhidra seems to suggest this. He also serves another function, which is to bring out aspects of Krurpasha's personality that are not possible to depict through the numerous combat scenes in the series. Krurpasha's cruelty, arrogance, and hunger for power are easy to depict through the action sequences that are the signature of superhero stories. But the readers only glimpse his fatal flaw, stupidity, through his interactions with Mahakala Chhidra.

Epic characters often lead other lives in oral narratives. The Ravana of the classical *Ramayana* is a complex and tragic figure, made up of contradictory qualities—megalomania and a self-destructive obsession with Rama's wife Sita, the one woman in the universe that he cannot possess. But these negative qualities are counterbalanced by his knowledge and reputation as a just ruler. Folkloric depictions often use Ravana's 10 heads to draw attention to these contradictory qualities, depicting his tenth head in the form of a donkey's head to suggest that stubbornness and foolishness were the dominant qualities in his personality. Mindful of the conventions associated with the genre, Anupam Sinha did not depict Ravana with a donkey's head. But the influence of folk culture is evident in the ways in which the interactions between the two villains are depicted. Mahakala Chhidra acts as a foil for Krurpasha, the Ravana character in this superhero Ramayana, bringing out the comedic features with which Ravana is associated in folk narratives.

Remediated Myths and Vernacular Superheroes

It may seem at first sight that the combination of futuristic, techno-scientific imagery with pseudo-archaic symbolism is a direct offshoot of the

rise of Hindu fundamentalism and its politicisation of Ramayana mythology. The artistic style and imagery in the series and the use of incongruous archaisms such as bows and arrows in the hands of the superheroes seem to point to the influence of Hindutva ideology that favours a muscular and militant representation of Rama.¹⁰ Anupam Sinha, while sympathetic to the idea of an ascendant Hindu culture, does not believe that the classical versions of the epics are sacrosanct and is categorical in his opposition to the *Ramayana* being viewed as a monolithic text. In an interview with me, he spoke of the diverse influences that went into the making of the Nagayana story.

The Valmiki *Ramayana* only documents events. It has no place for emotions. It is in Tulasidas's *Ramayana* that we find emotions but for Tulasidas Rama is god and all other characters in the story are subservient to him. I couldn't do that in my story. Dhruv cannot be subservient to Nagraj as Lakshmana is to Rama—they are superheroes of equal stature. Also the villain in superhero stories cannot be more powerful than the hero otherwise he would win. So Krurpasha and even more so Mahakala Chhidra have to have at least one fatal flaw in their characters that will lead to their defeat in the end. There are many loose threads and undeveloped characters in the *Ramayana* and I have tried to flesh out some of them in my story. Tulasidas's *Ramayana* is the basis for all Ramayana performances and storytelling in North India so I tried to incorporate elements from that text that are popular and would be familiar to our readers.

The appeal of this series lies in the way that it resonates not only with familiar themes from Indian mythology but also with models of temporality used in traditional forms of narration. Mythic events are presented as hierophanies that are actualised as 'present realities across time' (Cantlie 2003, 836). The narration establishes the contemporaneity of events inside the frame of the narrative with those that occur in historical time. The mark of a living mythic tradition is the way in which repeated narrations create new pathways along which stories can travel. Stories expand continually as auditors generate new contexts in which they are recounted. The creators of the Nagayana series play with this traditional form of narration using the possibilities offered by the comic medium, which enables modulation between different temporal registers, as we saw through the figure of Mahakala Chhidra. Parallel realities, nested worlds, and oscillations between the synchronic and diachronic orders of time enabled through the arrangement of panels on a page are ideas that are common to science fiction and mythology, even if the language they

¹⁰ An ideology and movement that seeks to establish the hegemony of Hinduism in India.

use to conceptualise these ideas is different (Schwartz 2014). The popularity of the Nagayana series among Indian readers lies in the way that it moves between the two, using pop science, folklore, and the technique of retroactive continuity common to serialised comics to make a *Ramayana* for our times.

Is the Nagayana series a new entrant in what Paula Richman describes as ‘an unending series of *Ramayanas* in India and beyond’ (1991, 4)? Unlike the first televised *Ramayana* serial, which acquired a sacred aura for many of its viewers and was treated almost as a form of ritual viewing, the *Nagayana* does not evoke such sentiments. Science fiction tropes are an intrinsic part of the superhero genre, and it is this inspiration rather than a politicised Hindu ideology that has determined the artistic vocabulary of the series. The imaginative combination of bowdlerised scientific ideas and folkloric tropes is what makes Anupam Sinha one of the most popular writers in the Raj Comics team and perhaps the only one who could be entrusted with the ambitious project of ‘making a new *Ramayana*’, to quote Sanjay Gupta’s felicitous phrase (Gupta 2017: unpaginated).

The American superhero model is omnipresent in the world, but the increasing visibility of superhero figures in countries that have rich repositories of myth and folklore points to the vitality of the genre and its ability to absorb not only elements from their traditional narrative universe but also the cyclical structure that is associated with myth and merge it with the serial nature of comics narration. Unlike the role that superhero stories are supposed to have played in re-mythologising American culture, superheroes in these countries live side by side with mythological and folkloric figures that are part of a living religious tradition (Wandtke 2012). Comics creators use the medium to re-make these figures in a new, secular medium (Omanga 2016). Instead of thinking of the superhero story as a rupture from traditional mythology and iconography, comics such as the Nagayana series reveal the enormous potential of re-mediation that myths have—a process that is not new but part of the narrative tradition itself. These remediations do not simply update the epics for the present but rather infuse the present with the heterogeneous qualities of the mythic.

Comics scholars have shown how a nationalist ideology shapes the ways in which Indian comics present stories mined from ancient sources (Chandra 2010, McLain 2009). Comics produced by influential publishers such as Amar Chitra Katha are supposed to have a pedagogical function in that they make India’s ‘ancient’ heritage accessible to her youth. Classical tales are simplified and adapted to conform to the ‘individual biography mode’, in which mythical figures become role models

for young readers. Raj Comics, however, has no such ambition, and their mythological transcreations are solely for the purpose of entertainment. This is precisely the reason why they constitute an important field for anthropological investigation. Ethnographic studies of textual transmission show that every act of narration is also a reinterpretation and remediation. Stories that are part of living mythologies are spread through a variety of different mediums. Comics, a contemporary medium with roots in both myth and traditional forms of storytelling, is one of the ways in which the process of remediation may be studied.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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