



Beyond Text and Image: Comics as a Contemporary Manifestation of India's Pictorial Storytelling Legacy

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Abstract

This paper examines Indian comics as a contemporary evolution of India's ancient pictorial storytelling traditions, arguing that modern comic books represent a technological and cultural continuity rather than a Western import. By analyzing the historical trajectory from cave paintings, temple friezes, and scroll paintings to digital comics, this study demonstrates how sequential visual narrative has been integral to Indian cultural expression for millennia. The paper explores key transitional forms including the Ajanta murals, Pattachitra scroll paintings, and colonial-era chromolithographs, before examining how publications like *Amar Chitra Katha*, *Tinkle*, and contemporary graphic novels adapt these traditions for modern audiences. Through close analysis of visual techniques, narrative structures, and thematic continuities, this research positions Indian comics within a distinctly South Asian aesthetic and narrative framework while acknowledging transnational influences. The study concludes that understanding comics through India's pictorial legacy offers crucial insights into indigenous modes of visual literacy and challenges Western-centric definitions of the medium.

Keywords: Indian comics, pictorial storytelling, sequential art, visual narrative, Amar Chitra Katha, Pattachitra, temple art, graphic novels, visual culture, indigenous aesthetics

Introduction

When Anant Pai launched *Amar Chitra Katha* in 1967, critics dismissed it as mere imitation of Western comics. However, this assessment overlooks a crucial historical continuity: India has been telling stories through sequential images for over two thousand years. From the narrative cycles painted on Ajanta cave walls to the episodic scrolls of Bengal's *patuas* (scroll painters), pictorial storytelling has been central to how Indian culture transmits knowledge, mythology, and values across generations. Contemporary Indian comics, far from being derivative Western imports, represent the latest manifestation of this deep-rooted tradition, adapted for modern print and digital media.

This paper argues that Indian comics must be understood not merely as products of twentieth-century global popular culture but as contemporary expressions of indigenous visual narrative traditions. By tracing the historical development of sequential pictorial storytelling in South Asia and analyzing how its aesthetic conventions, narrative techniques, and cultural functions persist in modern comics, this study repositions Indian comics within their proper cultural genealogy. This approach challenges the dominant Western-centric framework that has shaped comics scholarship and offers a model for understanding how traditional art forms evolve through new technologies without losing their cultural specificity.

Historical Foundations: Sequential Narrative in Ancient and Medieval India

India's tradition of visual storytelling predates the common era. The earliest evidence appears in the Buddhist *Jataka* tale paintings at Ajanta (circa 2nd century BCE to 5th century CE), where murals depict the Buddha's previous lives through continuous narrative techniques. Unlike Western medieval art's tendency toward single iconic moments, Ajanta artists employed what modern comics scholars would recognize as sequential art: the same character appears multiple times within a single composition, moving through different episodes of a story. In Cave 17's *Vessantara Jataka*, Prince Vessantara appears repeatedly across the mural, creating a visual narrative that viewers "read" by following the figure through space and time.

This continuous narrative method—where temporal sequence unfolds across spatial arrangement—became a defining characteristic of Indian pictorial storytelling. The technique appears extensively in temple architecture, where narrative relief sculptures wrap around temple walls, creating what art historian Vidya Dehejia terms "narrative choreography." The 7th-century Pallava rock-cut temples at Mahabalipuram feature Krishna's life story carved in sequential panels, requiring viewers to circumambulate the structure to experience the complete narrative. Similarly, the 12th-century Hoysala temples in Karnataka present *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* episodes in horizontal friezes that function like proto-comic strips, with architectural frames serving as panel borders.

The sophistication of these narrative techniques is evident in their treatment of time, space, and focalization. Indian temple art often employs simultaneous narration—showing multiple events occurring in different temporal moments within a unified spatial field. The famous Descent of the Ganges relief at Mahabalipuram depicts gods, humans, animals, and celestial beings in a complex multilayered narrative that combines mythological time with observed reality. This technique finds direct parallels in contemporary Indian comics, which frequently layer mythological and mundane temporalities within single panels or pages.

Medieval India saw the flourishing of portable pictorial narratives. Illustrated manuscripts became vehicles for both religious and secular stories, with the Jain tradition producing extensively illustrated *Kalpasutra* manuscripts from the 11th century onward. These manuscripts employed sophisticated visual conventions: red backgrounds signified indoor spaces, white indicated outdoor settings, and the eye extending beyond the face in profile became a distinctive stylistic marker. More significantly for comics history, these manuscripts integrated text and image in dynamic relationships, with text blocks flowing around and between images, creating integrated visual-verbal narratives.

The scroll painting tradition represents perhaps the closest historical antecedent to modern comics. Bengal's *patuas* (scroll painters) performed narratives by unrolling painted scrolls while singing accompanying songs, revealing sequential images in a controlled temporal rhythm. These *patachitra* scrolls depicted stories from Hindu epics, Islamic traditions, and contemporary events through sequential panels separated by decorative borders—a format remarkably similar to modern comic strips. The *patuas* controlled narrative pacing through performance, deciding when to reveal each image, much as comic artists control reading speed through panel size, layout, and gutter space. This performance aspect highlights an important distinction: traditional Indian pictorial narratives were often accompanied by oral performance, making them multimedia experiences rather than purely visual texts.

Colonial Transitions: Print Technology and New Visual Forms

The introduction of print technology under British colonialism transformed but did not erase these pictorial narrative traditions. The late 19th century saw the emergence of chromolithography, which made colored images affordable and widely available. Calcutta's Bat-tala printers and Bombay's chromolithograph studios produced mass-market visual narratives that adapted traditional imagery for modern reproduction technologies. Raja Ravi Varma's oleographs of Hindu deities and mythological scenes achieved enormous popularity, creating a new visual vernacular that blended European realism with Indian iconography.

Significantly, these colonial-era visual productions maintained narrative functions. Calendar art and poster art frequently depicted sequential episodes from mythology, and some publishers produced serialized visual narratives. The *Chandamama* magazine, launched in 1947, published illustrated stories that employed panel-like sequential arrangements, creating a bridge between traditional storytelling formats and modern comics. These transitional forms demonstrate how Indian artists adapted pictorial storytelling traditions to new technologies while maintaining cultural continuity.

The introduction of Western-style comics during the colonial and post-independence periods occurred in this context of existing visual literacy. Indian readers encountering Phantom or Superman comics brought interpretive frameworks shaped by centuries of engaging with sequential visual narratives. This cultural preparation helps explain the explosive success of *Amar Chitra Katha* and subsequent Indian comics: they were not teaching readers an entirely new form but rather offering familiar narrative experiences in modern formats.

Amar Chitra Katha and the Comics Revolution

When Anant Pai created *Amar Chitra Katha* (Immortal Picture Stories) in 1967, he explicitly positioned the series as a tool for cultural transmission, concerned that Indian children were forgetting their heritage. However, the series succeeded not merely because of its pedagogical mission but because it adapted traditional visual storytelling conventions for modern comics format. *Amar Chitra Katha* employed a visual style that synthesized elements from temple art, Mughal miniature painting, and contemporary illustration, creating an aesthetic that felt both modern and traditionally Indian.

The narrative structure of *Amar Chitra Katha* titles reflects indigenous storytelling patterns rather than Western comics conventions. Many issues employ frame narratives reminiscent of traditional *kathakas* (storytellers), beginning with a contemporary frame that introduces a mythological or historical tale. This mirrors the structure of texts like the *Mahabharata*, which presents itself as a story told by the sage Vaishampayana to King Janamejaya. The visual presentation frequently employs continuous narrative techniques inherited from temple art: characters reappear within panels, and multiple temporal moments coexist within unified compositions.

Amar Chitra Katha's treatment of time and causality also reflects Indian narrative traditions. Unlike Western superhero comics' emphasis on linear causality and individual agency, *Amar Chitra Katha* stories often present events as manifestations of divine will or karmic consequence. Visual techniques reinforce this: divine interventions are marked by stylized effects drawn from devotional art traditions, and characters frequently directly address deities visible within panels—a convention derived from devotional paintings where human and divine realms coexist visually.

The series' influence extended beyond its approximately 400 titles. *Amar Chitra Katha* established visual conventions and narrative templates that shaped Indian comics for decades. Its success demonstrated the commercial viability of culturally rooted comics content and inspired numerous imitators and successors. *Tinkle* magazine, launched in 1980 by the same publisher, created original characters and stories while maintaining visual and narrative connections to Indian traditions. Characters like Suppandi and Shikari Shambu operate within recognizably Indian social contexts, and even when *Tinkle* published adaptations of global folk tales, the visual style and narrative pacing reflected indigenous conventions.

Contemporary Indian Comics: Continuity and Innovation

Contemporary Indian comics demonstrate both continuity with traditional pictorial narratives and innovation in response to globalization and digital media. Graphic novels have emerged as a prestigious form, with works like Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004), Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008), and Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (1994) gaining critical recognition. These works engage seriously with literary and artistic traditions while exploring distinctly contemporary Indian experiences.

Banerjee's *Corridor* exemplifies this synthesis. Set in Delhi, the book employs a non-linear narrative structure reminiscent of Indian classical texts, where seemingly disconnected stories reveal thematic and symbolic

connections. The visual style combines influences from Mughal miniature painting, Soviet-era posters, and European comics, creating a hybrid aesthetic that reflects Delhi's own cultural layering. Banerjee's treatment of space—depicting the city as a palimpsest of historical periods coexisting—recalls the simultaneous temporality of traditional Indian visual narratives.

Amruta Patil's work demonstrates how traditional visual conventions can address contemporary issues. *Kari* explores queer identity in Mumbai through a visual language that references Indian miniature painting, contemporary graphic design, and Western comics. Patil's panels often feature decorative borders reminiscent of manuscript painting traditions, and her use of color symbolism draws from Indian aesthetic theory—particularly the concept of *rasa* (emotional essence). Her subsequent *Adi Parva* (2012) and *Sauptik* (2016), retelling portions of the *Mahabharata*, explicitly engage with India's pictorial storytelling legacy, adapting ancient narratives through contemporary visual experimentation.

The rise of digital comics has accelerated both globalization and localization of Indian comics. Platforms like Graphic India, Holy Cow Entertainment, and Tinkle have moved online, reaching global audiences while maintaining cultural specificity. Webcomics like Aminder Dhaliwal's *Woman World* and Aarthi Parthasarathy's *Angry Maushi* demonstrate how Indian creators navigate global comics cultures while addressing Indian experiences. Significantly, many digital Indian comics employ vertical scroll formats optimized for mobile reading, unconsciously echoing the vertical scroll traditions of historical *patachitra*.

Corporate initiatives have also emerged. Graphic India's collaboration with Stan Lee and Sharad Devarajan produced *Chakra the Invincible* and other superhero properties designed for Indian and international markets. These works attempt to synthesize Western superhero conventions with Indian mythology, though critical reception has been mixed. More successful have been grassroots initiatives like the Pao Collective and Yoda Press, which publish alternative and experimental comics exploring Indian realities through diverse visual languages.

Visual Techniques: Continuities Across Time

Close analysis reveals specific visual techniques that connect contemporary Indian comics to historical pictorial traditions. The treatment of spatial depth provides a clear example. Traditional Indian painting employed multiple perspective systems simultaneously—a practice that resisted Western single-point perspective until the colonial period. Contemporary Indian comics frequently employ similar multi-perspectival space. In Orijit Sen's *River of Stories*, panels depicting the Narmada River valley combine aerial views, ground-level perspectives, and cross-sections within single compositions, creating complex spatial fields that recall the multi-layered spaces of miniature paintings.

The use of decorative elements and ornamental frames constitutes another continuity. Where Western comics often employ simple rectangular panels with minimal borders, many Indian comics feature decorated panel borders, ornamental page layouts, and integrated design elements. This reflects the traditional Indian aesthetic principle that empty space should be filled with decoration—a principle evident in temple architecture, manuscript illumination, and textile design. In Amruta Patil's work, decorative borders serve narrative functions, with border designs shifting to reflect emotional states or thematic elements within panels.

Facial representation in Indian comics often maintains conventions from traditional art. The three-quarter profile view, extended eyes, and stylized expressions in many *Amar Chitra Katha* titles derive from Mughal and Rajput miniature painting traditions. Even in more contemporary styles, Indian comics often privilege expressive pose and gesture over facial detail—a characteristic of classical Indian dance and sculpture, where *mudras* (hand gestures) and body positions convey meaning. This contrasts with Western comics' emphasis on facial expression as the primary vehicle for emotion.

Color usage in Indian comics frequently references traditional color symbolism. The association of colors with specific emotions and concepts—blue with the divine, red with *shakti* (power), yellow with learning—appears

throughout Indian visual culture and persists in comics. *Amar Chitra Katha's* color choices for deity representations follow devotional art conventions, and even secular contemporary comics often employ culturally coded color schemes.

Narrative Structures: Story, Myth, and Morality

The narrative structures of Indian comics reflect indigenous storytelling patterns that privilege myth, moral instruction, and cyclical temporality. Unlike Western superhero comics' emphasis on individual transformation and linear progression, Indian comics often present stories as illustrations of timeless principles. The *Amar Chitra Katha* titles function as *itihasa* (traditional history)—narratives that blend historical events with moral and spiritual lessons. Even when depicting historical figures, the comics emphasize exemplary behavior and dharmic duty rather than psychological complexity or character development.

This pedagogical function connects comics to traditional storytelling roles. In pre-modern India, visual narratives served educational purposes, teaching religious principles, social norms, and moral values. The *patuas* who painted scrolls were also teachers, and temple sculptures served as visual textbooks for largely illiterate populations. Contemporary Indian comics, particularly those aimed at children, maintain this educational function. *Tinkle* magazine explicitly combines entertainment with moral instruction, and even adult-oriented graphic novels often engage with questions of duty, identity, and social responsibility in ways that reflect classical Indian concerns.

The treatment of violence in Indian comics also reflects cultural specificity. While Western superhero comics emphasize physical combat and victory through force, Indian comics often depict violence as tragic necessity or karmic consequence. In *Amar Chitra Katha* war stories, violence receives less visual emphasis than strategy, diplomacy, and moral dilemmas. When violence appears, it's often stylized rather than graphic, following the conventions of traditional Indian art, which depicts violence symbolically rather than realistically.

Mythological content remains central to Indian comics in ways that distinguish them from Western comics, where mythology is largely metaphorical or relegated to fantasy genres. In Indian comics, mythological and contemporary realities coexist naturally. Characters pray to deities who might appear within panels, astrology and karma function as legitimate causal forces, and sacred texts are quoted as authorities. This reflects the continuing presence of mythology in everyday Indian life, where the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* function not as ancient literature but as living narratives that inform contemporary identity and behavior.

Challenges and Critiques

Despite their cultural significance, Indian comics face several challenges. The dominance of Western comics in global markets and critical discourse has marginalized Indian comics scholarship and limited international recognition of Indian creators. The tendency to evaluate Indian comics through Western aesthetic and narrative frameworks often results in their being dismissed as derivative or unsophisticated. This critical approach fails to recognize the distinct visual and narrative traditions from which Indian comics emerge.

Within India, comics have struggled with perceptions of low cultural status. Unlike Japan, where manga are respected across age groups and literary prestige, Indian comics are often dismissed as children's entertainment. This has limited investment in the medium and restricted its artistic development. The commercial pressures on Indian comics publishing have led to repetitive content and conservative visual styles, with many publishers reluctant to experiment with form or content.

Gender representation in Indian comics has been particularly problematic. *Amar Chitra Katha* and its successors largely reproduced patriarchal narratives, depicting women primarily as devoted wives, suffering mothers, or objects of desire. While contemporary graphic novels have begun addressing feminist concerns—notably Amruta Patil's work and titles like Priya's *Shakti* (2014), which addresses sexual violence—mainstream Indian comics remain male-dominated in both creation and representation.

The question of language poses additional challenges. While *Amar Chitra Katha* published titles in multiple Indian languages, English has dominated Indian comics, limiting their reach to English-educated audiences. This linguistic choice reflects class dynamics and colonial legacies, potentially disconnecting comics from the multilingual oral storytelling traditions they claim to represent.

Conclusion: Comics as Cultural Continuity

Understanding Indian comics as contemporary manifestations of indigenous pictorial storytelling traditions rather than Western imports offers several crucial insights. First, it reveals the cultural specificity of comics as a medium—that while comics globally share certain formal characteristics, they emerge from and reflect distinct cultural traditions and aesthetic principles. The sequential visual narratives of Indian temple sculpture and Japanese *emaki* scrolls may share formal similarities, but they develop from different cultural logics and serve different social functions.

Second, this historical framework challenges Western-centric comics scholarship and validates indigenous modes of visual literacy. Indian readers bring to comics interpretive skills developed through centuries of engaging with visual narratives. The conventions that govern how Indian audiences "read" comics—expectations about spatial arrangement, temporal progression, and the relationship between text and image—are shaped by cultural experience, not universal perceptual principles.

Third, recognizing continuity between traditional and contemporary pictorial storytelling demonstrates how cultural forms evolve through technological change without necessarily losing their cultural character. Indian comics employ modern printing and digital technologies, incorporate transnational influences, and address contemporary concerns, yet they maintain aesthetic conventions, narrative structures, and social functions that connect them to ancient traditions. This suggests that globalization need not mean cultural homogenization—that local traditions can adapt to new technologies and global forms while maintaining cultural specificity.

Finally, the case of Indian comics offers a model for understanding other non-Western comics traditions. Just as Indian comics emerge from temple art and scroll paintings, Japanese manga develop from *emaki* scrolls and *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, Korean manhwa connect to folk painting traditions, and African comics draw on indigenous visual cultures. Recognizing these distinct genealogies enriches global comics scholarship and challenges the assumption that comics are fundamentally a Western medium that has been adopted elsewhere.

As Indian comics continue evolving in digital environments and global markets, they face pressures toward standardization and homogenization. However, the persistence of visual techniques, narrative patterns, and cultural functions across two millennia suggests that India's pictorial storytelling traditions possess remarkable resilience. Contemporary Indian creators who consciously engage with this legacy—like Patil, Sen, and others—demonstrate that innovation need not mean abandoning tradition. By understanding comics as one manifestation of India's ongoing pictorial storytelling legacy, we can appreciate their cultural specificity and recognize the diversity of forms that sequential visual narrative can take.

The story of Indian comics is ultimately about continuity and change, tradition and innovation. From the Ajanta caves to digital webcomics, Indian culture has told stories through sequential images, adapting techniques and technologies while maintaining core aesthetic principles and narrative functions. Contemporary Indian comics represent not the adoption of a foreign form but the latest chapter in this long narrative tradition—a chapter written in new media but drawing from ancient sources, speaking to global audiences while remaining distinctly, recognizably Indian.

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