Chapter 11
India in Pictures: Comics and Graphic Novels
Nina Sabnani

In the world of comics and graphic novels the relationship between words and images has always been a strong one and in India this notion is also an old one. From vertical scrolls to embroidered narratives, these precursors to comics and graphic novels have existed in the country for hundreds of years. India has rich examples from the oral to the literary tradition and then beyond to the digital and multimedia. Even as newer forms evolve through cultural, political and technological changes over time, all traditions co-exist and therefore may be seen as non-sequential.

Oral Tradition

Known by various names such as pattachitra, Cheryal scrolls and Guruḍu scrolls, the practice of some of these traditions is still alive in parts of the country (Fig. 1 & 2). The most popular amongst the horizontal scrolls is the Phad from Rajasthan (Fig 3). In the phad tradition, the artist who makes the phad scroll and the storyteller who recites the narrative belong to different castes communities. The performance takes place at night for a community that is also the patron of the storyteller. The storyteller (or bhopa) is accompanied by a lamp bearer who is often his wife. Together, they walk along the twenty to thirty-five foot scroll reciting and lighting up different parts of the scroll as the story unfolds. The storyteller assigns meaning to the image through a performance that includes voice, dance and music.

Similarly, in the Kavad tradition of Rajasthan (Fig 4a, 4b), the storyteller points at images to recite the stories in prose and verse. The kavad is a portable wooden shrine with painted images on multiple panels. The images come alive when the storyteller assigns names and meanings to them; a single image represents a whole story.

Literary Tradition

Words and images came together in palm leaf manuscripts and paper when oral knowledge of the sacred, the epic narratives and literature, began to be transmitted through writing. The focus shifted from listening to reading. The single scroll became a unit of pages held together, a book (or phol). Also known as illustrated manuscripts, these traditions continued till the emergence of the printing press, and when paper became more popular. The material used determined the size and shape of these books.

One of the earliest illustrated stories from the Mughal Emperor Akbar’s time was the Hamza Namah, a fanciful blend of history and local legend. A favourite story of Akbar’s, it ran into several hand-made editions during his reign and took almost fifteen years to complete. It is a collection of action filled stories that revolve around the adventures of Amir Hamza, the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad. The text is written at the back of the painted images.

Akbar also commissioned the Awtari, Sulabh, a Persian version of the animal fables, the Panchantar. Both had images and text that could be compared and are comparable to graphic novels today. So even though we may not term them as comics, literature of such nature did exist in India. Comics by Indians and with Indian content emerged in India post independence.