

The Itineraries of a Medium: Bengali Comics, and New Ways of Reading.

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Abstract: When the nineteenth-century social reformers with their prescribed practices and trenchant pulpitering failed to revive the virility of bootlick and sycophant Bengali *bābus* (the genteel class), political cartoonists pompously rose to intercede in the dispute. Political cartoonists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, like Prannath Datta (1840-1886), Gaganendranath Tagore (1867-1938), and Binoy Basu (1895-1959) realized that *ākḥ'ṛās* or gymnasiums, wrestling, body-building, and martial arts were inadequate to trigger a seismic rearrangement in the disposition of the English-educated debauched and profligate *bābus* because the prevalent decadence, corruption, and colonial complicity had already hindered the outcome of such social reforms in the first place. Political cartoonists in late colonial Bengal, therefore, assumed the public role of stripping the *bābus* of their accoutrements of Western modernity with the artistic deployment of satire and caricature. This lecherous, imitative, pretentious, anglophile *bābu* became a cultural stereotype in late colonial Bengal that allowed it to metastasize into a fecund trope of caricature, parody, and literary imagination.

It was around this time that with the publication of one of the first Bengali cartoon magazines like *Har'bolā bhāṅṅ* (1873, Fig. 1) and *Basantak* (1874, Fig. 2)¹, the meaning of the word “cartoon” was redefined. The word “cartoon”

¹ Although *Har'bolā bhāṅṅ* and *Basantak* are claimed as the first cartoon magazines in Bengal, they are not the first illustrated Bengali books. A Brahmin man called Baburam was the first Indian to install a printing press in Calcutta in 1807 in Kidderpore, but most importantly it was in 1816 that the first illustrated Bengali book – Bharatchandra Ray's *Annadāmaṅgal* with eight woodcut and metal engraving illustrations – was published by Gangakishore Bhattacharya, and printed by Ferris and Company. Kashinath Mistri's illustrations in Joyce's *Dialogues on mechanics and anatomy* are well documented in The School Book Society's Annual Report for 1818-1819. John Lawson was also well known for his illustrations of animals in the first illustrated monthly periodical *Paśbabali (The animals)* published in 1822. Ramchandra Vidyalankar's *Gaurī bilās* published in 1824 also had six illustrations. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Calcutta became a fecund site for the display and sale of British pictures, with the first art exhibition organized by the British Club taking place in the city in 1831. Sukumar Sen mentions with awe the seventy-two full page illustrations by Ramdhan Swarnakar in Paranchand Kapur's *Harihar'maṅgal* published in 1830. Sen also suggests that illustrations in the Battala books appeared after 1831, while William Archer dates them from 1850 onwards. The Battala book trade stormed the colonial market with a varied range of literature that

attained a new economy of its own as it was no longer considered to be a preparatory drawing (Horn 1980: 15-34 *passim*) but rather a finished product – a satirical one – that now employed innuendo, wit, pretension, bathos, and irony to parody contemporary manners and social groups.



Fig. 1: Cover picture of Har'bolā bhār (Vol. 1, 1873)

ranged from farces, erotica, mysteries, history, etc. printed onto cheap flimsy papers from woodcuts, and sold at a low price. These Battala prints competed in the market against the already existing Kalighat paintings. Purnendu Pattrea points out that with the mass scale circulation of almanacs (*pañjikā*) especially after the publication of Kṛṣṇacandra Karmakarī's *Natun pañjikā* (*New almanac*) published by Sanders and Jones Printing Press in 1847 that woodcut prints found its new target audience – the middleclass of Calcutta. The Calcutta School of Industrial Art established in 1854, which became Calcutta School of Art in 1864, and later became Government College of Art & Craft in 1951 promoted engraving and woodcuts as special branches of training. See: Paul 1983; Śrīpāntha 1996; Gupta and Chakravorty (eds.) 2004; Basu and Māmun (eds.) 2005; Ghosh 2006; Bhadra 2011; Pāl 2013; Śrīpāntha 2015; Sen 2015; Pāl 2018.



Fig. 2: Cover picture of *Basantak* (Vol.1, 1874)

The overtly satirical drawings published in these magazines in the form of social and political cartoons ridiculed individuals, exposed human follies, parodied foibles of the society, and criticized colonial politics. Political cartoons emptied its arsenal of *byājastuti* (mock-praise), *bakrokti* (oblique expression), *upahās* (ridicule), and *śleṣ* (irony) – all the essential instruments of early Bengali satire of Sanskrit origins (Basu 2013: 126) – to deploy an attack against the landed gentry, middle class *bābus*, British officials, and social magnates. The excoriation of the empire’s ‘civilizing mission’ through caricatures and a self-critical stance established the cartoonists as the ‘alter-ego’ of the Westernized *babu*. The cartoonists of *Har’bolā bhāṛ* and *Basantak* sought to envision a social change through their caricature and satire, but

nonetheless faded out of the public discourse as people failed to grasp the seriousness of the medium and its humor.

The clown or jester-like (*bidūsak*) narratorial figure in *Har'bolā bhāṛ* and *Basantak* was modeled after the cultivated iconoclast – Mr. Punch – of the nineteenth-century English satirical periodical called *Punch, or the London Charivari*.² The all-seeing omniscient narrators of *Har'bolā bhāṛ* and *Basantak* employ burlesque to interlace their juxtaposed visual-verbal invectives directed against the colonial administration. The structural importance of the visual-verbal caricatures in these periodicals is based on the effective use of burlesque, i.e., the severe treatment of a frivolous subject matter and vice-versa, and a witty, informal, amusing and tolerant revelation of foibles through Horatian satire, which is opposed to the formal, vitriolic and caustic Juvenal satire that attacks vices through contempt and indignation. The vein of the Horatian satire runs throughout nineteenth century Bengali self-ironical tradition in the celebrated works of Pyrichand Mitra's *Ālāler gharer dulāl* (*The spoilt brat of a wealthy man*, 1857), and Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutom pyācār nak'ṣā* (*The observant owl*, 1862). Although the periodicals have abstained from all sorts of ribaldry and bawdy indecency, the zaniness produced in the aftermath of the tumescence and de-tumescence of their subject matter through literary wit and inflated and deflated bathos remained a stable trope unrivalled by any other visual medium in nineteenth-century Bengal.

Seventy years after *Har'bolā bhāṛ* and *Basantak*, West Bengal has braved tumultuous times that in retrospect can now be rightly called chaotic. The Bengal Famine (1943), the Great Calcutta Killings (1946), the Sino-Indian War (1962), the death of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister (1964), the

² *Le Charivari* founded by Chales Philipon (illustrated by Honore Daumier) was an illustrated magazine that was published in Paris from 1832 to 1937. It published political cartoons, caricatures and reviews. In 1841, Ebenezer Landells and Henry Mayhew employed *Le Charivari* as a model to establish their *Punch* magazine that was subtitled, *The London Charivari*. *Punch's* reception in India occurred with the publication of *The Indian Charivari* or *The Indian Punch* in 1872 that featured the Indian version of Richard Doyle's *Punch* cover. *Delhi Sketchbook* was the first *Punch*-inspired magazine, which the newspaper *The Englishman* launched in 1850. After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 the magazine was re-launched as *The Indian Punch* which ended in 1862. It was against the racial caricatures of the Indians in *The Indian Charivari* that illustrated Bengali periodicals like *Har'bolā bhāṛ* (1873) and *Basantak* (1874) endeavored to claim cultural superiority and subvert colonial policies through their caricatures.

Indo-Pak War (1965), the Naxalbari Uprising or Naxalite Movement (1967), the Bangladesh War of Liberation (1971), and the Emergency or the notorious suppression of and abuse of civil rights and democratic processes by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1975-77) were some of the vital events that marked the transition from the decadent British-ruled colonial Bengal to the rebellious and fractured post-Independence West Bengal. The socio-political history of Bengal and its reception in contemporary literature till the present day is a long and chaotic one. The visual or graphic literature in the form of Bengali political cartoons and comic strips that was produced in the wake of this chaos remained unacknowledged amid the hegemony of other literary genres and its subsequent forms like novel, poetry, drama, and essay.

Political cartoons and comics of these stormy decades abound with mythical recreations and endless insurrections. In the 1960s, cartoons fully evolved into comics. The medium of a single-page political/social/educational cartoon spatially expanded and stylistically modified itself to accommodate speech-bubbles, panels, and gutters. One of the first practitioners of comic art was Narayan Debnath (born 1926). Debnath published India's first comic-strip superhero, *Bãṭul di Greṭ*, in the May-June, 1965 edition of the *Śukltārā* magazine. The *Bãṭul* strips redefined the medium of Bengali comics in the 1960s. *Bãṭul* strips are treated as a metonymy for analysis here, i.e., it is a part which represents the whole of Bengali comics corpus from the 1960s onward. It created an artistic precedent for everything that followed after its publication. The *Bãṭul* comic strips pose enormous complications for a comics scholar, firstly, because Narayan Debnath illustrated some roughly three hundred *Bãṭul* strips over the course of fifty-two years. Secondly, there are uncanny similarities with Dudley W. Watkins' *Desperate Dan* (1937) that might hold answers to the question of whether a distinct Bengali comics theory is at all required or not to fully fathom the itineraries of this medium (Fig. 3). And thirdly, although the strips are interconnected thematically they do not follow a continuous narrative. A reader can approach the *Bãṭul* strips regardless of its chronology and can freely gallop back and forth on its publication timeline without the risk of losing the essence of the texts.

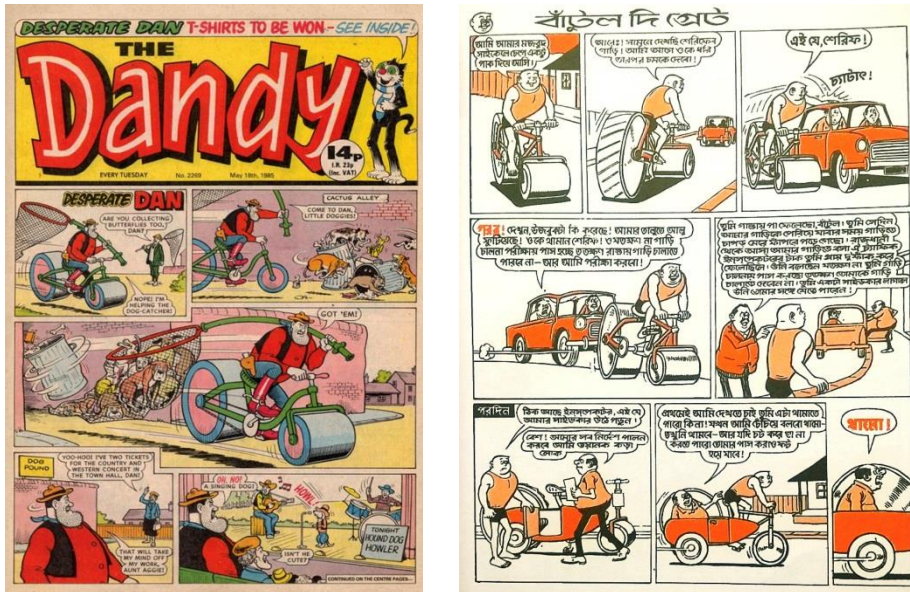


Fig. 3: Similarity between Desperate Dan and Bāṭul di Greṭ

No matter in what sequence one chooses to read these comics, one’s understanding of the figure of the superhero within the matrix of culture and language of West Bengal will always remain stable and holistic. This discontinuous and fragmentary nature of the *Bāṭul* corpus makes it more approachable for analysis, unlike in the case of the DC or Marvel Comics, where one is compelled to locate the origin story of the superheroes to find clues about some secret messages, hidden features, and the ruptures in the storyline or narrative process. The origin story is an initial background story or a “bedrock account” (Hatfield, Heer and Worcester 2013: 3) of the events from which the figure of the superhero emanates who is then eventually set apart from the rest of humanity. Origin stories are recurring tropes within the narrative that constantly act as organizing principles to drive and shape the singular nature of the superhero. It is the event from which the entire narrative springs. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester explicate that (Hatfield, Heer and Worcester 2013: 3): to read origin stories about destroyed worlds, murdered parents, genetic mutations, and mysterious power-giving wizards is to realize the degree to which the superhero genre is about transformation, about identity, about difference, and about the tension between psychological rigidity and a flexible and fluid sense of human nature.

Bāṭul being West Bengal's first superhero has regrettably no origin story to narrate, which makes him somewhat dissimilar from his Western counterparts, and too aberrant for the Western theoretical frameworks to accommodate.

In North America and Europe, the hegemony of the dominant academic attitudes toward the already existing literary genres and other mediums of mass entertainment fomented a plague of stigmas that rendered mass-produced products like comics aberrant and harmful (Lopes 2006: 387-414). Comic book theorist Will Eisner recollected that comic book artists were once regarded, socially and professionally, as what the German called *Untermensch*, an inferior person or a subhuman (Groth and Fiore 1988: 16). This stigmatization of popular cultural forms was created by the labeling process that vehemently intervened as a social construction (Lopes 2006: 393). But unlike the problematic comics culture in North America or Europe, its medium, practitioners, and fans were never completely stigmatized or vilified by critics or educators in West Bengal. In the 1960s, when comic book illustrators like Narayan Debnath, Kafi Khan (Pratul Chandra Lahiri / P.C.L. / Piciel), Mayukh Chowdhury, Shailesh Pal, Pratul Bandhopadhyay, Tushar Chatterjee, Balaibandhu Roy and others were perfecting the art form amid the political tumult of the times, they were branded as “bina poishar artists” [*binā pay'sār ārtiṣṭs*] (Chakravorty 2012) – penniless artists – due to the lack of financial prospect that engulfed the area. It was only the status accorded to them as artists that saved them from this kind of stigmatization seen in Europe and the United States, as most of them were readily hired for their skills in Bengali magazines like *Nabakallol*, *Śuk'tārā* and others. It was only in the late 1960s³ that the birth of the comic book fan culture (as a subculture) is witnessed in West Bengal. These artists found a community of target audiences that validated their work as worthy of attention. This community of “sympathetic others” (Lopes 2006: 391) had a significant impact that spawned an unprecedented amount of comic strips on public demand in the successive decades.

³ In 1969, *Bāṭul di Greṭ* was nominated as the topic/theme for ‘*Kākali Basu smṛiti sāhitya prā-tiyogitā*’ [Kakoli Basu memorial writing contest] that was advertised in *Śuk'tārā* magazine. Bengali comics enthusiast and researcher, Kaushik Majumdar was confounded to see how quickly *Bāṭul*'s fame escalated within the fourth year of its publication. See: Majum'dār 2013: xi.

Ian Gordon records in his book *Comic strips and consumer culture: 1890-1945* (1998) that comic strips were published in the newspaper because their appeal to the target audience led to higher sales, and not because “literary-minded people with community based salons requested their publication” (1998: 43). Gordon also writes that the “purchasers did not directly consume comic strips, the strips established their characters as commodities. The popularity of comic strip characters, and the art form as a whole suggested broader commercial opportunities to a number of entrepreneurs involved in their production” (43).

Nonetheless, it was Mayukh Chowdhury’s contention that in Calcutta – “readers understand comics, but not the publishers”⁴ (Caudhurī 2016: vii). Chowdhury asserts that comics demand adventurous stories and “action-packed drama” throbbing with suspense (Caudhurī 2016: vii).

Based on his scrupulous nature of composing graphic narratives and an ardent fondness for American comics like *Tarzan*, *Hercules*, *Flash Gordon*, *Rip Kirby* and others, he gave a brief outline of three key features which every Bengali comics illustrator must possess to become commercially successful. Firstly, the ability to create a meticulous narrative; secondly, the artistic skill to proceed from one action to another through astounding shot divisions; and thirdly, a masterful execution of drawings with an impeccable knowledge of spellings (Caudhurī 2016: vii). Debnath is exempted from Mayukh Chowdhury’s adopt-adapt-adept guidelines because he had already mastered these tenets even before they were formulated.

Moreover, Mayukh Chowdhury and Narayan Debnath had familiar sources of reference like *Rip Kirby*, *Tarzan*, and *Batman*, *Hercules*, etc. In the 1960s, when the Bengali author Dr. Samarendranath Panda (a.k.a. Sri Swapan Kumar) started writing serialized crime stories, they were accompanied by Debnath’s mesmerizing black and white sketches on the back cover, which eventually achieved public fame in the decades to come. The protagonists of Sri Swapan Kumar’s crime series – Detective Dipak Chatterjee [Dīpak Cyātārjī] and his assistant Ratan'lāl, as well as the antagonists – Bāj'pākhi (Hawk), Kālō Nek'ṛe (Black Wolf) and Dragon were equally celebrated among the readers. Bāj'pākhi was illustrated in the image of Batman, Kālō Nek'ṛe in the likeness of Phantom, and Dragon in the likeness of Mandrake. For detailed and meticulous

⁴ Bengali original: *pāṭhak'rā kamik-s bojhen, kintu bojhen nā prakāśak'rā.*

illustrations of the pistols, Narayan Debnath referred to his much loved John Prentice's *Rip Kirby* comic strips (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) (Gaṛāi and Ghos̄ 2013: 431).



Fig. 4: Bāj'pākhi, Kālō Nēk'rē and Dragon

PRACTICING THE ART IN WEST BENGAL

The realistic nature of Debnath’s comics is derived from its simplified illustrations. Scott McCloud said that cartooning is a form of “amplification through simplification” (McCloud 1994: 30). When an image is stripped to its essential meaning that meaning is amplified better than any realistic art. Here, before we proceed any further, it is necessary to outline the basic differences between cartoons and comics. Observations on the form of comics are varied, eclectic and contestable⁵ and for a better understanding, I have resorted to the most widely circulated and readily comprehensible ideas regarding the medium. Scott McCloud’s analysis of the form of comics⁶ in *Understanding comics: The invisible art*, is considered to be essentially broad, yet provisional for critics and practitioners. He defined comics as: “[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud 1994: 9).



Fig. 5: John Prentice’s Rip Kirby, and Narayan Debnath’s Kauśik Rāy in Sarparājyer dbipe (The island of the Serpent King)

⁵ For the various definitions of the comics form, see: Eisner 1985: 8; Groensteen 2007: 21-22; Gordon 1998: 7-11; Hayman and Pratt’s *pictorial narrative* in 2005: 423; Meskin 2007: 369-379; Chute 2008: 452; Pratt 2009: 107-117; Cook’s *mereological pictorial thesis* in 2011: 285-296.

⁶ McCloud writes that comics is “plural in form, used with a singular verb”, 1994: 9.

The cartoon form here differs from the comics form in a way that cartoons have single-panel images, while comics unfolds over multiple frames and deviates from the regular interval of space (Chute 2008: 454).⁷ Moreover, the gutter – the blank space between the panels of illustration – that “plays host to much of the magic and mystery” (McCloud 1994: 66) at the heart of the comics is “the only element of comics that is not duplicated in any other medium” (McCloud 1993: 3-16). The ‘closure’ or our mental process that bridges the spatio-temporal incompleteness of the diegesis in the ‘gutter’ allows readers to participate in the completion of the narrative. Scott McCloud describes ‘closure’ as the everyday process of “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (McCloud 1994: 63). He argues, “[i]f visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar. And since our definition of comics hinges on the arrangement of elements, then, in a very real sense, comics is closure” (McCloud 1994: 67).⁸ Moreover, this “hybrid word-and-image” comics form does not coalesce the visual and the verbal, neither does it use one to illustrate the other, it rather presents the two “nonsynchronously” (Chute 2008: 453).

Illustrators and editors of comic books in Bengal have defined comics and graphic narratives as stories in picture and picture stories respectively (Gamgopādhyāy 2015: 3). In the light of the extremely fecund comics scholarship in the Western academia, this minimalist definition of Bengali comics is inadequate for a critical venture. The delineations of Bengali comics are embedded in a completely different cultural matrix. South Asian comic book theorists are insouciant to consider Indian comics as anything but “variations on the master narrative” from the West, which as a result, further relegates this genre to a position of marginality in West Bengal (Chakrabarty 2000: 27). To analyze the form of comics for a postcolonial critic in total ignorance of the Western theoretical frameworks and their conceptual paradigms is to

⁷ Kafi Khan (1900-75) was the master of drawing gag cartoons that were heavily influenced by the political cartoons and caricatures of the cartoonist David Low. Gag cartoons are single-panel drawing with verbal captions beneath. Gamgopādhyāy 2012: 7.

⁸ Henry John Pratt says Scott McCloud’s choice of the word ‘closure’ is “unfortunate”, as the term has been used to refer to the resolution of narrative tension for a long time beside its usage in epistemology. Pratt is not involving in a semasiological study of the term, but is rather delineating that other words like ‘suture’ from film theory (to sew a film together from various elements) can also be used to understand this concept. Pratt coins the terms “soldering” and “bridging”, but decides not to use in the light of the prominence of McCloud’s ‘closure’. See: Pratt 2009: 111.

provide an incomplete and an “outdated” project, which would further smear the credibility of the work (Chakrabarty 2000: 28). The time has not yet come to “return the gaze” (Chakrabarty 2000: 29), so this article must endure the rites of passage and be content with the borrowed theories from the Western comics historiography. The form of the Bengali comics cannot define themselves; they must be defined. And in the quest for a definition, one is compelled to go back to its Western precedents.

Fredric Wertham, a New York psychiatrist in his book, *Seduction of the innocent*, published in 1954, had already anticipated the negative influences of comic books on children. Wertham in his book unabashedly castigated the entire enterprise of comic strips and comic books for their publication for mass consumption where *Superman* and *Donald Duck* were no less than “adult-oriented horror and crime comic books” (Gordon 1998: 2). Wertham’s virulence toward the medium of comics was apprehended as a threatened reaction to a new form of mass culture that was beyond the jurisdiction of the cultural elites (Gordon 1998: 2). In the United States, the academic reciprocation towards the comics culture was a hostile one, while in West Bengal it was that of indifference. Bengali comics of the second half of the twentieth century, according to the masses, politicians or intellectuals, did not even possess a destabilizing potential toward the socio-political framework. Bengali comics posed no threats and had no status except light-hearted entertainment. It is one of the primary reasons why comics scholarship in West Bengal even after almost eighty years of production and circulation of Bengali comics is still suffering from a dearth of serious academic research.

With the publication of the first critical book on the great comic book heroes in the 1960s (Jules Feiffer’s *The great comic book heroes*, 1965), along with other secondary materials, there emerged a widespread minimalist notion of the superhero comics as necessarily “formulaic, masculinist, melodramatic, and morally reductive” (Hatfield, Heer and Worcester 2013: xiii). The celebration of the imagery of the American superhero, rather than its analysis, became a major drawback for the magical yet marginal position of the superhero comics in contemporary popular culture.



Fig. 6: John Buscema's Hercules #1006, July 1959 (left) and Mayukh Chowdhury's Yātrī (The traveller) (right)

It is beyond doubt that Narayan Debnath and Mayukh Chowdhury were equally influenced by the Golden (1930-1950), Silver (1956-70) and Bronze Age of American Comic Books (1970-85). They strongly inculcated, appropriated and modified these formulae to forge their narratives and characters. Mayukh Chowdhury's list of influential comics is mentioned in his 1996 article, "When comics tell stories!"⁹, which includes Alex Raymond and John Prentice's *Rip Kirby*, Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon*, Neal Adams' *Green Lantern*, John Buscema's *Conan the Barbarian* and *Hercules*, Lee Falk's *The Phantom*, and *Tarzan* by Burne Hogarth (the person whom he hailed as the "Michelangelo of the comic world") (Caudhuri 2016: x) (Fig. 6).

Narayan Debnath and Mayukh Chowdhury were aware of the dismissive tags that were attached to the medium, but they threw down their gauntlets to define the purpose, idiosyncrasy and objectives of action and adventure comics in West Bengal. Narayan Debnath through his *Bāṭul*, *Indrajit Rāy*, and *Kauśik Rāy*, and Mayukh Chowdhury through his *Rabin'huḍ* (*Robin Hood*) series, *Agantuk* (*The stranger*), *Andha Mākōṛsā* (*The blind spider*) and

⁹ Bengali original: *Kamik's yakhan galpa bale*.

Rām'dhanur sandhāne (In search of the bow of Ram) (Fig. 7.1 – Fig. 7.4) retaliated against the monolithic ideas of the superhero comics genre as “an adolescent male power fantasy” (Hatfield, Heer and Worcester 2013: xiii) that were considered incapable of expressing thought-provoking visions and accused of being conformist and juvenile.¹⁰

¹⁰ It is also interesting to note that this Bengali comics tradition also invokes the underlying historical arc of physical culture that was prevalent from the mid-nineteenth century onward. John Rosselli, in his essay “The self-image of effeteness: physical education and nationalism in nineteenth-century Bengal”, deftly traces the rise of physical culture in Bengal from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1930s when Bengalis strove to ameliorate the detrimental fabrication of their imposed degeneracy, i.e. effeteness, through the pursuit of physical culture. In order to overcome the undesirable state of their humiliation they sought remedy in physical culture and martial art. The members of the Tagore family and their allies in the Ādi (Original) Brāhma Samāj launched the first response against the colonial stereotype of Bengali effeteness. In 1866, Rajnarayan Basu's prospectus of a *Nationality Promotion Society* mandated the revival of “the national gymnastic exercises” first among the society's tasks, followed by the publication of tracts in Bengali that illustriously offered instances of “the military prowess of the ancient Bengalis”, and the reform of the Bengali diet. In the following year (1867), members of the Tagore connection launched the Hindu Mela (Fair), an annual festival in Calcutta which exhibited the display of handicrafts as well as cultural and sporting events. It was termed as the “National Gathering” by its promoters. The Hindu Mela under its chief organizer Nabagopal Mitra made much of gymnastics, wrestling and other traditional sports. In 1868, Nabagopal Mitra established a gymnastic school from which a well-known though short-lived National School was later developed. Within a few years, he had trained and dispatched several physical education teachers, and founded a number of *ākh'ṛās*. In 1876, Bipin Chandra Pal also founded a secret society to promote physical culture and train all adults in handling weapons. Projit Bihari Mukharji also explicates in his book *Nationalizing the body: the medical market, print and daktari medicine* that in the early twentieth-century Bengal, *ḍāktārī* authors wrote zealously about the role of *byām* (exercise) in the cultivation of the body as well as in the prevention of diseases. Narayan Debnath's characters seem to react to a caveat issued by Dr. Kulachandra Guha in 1910: “We need to attend to the cultivation of the body [*byām*] with as much urgency as we do these days to our diet [*āhār*]—possibly even more urgently—this has become our solemn duty now, or else, our nation [*jāti*] shall soon fall prey to a variety of Contagious Diseases and disappear from the face of this earth” (2009: 119). The definition of *byām* expanded much beyond the realm of physical exercise to incorporate *mānasik byām* (mental exercises) that aimed at the rejuvenation of *bibek* (conscience), *buddhi* (intellect), *smṛiti* (memory) and *kalpanā* (imagination). See: Chowdhury-Sengupta 1995; Sinha 1995; Dasgupta and Baker (eds.) 2013; Chatterjee (ed.) 2013; Armstrong 2018.

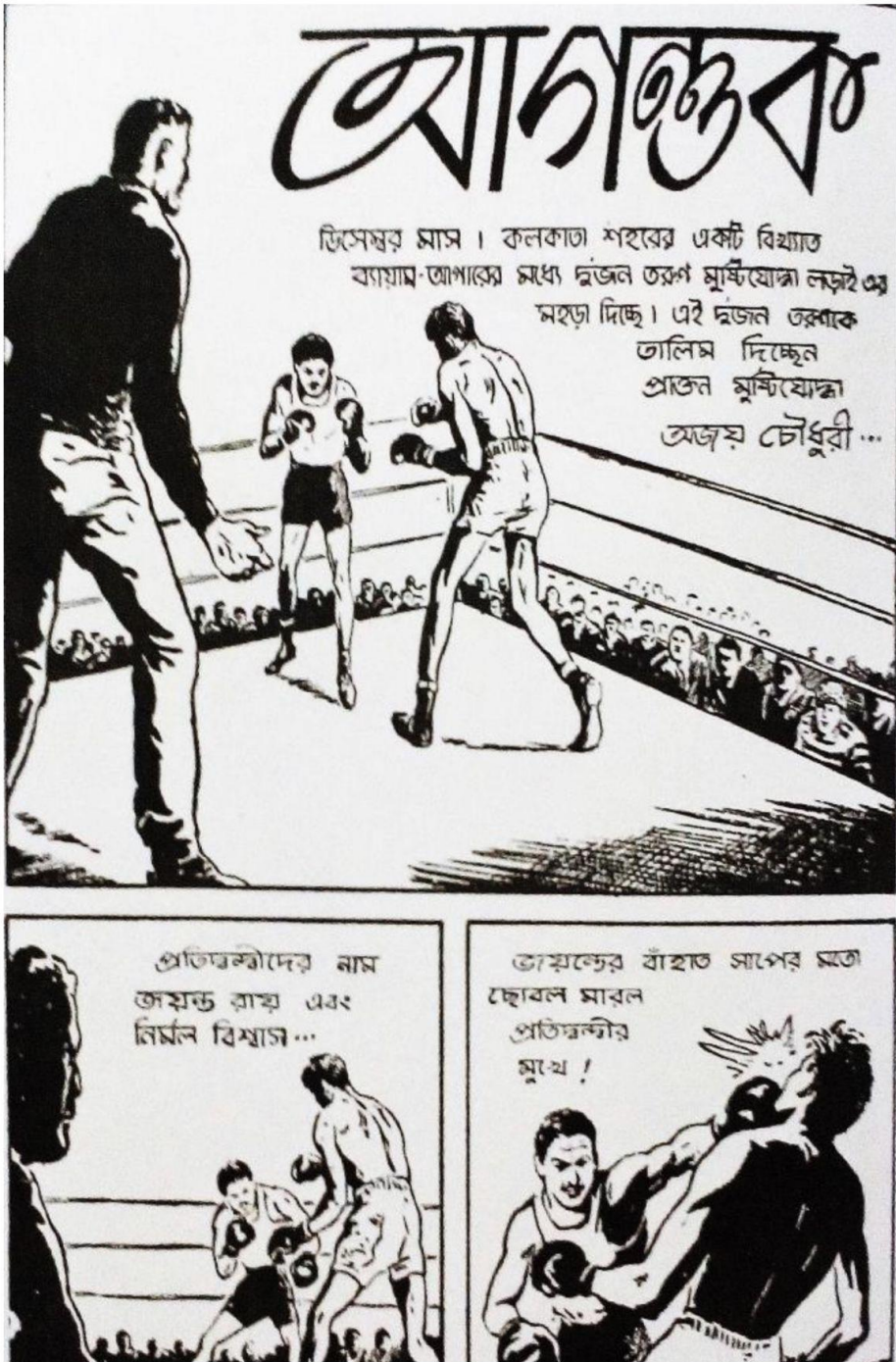


Fig. 7.1: Āgantuk



Fig. 7.2: Rām'dhanur sandhāne



সে কোন বিশেষ দেশের
বিশেষ মানুষ নয় —
নির্ধারিত ও শাসিত
মানুষের কাছে অন্যায়ের
বিরুদ্ধে আপোষহীন
সংগ্রামের জীবন্ত প্রতীক,
জনেপ্রতি ও ইতিহাসে
যুগ-যুগান্তের অম্লর নায়ক —

রবিনহুড!

সমুখ চৌধুরী পরিবেশিত

দ্বাদশ শতাব্দীর মধ্যভাগে বিজয়ী নর্মানদের অত্যাচারে যখন অর্ধেক হয়ে উঠেছে ইংল্যান্ডের আদিবাসী অ্যান্গলো-স্যাক্সন গোষ্ঠী, সেইসময় নির্ধারিত আদিবাসীদের জিতর থেকে আবির্ভূত হল এক দুর্ধর্ষ যোদ্ধা — রবিনহুড। উক্ত রবিনহুডের নেতৃত্বে জন্ম-গ্রহণ করল এক বিদ্রোহী বাহিনী। নর্মানরা এই বিদ্রোহীদের 'দস্যু' আখ্যা দিল। নর্মানদের বিরুদ্ধে সম্মুখযুদ্ধে অংশী হলে দস্যুদের পরাজয় ছিল অনিবার্য; তাই তারা অস্বাভাবিক হারত অত্যন্তই এক কঠোর সশাসনা করে আত্মপালন করতে শেরউড নামক অরণ্যের অন্তঃস্থলে। অজানা বনের পথে রবিনহুডকে অনুসরণ করতে গিয়ে কয়েকবার তার খাওয়ার পর নর্মানরা এই বলে তার গবেশ করতে চাইত না। নর্মানদের কাছে শেরউড মন ছিল চ্যুতেশ্বরীর মতোই উন্মাদ। অ্যান্দের কর্তমান কাহিনী যখন শুরু হচ্ছে, সেইসময়ে ইংল্যান্ডের রাজত্বশাসন করছিলেন জর্জ প্ল্যান্টাজেনেট এবং দেশের আসল রাজা জনের জ্যেষ্ঠ ভ্রাতা "সিচার্স দি লায়নহার্ট" সুদূর প্রাচ্যে অবস্থিত জেরুসালেম নগরীকে স্যারাসেনদের কবল থেকে মুক্ত করার জন্য যুদ্ধ করছিলেন। মুদ্রাণ ও ইসলাম ধর্মাবলম্বী স্যারাসেনদের এই যুদ্ধ ইতিহাসে 'ক্রুসেড' বা 'ধর্মযুদ্ধ' নামে খ্যাতমান হতে পারে। ইউরোপের বিভিন্ন নরপতি এই ধর্মযুদ্ধে সসৈন্যে যোগ দিয়েছিলেন। প্রাচ্যের ধনবস্ত্র দেখে ইউরোপের মানুষ যুদ্ধ হয়ে গিয়েছিল এবং সেই ধনবস্ত্রের খ্যাতি ইংল্যান্ডেও এসে পৌঁছেছিল। কত সাহসী ব্যক্তি ধনবস্ত্রের লোভে প্রাচ্যদেশ অতিক্রমে ক্রুসেডে ভ্রামান। ওয়েস্ট-উইচল সমুদ্র ছিল বিপদসঙ্কল — মরদের ৩৬ বিগদ উত্তর-আফ্রিকার দুর্দান্ত মূর জাতীয় জেলদস্যু। ইতিহাসের কথা শেষ করে এবার "রবিনহুড" সিরিজের দ্বিতীয় কাহিনী শুরু করছি। কাহিনীর নাম —

জেলদস্যুর কবলে রবিনহুড

Fig. 7.3: Jaladasyur kabale Rabin'hud (Robin Hood, the Prisoner of the Pirates)

অন্ধ মাকড়সা

ডিসেম্বর মাস। কনকনে ঠান্ডা।

কলকাতার শহরতলি গোলাপনগরের পথে পথে রাত্রির অন্ধকারে যে বিশাচর শেয়ালগুলো টীল দিয়ে বেড়ায় আর থেকে থেকে তীব্রবর্ষে নিজেরে অস্তিত্ব ঘোষণা করে আজ রাতে তাদেরও কোন সাজাশব্দ পাত্তয়া যাচ্ছে না। রাত মাজে বারোটা-

কিন্তু গোলাপনগর কলোনির পথে দাঁড়িয়ে কেউ যদি ঘনে করে সমস্ত

পৃথিবীতে বুকি একটিও মানুষ জেগে নেই তাহলে বোধহয় বিশেষ ভুল হবে না। তবু দিনের পৃথিবী যখন খুন্সিয়ে পড়ে রাতের পৃথিবী তখন জেগে ওঠে...

তাই গোলাপনগরের ফাঁকা মাঠটার উপর যে-নশু তিনতলা বাড়িটা দাঁড়িয়ে আছে...



তারই একটা ঘরের মধ্যে অন্ধকার-
শীতের রাতে শুরু হয়ে গেল
এক ভয়ংকর নাটকের পাল্লা...



Fig. 7.4: Andha mākōr'sā

‘Bengali comics’ under the broader topic of ‘Indian comics’ was not established as a separate genre until Anant Pai introduced the Amar Chitra Katha (Immortal Pictorial Tales) series (henceforth ACKs) in 1967 (Mathur 2010: 176). Suchitra Mathur observed that ACKs were a deliberate nationalistic enterprise, which involved a retelling of Indian myths, legends, and history in the form of graphic narratives to “create a visually coherent ‘Indian’ cultural tradition” (Mathur 2010: 176). These comics intentionally set themselves apart from the Anglo-American comic tradition in both style and form. The larger-than-life heroes were quickly recognized, as they belonged to specific socio-cultural contexts. In the 1960s along with ACKs the establishment of the two comic book publishers in India – Diamond Comics (1960) and Indrajal Comics (1964) – resurrected the figure of the superhero in the Indian comics tradition with the initial publications of American superhero comics like *Mandrake*, *Spiderman*, *Superman* and *Phantom* in Hindi translations (Mathur 2010: 176). It was only with the publication of *Bāṭul* that India received its first strange and distinct superhero.

THE ROBUST BĀṬUL OF TALEB

Bāṭul, as Narayan Debnath reiterated with firm conviction, was written solely for children (Chatterjee 2015). I believe, that had *Bāṭul* lost his apolitical stance and behaved like the DC or Marvel Comics superheroes who cogitate during their past time about the democratic policies of the nation and the outcomes of their involvement in different conflict zones including Vietnam War, Cold War and space wars, then eventually, the target audience would have been comprised. It is naïve to assume that the *Bāṭul* texts are not laden with political messages because after all – all art is propaganda.

Ritu Khanduri writes in her book, *Caricaturing culture in India* regarding the impact of this artistic and political propaganda. She writes that cartooning in India, in contemporary times, marks out a cultural space for itself in which its style evades from being pinned to a national or other vernacular identities (Khanduri 2014: 211). Khanduri also delineates that it also exposes a form of artistic agency that “arises from the bodies of knowledge” (Khanduri 2014: 211). The ambiguous relation between communism and cartooning is also explored by sociologist Dipankar Gupta’s extensive study into the

far-right political party of Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. Gupta notes that Shiv Sena's tussle with communism was implicitly associated with the Left's ideological opposition to freedom of speech and art. The founder of Shiv Sena, Bal Thackeray, was a renowned cartoonist in Maharashtra who considered himself primarily as an artist. Ironically enough in the 1970s West Bengal, during the stronghold of the Left, there was a rich tradition of wall cartoons and graffiti that spewed forth revolutionary sentiments (Khanduri 2014: 211). In fact, Mayukh Chowdhury also illustrated movie posters during his heydays on the walls of the Purna cinema in Bhowanipur (Ghoṣ 2015: 149).

Bāṭul is embedded within the social history of West Bengal. Therefore there is a need to unravel, re-exhume and deconstruct its semiotic and referential codes to create a holistic understanding of its ideology. The word *bāṭul* has two meanings in Bengali. Firstly, it means a playing marble which is either forged out of glass or iron, Sanskritized as *bartul*, and secondly, it signifies a short or a stout person or *bāṭ'kul* (Bhattacharya 2010: 591). The first meaning of the word cannot be easily dismissed, as the figure of Bāṭul can be symbolically read through the playing marble motif. The playing marble¹¹ or the catapult motif recurs throughout the corpus where Bāṭul is seen to catapult others intentionally or accidentally, and also occasionally catapults himself (according to the rule of this game) amid the thick of conflicts (Fig. 8). It is a peripheral theme which needs further elaboration, but for the time being, the article is more concerned with the second meaning of the word – 'robustness' (*balabān*) – the dominant one, which represents the personality of Bāṭul in the mind of the readers.

¹¹ While playing marbles, the action that is performed with the fingers to fling a marble also imitates the mechanism of a catapult.



Fig. 8: Bāṭul and the catapults in 4 distinct illustrations

Nassim Nicholas Taleb's compelling study of the nature of things and events in his book *Antifragile: how to live in a world we don't understand* can be used to analyze the figure of Bãṭul as a literary event and as an object of speculation.¹² The central thesis of Taleb's work is how organic or complex systems react under 'The extended disorder family'. Taleb introduces the concept of 'the Triad', which is composed of the following three degrees: the 'fragile', the 'robust' and the 'antifragile'. His definition of the three degrees on the spectrum of the Triad is such that the 'fragile' wants to be left alone in tranquillity, it hates volatility (e.g., the Sword of Damocles), the 'robust' remains the same and attains equilibrium quickly (e.g., Phoenix), while the 'antifragile' grows, self-heals and self-repairs from random disorder or volatility (e.g., Hydra) (Taleb 2012: 23). He lists sixteen volatile elements that form the 'Extended Disorder Family' or 'Cluster' against which the 'robust' demonstrates resilience (Taleb 2012: 13): i. Uncertainty, ii. Variability, iii. Imperfect, incomplete knowledge, iv. Chance, v. Chaos, vi. Volatility, vii. Disorder, viii. Entropy, ix. Time, x. The unknown, xi. Randomness, xii. Turmoil, xiii. Stressor, xiv. Error, xv. Dispersion of outcomes, and xvi. Unknowledge.

According to Taleb, a robust entity is neither harmed nor helped by volatility. It "resists shocks and stays the same" (Taleb 2012: 3). The figure of Bãṭul analyzed through Taleb's theoretical framework brings forth the distinct quality of the Bengali superhero, which deviates from its Western counterparts (DC and Marvel comics superheroes) that dominantly possess the status of anti-fragile. Consider this historical fact for instance, when the X-Men of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby was published in the fall of 1963, it developed the mythemes of 'radiation' and 'mutation' influenced by the dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945 during the WWII, and by the discovery of the double-helix structure of DNA by Francis Crick and James Watson in 1953 (Kripal 2015: 173).

The radiation-to-mutation theme is so universal in the world of DC and Marvel Comics that it instantly reminds us of Reed Richards, Susan "Sue" Storm, Johnny Storm and Ben Grimm's exposure to cosmic rays in outer

¹² Taleb is a statistician and a risk analyst, but not a literary scholar. To deploy his ideas to buttress my arguments might initially seem out of equation, but Taleb's theory of the 'fragile', 'robust' and 'antifragile' is so dynamic that it can be used to analyze any phenomenon, starting from historical epochs to biological evolution to mythologies to human emotions and personalities to *ad infinitum*. See: Chatterjee 2015: 636-639.

space that gave them superpowers to become Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four* (November, 1961); Peter Parker being bitten by a radioactive spider in Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's *Spider-Man* (August, 1962); Bruce Banner's accidental exposure to the gamma radiation that transformed him into Jack Kirby and Stan Lee *The Incredible Hulk* (May, 1962); Professor Xavier's father who worked on the Manhattan Project, on the first atomic bomb, and the Beast whose father was an ordinary labourer at an atomic site in *X-Men* (Kripal 2015: 175). In pop culture and comic book studies, these characters undoubtedly qualify as examples of the Talebian 'antifragile'. These entities regenerated themselves from shocks through adaptation, and as they regenerated, they became stronger. For an antifragile element, the sufferings are minor, while the gains are tremendous when they are exposed to the Extended Disorder Family. Taleb's concept of the antifragile, which engulfs other "organic" and "complex" social systems has its root in the exemplary quality of the human bones that regenerate and become stronger every time they undergo wear and tear. Therefore, by all means, if the Western superheroes are marked by the characteristics of antifragile, growth, evolution and change, then Băţul, through his construction, is marked by robustness, resilience, and stasis in the face of volatility. This is evident, in some illustrations, we observe how Băţul remains utterly calm and unflinching as he encounters dynamite explosions and ferocious animals (Fig. 9).

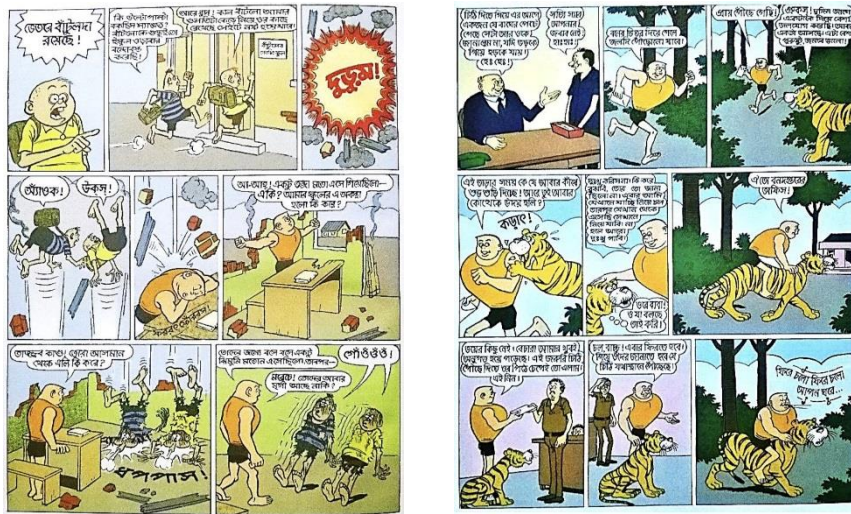


Fig. 9: Băţul the oblivious

Moreover, whenever he is bashed with a sledgehammer or stabbed with a knife, he feels as if he has been tickled or bitten by a mosquito (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10: A sledgehammer is a mosquito

He is not only oblivious to his surrounding threats, but as he encounters them, they are instantly trivialized. Robustness, trivialization, bathos and exaggerated representation of the reality are the main tropes and sources of humour in the corpus. The evolution of Bāñṭul's disproportionate body that is traced through the decades from 1965 to 2015 is hardly distinguishable with the minor improvisation, and is also a theoretical validation for his robustness (Fig. 11).

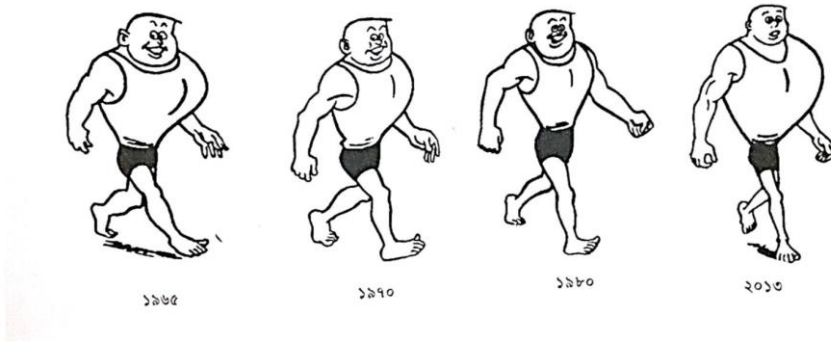


Fig.11: The evolution of Bãṭul. L-R: 1965, 1970, 1980, 2013

RESPONSES TO CAWELTI'S FORMULAS

Western superhero theories start to collapse at the threshold of Bengali comics and become almost redundant without any scope for negotiations. The Western comics theories that are formulated by Walter Ong, Charles Hatfield, Richard Reynolds, Fredric Wertham and others mostly have Western superhero comic books and *not* comic strips (like *Bãṭul*) as their object of analysis.

John G. Cawelti authoritatively lists some literary formulas that were used to create superhero/ adventure comics in North America and Europe. Cawelti explicates systematically how, firstly, the superhero overcomes obstacles to achieve some impossible mission against all odds, which symbolizes his a constant triumph over death. Secondly, the superhero always receives an additional favour from attractive young ladies; and thirdly the superhero is “one of us,” a figure marked by flawed abilities and attitudes presumably shared by the audience (Cawelti 2013: 78). The principle of identification between the readers and the character is shaped essentially by the third point.

Although Cawelti's formulas are apposite in the realm of superhero studies, they aren't universal, and the first two points do not hold valid while studying *Bãṭul*. In the light of Cawelti's formulas, the article offers two more formulas that would define the laws of Bãṭul's world. Firstly, the need to triumph over death is hardly a feature in *Bãṭul*. Bãṭul is invincible and inde-

structible. Debnath has endowed him with zero vulnerabilities or weaknesses, except that he occasionally suffers from a chronic drowsiness. Therefore, the theme of death or overcoming it is peripheral to the corpus. Secondly, the world of *Bāṭul* is dominated by male characters – *Bāṭul*, *Bhojā-Gajā* (his nephews), *Lambakarṇa* (his friend), *Sātā Ostād* (local goon and *Bhojā-Gajā*'s mentor), dacoits, policemen, terrorists, and other supernatural entities. Attractive ladies and damsels in distress have been deliberately excluded from the *Bāṭul* corpus. There is *pisimā* (aunt) of *Bāṭul* – possibly an old widowed woman – who is always seen confined to her kitchen cooking tasty dishes for him. Regarding this second issue, Narayan Debnath retorted that he preferred not to include female characters in *Bāṭul* because he thought it was unnecessary, and that *Bāṭul* was illustrated dominantly for children (Chatterjee 2015). The decision to exclude female characters from an illustration that is solely meant for children seems absurd. Debnath was either making a sexist claim to the genre by saying that women shouldn't have any role in violence, absurdity or delinquency, where only the male body is suited for these purposes, or he was unconsciously forging male asexual characters; those who are neither sexually attracted to the opposite sex nor to their own.

It is, therefore, not hard to notice that in *Bāṭul*, sexual energy of the characters are channelized or diverted into other activities like hatching plots, robbing banks, going on outdoor trips and ceaselessly gormandizing during free time (Bukatman 2013: 171). *Bāṭul*'s asexuality does remind us of Jughead Jones from the *Archie Comics* (1941), who was confirmed to be an asexual in the canon (Reisman 2016).¹³ *Bāṭul* and Jughead share a similar trait in their ability to consume large quantities of food in a single sitting without gaining weight or becoming sick (Fig. 12).

¹³ Reisman 2016. Also see the recent controversy surrounding the figure of Jughead in the American television drama *Riverdale* (2017). A writer has commented that the screenwriter Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa's decision to make "Jughead straight and not acknowledge the effort that went into making the character asexual was just another example of 'asexual erasure'." See: Alexander 2017.



Fig. 12: Jughead and Bāṭul the gormandizers. Family Tree Glee from Pep (Archie, 1960 series) #360, April 1980

It is not as if all comic characters of Narayan Debnath are asexual. There are characters like detective Kauśik Rāy, and detective Indrajit Rāy who are equally attractive and are attracted to the opposite sex. In *Rahasyamaṃ sei bāriṭā* (*The mysterious mansion*, 1970, the first installment of the nine graphic narratives that constitute *Indrajit rāy o blyak ḍāymaṇḍ ayāḍbheñcār sirij*), Indrajit Rāy rescues a lady called Ms. Subira Mitra from the evil machinations of Black Diamond.

It was in the following issue of the *Indrajit Rāy* series, *Tuphān meler yātrī* (*The passenger of Tufan Mail*, 1971-72) (Fig. 13) where the readers are told that it has been fifteen years since the murder and massacre at “*Rahasyamaṃ sei bāriṭā*” (*The Mysterious mansion*) and that Subira is now no longer a ‘Mitra’ but a ‘Ray’ – a “*Rāy/bāghini*” (“tigress Ray”) (Ghosh 2016: 334). *Indrajit Rāy* is, in fact, Debnath’s only action hero who is married in the corpus where a female character like Subira Mitra/Ray plays an equally important role in both *Rahasyamaṃ sei bāriṭā* and *Tuphān meler yātrī*.¹⁴

¹⁴ The editors of *The superhero readers* grapple with these same questions as they write: “The superhero is a polarizing genre that has generated fierce battles for a host of reasons: political,

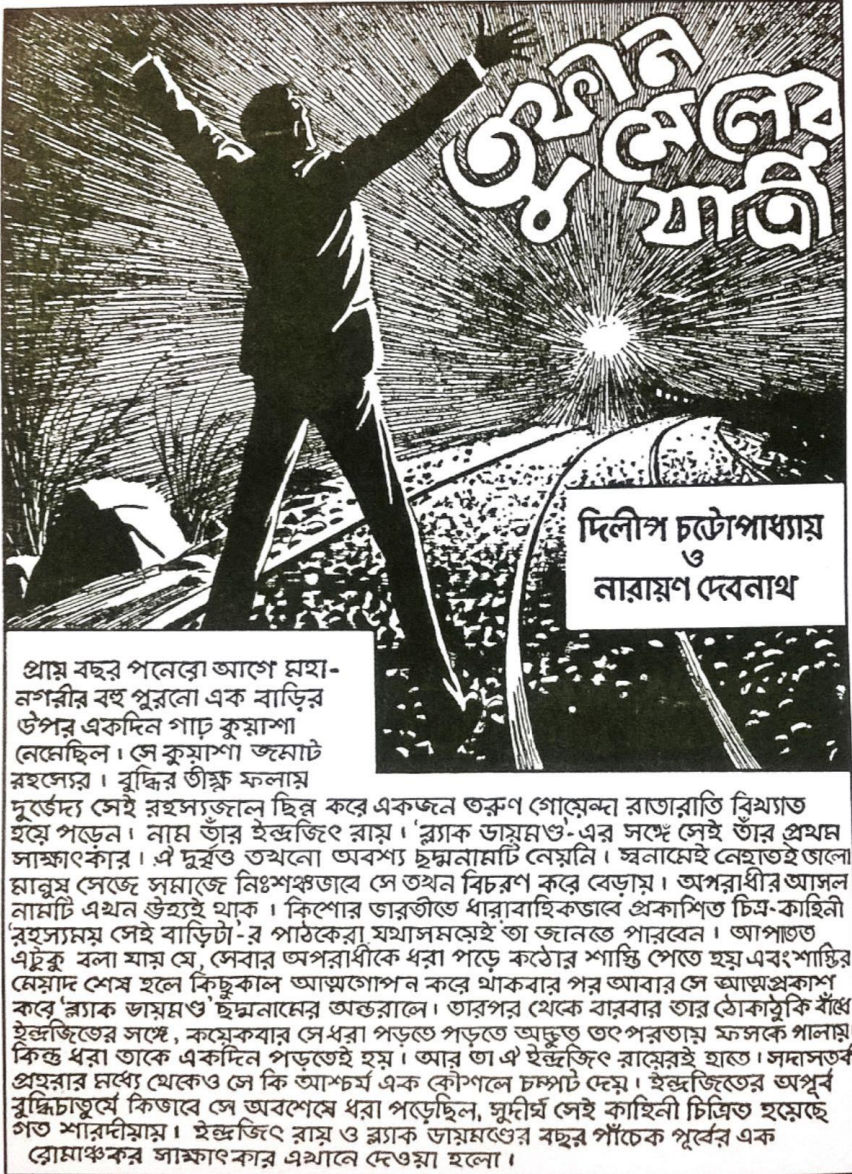


Fig. 13: Tuphān meler yātrī from Indrajit Rāy o blyak dāymaṇḍ ayāḍbheñcār sirij

gender-oriented, psychological, formalist, and aesthetic. Is the genre inherently authoritarian, or does it contain multiple ideological valences? What should we make of the hypermasculinity of superhero comics? Is their highly stylized imagery evidence of sexism, a foregrounding of sexual anxiety, or a vivid display of a queer sensibility that is otherwise culturally suppressed?" Introduction Hatfield, Heer and Worcester 2013: xviii.

The dearth of female characterization had its roots even before the publication of the first issue of *Bāṭul* in May-June (Bengali *Jaiṣṭhya*) 1965. In April-May 1964 (Bengali *Baiśākh*), Deb Sahitya Kutir (DSK) published Narayan Debnath's *Śūṭ'ki ār Muṭ'ki* (*Skinny and Fatty*). It was based on the outrageous antics of two sisters called *śūṭ'ki* and *muṭ'ki* ("skinny" and "fatty"). Debnath illustrated a total of six *Śūṭ'ki ār Muṭ'ki* comic strips – #1 (April-May 1964, Bengali *Baiśākh*), #2 (April-May 1965, Bengali *Baiśākh*), #3 (Oct-Nov 1965, Bengali *Kārttik*), #4 (Aug-Sept 1966, Bengali *Bhādra*), #5 (Dec-Jan 1967, Bengali *Pauṣ*), and #6 (Jun-Jul 1968, Bengali *Āṣāṛh*) (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14: *Śūṭ'ki ār Muṭ'ki* #1 (April-May 1964, Bengali *Baiśākh*)

It is evident from the publication dates that *Śūṭ'ki ār Muṭ'ki* were published randomly once a year, which shows that they failed to lure the readers with an equal magnetism of *Bāṭul*. It was around 1968 that an uproar was sparked at the DSK office following the publication of *Śūṭ'ki ār Muṭ'ki* #6. Feminists and other activists heavily criticized Debnath for stereotyping and body shaming female characters in his illustrations (Deb and Ghoṣ 2013: 148). Not much is recorded about the form of the protest at DSK, but this issue determined that the community of comic strip readers in the 1960s were cognizant of the negative influences of this medium on the masses (just like Dr. Wertham). Another probable reason for this kind of outrage was that the readers who were previously overwhelmed by the fantastic thirty-three page graphic narrative by Debnath called *Citre Durgeś'handinī* (*Durgeś'handinī in painting* was inspired by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's historical romance novel, *Durgeś'handinī*, 1865) published by DSK in 1962, found *Śūṭ'ki ār Muṭ'ki* politically unpalatable and disruptive (Fig. 15).

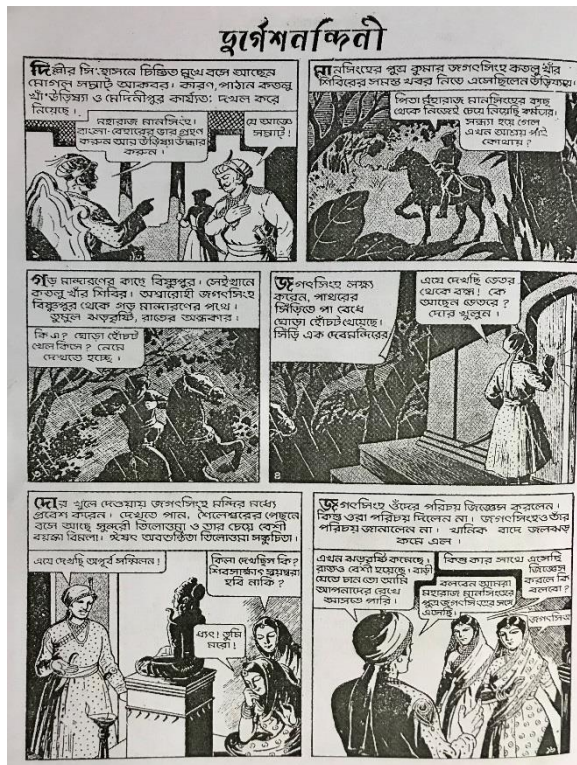


Fig. 15: Citre Durgeś'handinī

The antithetical shift from the aesthetically enriching and dignified *Durges'handinī* to the apparently humiliating *Śūṭ'ki āṛ Muṭ'ki* dealt a massive blow to the readers' worldly preference of the ideal female character. In the aftermath of this public protest, Debnath abandoned the *Śūṭ'ki āṛ Muṭ'ki* project altogether to propitiate his audience. Debnath eventually relinquished illustrating female teenagers in a lead role for his comic strips.

After much digression, reflecting back on Cawelti's premise is the only way to move forward with the analysis of Bāṭul. Cawelti's third point about superheroes sharing similar attitudes with the audience, for which they are identified as "one of us" holds valid for Bāṭul.

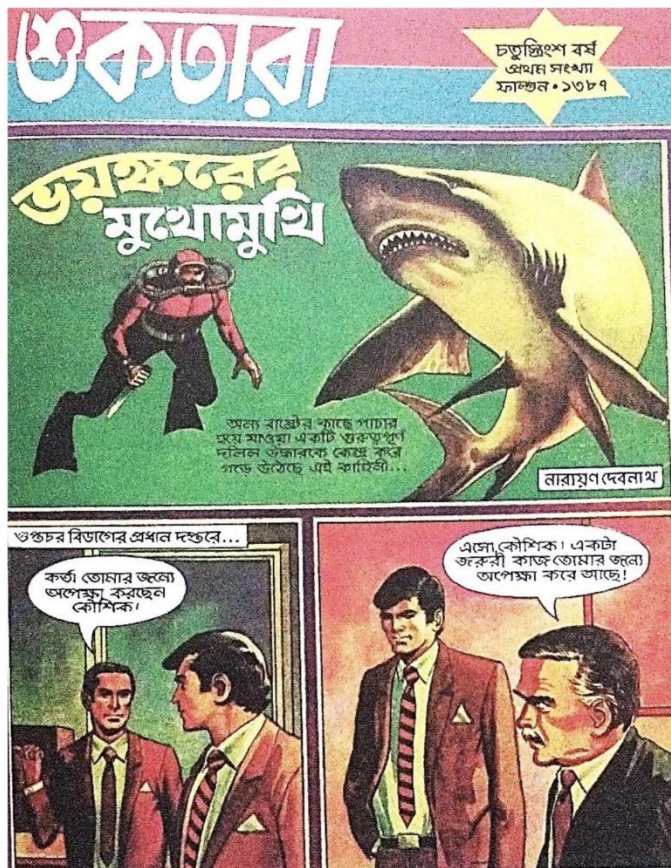


Fig. 16: Kauṣik Rāy, in *Bhayaṅkarer mukhomukhi* (Face to face with danger)

No other comic strip superheroes illustrated by Debnath (only if we consider the Rip Kirby and James Bond-like Kauśik Rāy [Fig. 16] and Indrajit Rāy to be superheroes) except Bāṅṅul share this unusual trait of sympathetic identification with the readers of the text. It is worth observing that Bāṅṅul is invincible in the face of death but is easily trounced in the paroxysm of drowsiness and ennui. We occasionally see him lounging on a chair or sofa and taking a nap whenever he is free, and we also witness him flexing his muscles and mumbling to himself – “my whole body is aching”¹⁵ (Fig.17) (Deb'nāth 2014: 159).



Fig. 17: “My whole body is aching”

This perpetual malaise in the Bengali character, as Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, was previously observed by Nirad C. Chaudhuri in *The autobiography of the unknown Indian* (1951) (Chakrabarty 2000: 184). Chakrabarty writes that Chaudhuri compared Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay’s riveting anecdotes of Bengali social life in colonial Calcutta in the text *Kalikāta kamālāṅṅ* (*Calcutta colony*, 1823). Chaudhuri’s observations provided him with the compelling evidence that the common Bengali practices of “the morning gossip, the midday spell of business or siesta, the afternoon relaxation, and the evening court (here: *āḍḍā*), had all come down unmodified” from the 1820s to the 1930s’

¹⁵ Bengali original: *śarīr'tā bara myāj myāj kar'che*.



Fig. 18: Our lazy superhero

CONCLUSION

It is in these gaps of time and the interstices of actions when Bāṭul yawns and becomes heavy-eyed that we truly discern the cultural signatures that are etched on his body (Fig. 18). Debnath and Bāṭul are both aware that no amount of action can transform the state of things within and without the fictional realm of comics. This absolute lack of faith in action that can alter the order of things has established superhumanity as “a nostalgic myth (without a precise historical setting)” (Eco 1994: 19). The transnational artistic influences on Bāṭul are unequivocal. The point of critique is not to dismiss the singularity of the Bāṭul corpus or Bengali comics as a whole by tracking down the foreign routes of transcultural influences. The point is to

¹⁶ Narayan Debnath writes in his essay “*Koutuhaler bipad*” that during the days of the WWII, he used to sit with his friends on the *royāk* and gossip (in *Nārāyaṇ Deb'nāth Kamik's samagra*, Vol. 3, eds. Pradīp Gaṛāi and Śāntanu Ghoṣ, Lālmāti, 2013, 504). Dipesh Chakrabarty mentions that the *royāk* was “the elevated verandas attached to the older Calcutta houses (here Shibpur), where young men of the neighbourhood assembled to have their noisy *addas* [āḍḍā]” (188). This vociferous *āḍḍā* on the *royāk* was often seen as a threat to the respectability of the middle-class Bengali householders. This observation regarding Debnath’s social life is tied to Nirad C. Chaudhuri’s comment on the unmodified inheritance of the colonial social practices, which further exemplifies the origins of the cultural signs that Bāṭul embodies.

acknowledge that Bãṭul is a cultural viaticum – a hybrid of foreign and indigenous artistic traditions – that occurred within a linguistic framework and during a particular historical epoch. I, therefore, propose that a distinct mode of reading be formulated based on the formal aspects and the content of the Bengali comics. This new mode of reading will incorporate Euro-American centric comics theory to analyze not only the medium of Bengali comics but also the indigenous cultural and social codes that this medium (which is also a culmination of its indigenous artistic evolution) seeks to critique.

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