

The Author

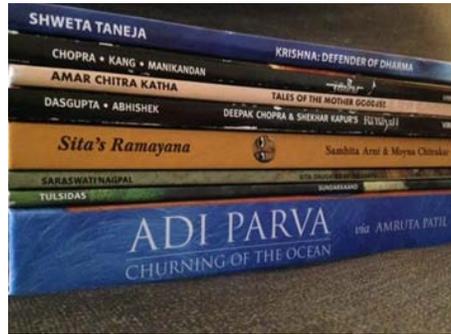


Sailaja Krishnamurti is a Faculty Associate of the York Centre for Asian Research and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities, York University.

Contact

For further information on this research, please contact: Sailaja Krishnamurti (skrishna@yorku.ca)

Reading Hindu Religion in South Asian Comics and Graphic Novels



Comics and graphic novels are increasingly regarded as a compelling part of global literature and popular culture. In India, comics in English have been popular since the 1950s. American and Japanese comics styles have an important influence on Indian comics, though some South Asian artistic traditions such as *chitrakatha* could be described as early local precursors of the subsequent art form, and continue to be an important influence on artists. The burgeoning comics industry in India has recently given rise to a strong fan culture that connects young people with their counterparts around the world.

My research project examines the use of Hindu myth and religious imagery as source material in comics and graphic narratives. The comics and graphic novels in the study range widely in theme and style, from superhero comics and fantasy to histories and abstract graphic narratives. Myth and religion are often a significant theme across characters and contexts. Artists and illustrators often find their source material in Hindu mythology; in some texts, deities are presented as characters, while in others, religious imagery becomes part of the visual landscape.

Comics' texts drawing on religious themes may serve a variety of desires for readers. Religiously inflected narratives sometimes work didactically to teach readers about religion. An important series that established this function is *Amar Chitra Katha*, a series of comics published since the late 1960s that presents abridged mythological and historical stories to children in graphic narrative form. More recently, the Virgin/Liquid comics series *India Authentic* retells myths about Hindu deities using a modern graphic style. These kinds of comics reproduce narratives that generally support a mainstream, hegemonic understanding of Brahmanical Hinduism.

Asia Research Briefs

Asia Research Briefs provide short summaries or perspectives based on research by YCAR Associates. Their purpose is to share insights from academic research with journalists, policy analysts, community leaders and interested members of the public. For further information, or to subscribe to the series, contact: ycar@yorku.ca.

About YCAR

The York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR) is one of Canada's largest and most active communities of scholars working on East, South and Southeast Asia as well as Asian migrant communities around the world.

The Centre includes faculty, graduate students and research associates from the social sciences, humanities, fine arts, law and business.

YCAR facilitates and supports research projects, knowledge exchange and graduate student training, as well as engagement with wider communities in the conduct or dissemination of research. YCAR is located on York University's Keele campus.

For more information:

www.yorku.ca/ycar

Eighth Floor, Kaneff Tower
4700 Keele St., Toronto
Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3



But some comics' texts work to critique hegemonic ideas about religion and about what comics look like in the contemporary world. *Sita's Ramayana* (Tara Books 2011) is a reimagining of the Ramayana with a feminist perspective, written by Samhita Arni and illustrated by traditional *patua* artist Moyna Chitrakar. Graphic novels have become an important part of social activism in South Asia. *Bhimayana* (Navayana, 2011), tells a story about the life of BR Ambedkar and foregrounds Dalit struggle against Hindu caste-based discrimination; it is illustrated by Gond artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam. In a different vein, the web-based comic Priya's *Shakti* (2014) draws on the visual language of earlier texts like *Amar Chitra Katha* to create a narrative against gender based violence in South Asian communities. These examples show that while comics' texts have the capacity to reproduce and reinforce normative ways of thinking about identity, they also provide ways to resist or rethink them, particularly in regard to issues around gender and caste.

My research makes use of interdisciplinary methods to study comics' texts and readers. Close analysis of image and text in these comics and graphic novels illuminates how religious iconography and allusion are at work within them, and studies their style and structure. Interviews with writers and illustrators explore their perceptions about religion in their work. The project also looks at experiences of comics readers in India and around the South Asian diaspora, considering the interactive relationship between producers, texts, and readers in the formation of religious knowledge, perceptions and identity claims.

Acknowledgements

This project has been funded in part by a York University Faculty Liberal Arts and Professional Studies Minor Research Grant.