

I'm not robot!

Collector of comic books Arun Prasad was referred to as an ‘extreme collector’, on a History Channel show, for his collection of 18,000-odd comic books — the result of more than 20 years of travelling, collecting and, most importantly, preserving. Collecting these India-published comic books — like Phantom , Bahadur , and Mandrake — was initially a way of going back in time, through the pages of his favourite Indrajal comics. “These connect me to my past, I get a bit of my childhood back through this,” says the Bengaluru-based pannapictagraphist, who is one of the largest collectors of Indian comics in the country. Arun’s search for vintage comics, which started in 1998, today comprises a network that spans across the country— Lucknow, Mumbai, Delhi, Ahmedabad and Kolkata. His first source of stories, growing up in Eravankara in Kerala, was his grandmother. He remembers her as being “filled with stories” drawn from mythology and folk tales. The days full of stories were enveloped with blankness when she died. “There were no more stories for me. That was the turning point. I started looking for stories — in newspapers and magazines — Balarama [a Malayalam comic book for kids] was my first exposure to comics,” he remembers. Around this time, he started reading other comics, especially those by Indrajal. Over the years, as his collection of comic books and comic-inspired material grew — he began viewing them differently: “as material of social, cultural and historical importance rather than merely for the narrative and story. When I started looking at them that way, I realised I had something of value — not in monetary terms but as archival material,” he says. The history of Indian comicsA columnist, artist, film and photography enthusiast, he is currently working on a project that traces the history of comic books in India, “in a visually attractive and readable format,” Arun says. A trigger for this was the invitation, in 2012, to show some of his vintage comics at Comic Con (Bengaluru). That made him take a ‘serious look’ at the material he had, he ‘saw’ them as artefacts and understood their significance. “These made me take a serious look at the material I had,” he says. American cartoonist Will Eisner’s Comics and Sequential Art , which studied comics and their roles seriously, contributed to Prasad’s changed outlook on comics as artefacts. He says, “If we consider comics as sequential art, as Eisner suggests, then we have a history dating back 10,000 years in the rock drawings of Bhimbetka caves. You look at one picture, you’d have no idea what it means unless you see them in a sequence — like you would a comic book. It shows a well-defined story of human beings and their cultural evolution. If there is narrative with illustrations placed sequentially then it is a comic.” The murals of Ajanta caves depict the life of Buddha and Jataka tales. He also lists Rajasthan’s kavadi , patachitra (West Bengal and Odisha) and leather puppetry as other traditional forms of sequential art. As he shows the history of comic books through a series of slides one comprehends what he means when he refers to them as socio-cultural material. For instance, shortly after the satirical British weekly Punch began publication in the 1840s, India had its Parsi, Awadh and Bengali versions — all satirical, which continued to be printed till the 1930s. One gets the sense that regional languages had a strong culture of comic books well into the 1960s-70s. Abid Surti, creator of Bahadur , one of the first desi super heroes, caught up with him at a comic con event asking if Prasad had come across his earlier works (cartoons) for the Gujarati magazine Ramakadu . Prasad’s collection is the result of painstaking work done over two decades and multiple sources. Phantom is his favourite superhero, and he has the complete collection of Phantom comics published by Indrajal — all 803 of them — in the nine languages it was printed in. He even tracked down the first 10 issues of Amar Chitra Katha (ACK). Comic books, since they used to be printed on newsprint, disintegrate easily. The problem compounds with age, and storage becomes important. To prevent the pages from turning brown, Prasad places comic books along with acid-free boards — used by artists — and slides them into poly-propylene bags. These are then placed vertically in cartons in a dedicated space in his home. “The ‘first’ issue of ACK comics is numbered 11. The question, ‘Why 11?’ nagged me for a long time. The answers I came across were vague, like 11 being auspicious. I wasn’t convinced,” says Prasad. He found that with issue number 11 ACK comics acquired their highly individualistic, signature Indian style by telling Indian stories. The issues from one to 10 were based on western fairy tales such as Pinocchio , Jack and the Beanstalk , Cinderella and others translated into Indian languages. He is in the process of cataloguing his comics. The software-generated homogeneity of modern-day comics does not appeal to him. A traditionalist when it comes to comic books, he says, “You could feel the artist through the hand-drawn works, now it is ‘system generated’, the soul is somewhere lost. I don’t feel like reading those,” Prasad says. However, he is happy with the evolution of the genre once considered a low form of pop art. He says, “They are being considered literature — comics are winning Pulitzers, featuring in art biennales., . the scene has changed. As also the indie-comic scene, where anyone with a story and who can draw, with access to a photocopier, can print and sell...in India there is a revolution on.” Indrajal Comics began publishing self-titled monthly issues in March 1964. Each of the first 10 issues had 16 pages of Phantom comics. The stories had to be edited to fit this short format. The remaining 12 pages were dedicated to other content, similar to Gold Key’s style. In the next 19 issues it became 20-24 pages. As the series continued, different characters would share the spotlight. Characters such as Flash Gordon, Mandrake the Magician, Bahadur, Kerry Drake, Rip Kirby, Garth, Mike Nomad and Buz Sawyer appeared - as well as Disney characters Robin Hood and Mickey Mouse along with Goofy, but the majority of the series spotlighted The Phantom. So much so that the series is often erroneously referred to as “The Phantom” instead of the correct “Indrajal Comics”.In due course the publication became fortnightly and then weekly by 1981. The numbering of books which was simply sequential in the beginning then changed to have the typical volume and a number. Indrajal Comics #444 was labeled as Vol.20 and No.1. The front cover design changed with distinct banner containing the title “Indrajal Comics” with a small circle showing the face of the main charracter.A total of 803 Indrajal Comics were published, excluding #123 and #124 which were not printed due to industrial strike action. More than half of these issues contained Phantom stories. The publishing stopped in 1990.The cover artwork for the first 50 or so issues of Indrajal Comics was done by B.Govind, with the back cover featuring a pin-up poster. His artwork became very popular and even said to have matched the artwork on the covers of international phantom publications such as Gold Key or Frew.To avoid confusion among Indian readers, there were some minor changes done to the name of the Phantom’s location and some characters in stories published in Indrajal Comics. The term “Bengali” or “Bengalia” or “Bengal” was changed to “Denkali” and in some issues “Dangalia” as well. This was since there is a state called “Bengal” in India and this may lead the readers to wonder about the “Pygmy” people that don’t exist in Bengal.The name of the “Singh Brotherhood” was changed to “Singa Brotherhood” and the killer of the father of the current (21st) Phantom was changed from “Rama” to “Ramalu” although the latter too is one of the common names in India.Apart from English, Indrajal Comics published the stories in at least a dozen other Indian languages including Hindi, Bengali, Tamil and Kannada. Contents:Indrajal Comics #15The Unknown CommanderMay 1, 1965Indrajal Comics #14The Mystery Of The RattleApril 1, 1965Indrajal Comics #13The Phantom And SamarisMarch 1, 1965Indrajal Comics #12The Phantom Is ChainedFebruary 1, 1965Indrajal Comics #11The Phantom’s TreasureJanuary 1, 1965Indrajal Comics #10The Phantom’s RingDecember 1, 1964Indrajal Comics #9Thugs in DenkaliNovember 1, 1964Indrajal Comics #8The PlaymateOctober 1, 1964Indrajal Comics #7The Man-Eating PlantSeptember 1, 1964Indrajal Comics #6The Lunar CultAugust 1, 1964Indrajal Comics #5The Phantom’s Isle Of EdenJuly 1, 1964Indrajal Comics #4The Phantom And The ImpostorJune 1, 1964Indrajal Comics #3The Challenge Of CannibalsMay 1, 1964Indrajal Comics #2Prince OrqApril 1, 1964Indrajal Comics #1The Phantom’s BeltMarch 1, 1964 This collection was only possible thanks to all the comic fans around the world!Please note that these are scans of old comic books & as such will show wear & tear with age, most fans feel this only adds to the experience but if you are looking for perfect copies unfortunately they do not exist, we believe this is the best available.

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