

Gokul T G

Research Scholar

School of Letters (English Lit)

Mahatma Gandhi University

Kottayam.

### The Indian Comic Strip: A Post-Modern “Double Talk”

*“People often ask me why I stopped my comic strip Suki. A better question is: How did it get published at all?”— Manjula Padmanabhan.*

Manjula Padmanabhan’s “Double Talk” debuted in *The Sunday Observer*, Mumbai on 14 August 1982 as a weekly comic strip and ran till 1986, when it folded up owing to its creator relocating to Delhi. It had a second life as a daily strip in the Delhi based *Pioneer* from 1991 to 1997, before Manjula ended it, forced by the declining finances of the newspaper. It was not coincidental that Vinod Mehta was the editor of both *The Sunday Observer* and *The Pioneer* when the strip ran in these publications. He had not only been a staunch supporter of “Double Talk” but also of the need to promote indigenous comic talent in the pages of Indian newspapers. In his foreword to Padmanabhan’s *This is Suki*, Mehta recounts his attempt at compiling the comics page of *The Sunday Observer* with American syndicated strips:

Disaster not in the sense of being objectionable or unpopular, but the page suffered from tiresome over-familiarity. There was no element of surprise. Just predictable jokes....Moreover, the humour, the characters, the assumptions, the context were fiercely Yankee.... I was desperately in search of an Indian comic strip.... (viii)

Unfortunately, many of his readers didn't share Mehta's enthusiasm or goodwill for "Double Talk", the Indian comic strip he chose for his newspaper. Letters arrived week after week from readers who found it 'pathetic', 'an eye sore' and 'an insult to reader's intelligence' (Padmanabhan, *This is Suki* 72). Mehta on his part enjoyed printing those rants and advised Manjula "not to over-worry" (Mehta).

The overwhelmingly hostile reader response to the strip could be attributed to unfamiliar territories it chartered. To start with, the idea of an Indian comic strip was quite a novelty back then. This has remained so even today, with instances of Indian comics strips getting extended runs being few and far between to merit any serious mention, the only notable exception being "Chandu" by Enver Amed which ran in the *Hindustan Times* for thirty long years. Manjula's strip on its part also had a few firsts to its credit. Like the Indian comic strip, an Indian woman cartoonist was an unheard phenomenon. Readers also had to deal with a 'bratty', 'irresponsible' and 'smart-assed' woman (Padmanabhan, *This is Suki* xi) in her early twenties as the chief protagonist of the strip, drastically different from the predominantly male cast of American comic strips they had grown comfortable with. Even then, in the world of American comics syndication, "Cathy" and Cathy Guisewite had been exceptions than norm. "Double Talk" stood out against the syndicated American fare it shared the page with; not only for tackling contemporary local issues, but also for being ahead of its times, displaying a postmodern sensibility not found in the out dated American strips that Indian readers had grown up with.

Right from the very first strip, Manjula draws the reader's attention to the status of the comic strip as an artefact and a constructed reality, continuing to adopt a self referential tone throughout the series. Suki identifies and introduces herself as a character in a comic strip and is seen fretting over speech balloons and the shape of panel borders, addressing the concerns

of a harried reader “bored” with her “neurotic obsessions and inconsequential views” and even performing a cabaret so that his demand for a funny and entertaining comic strip would be met. The strip flaunted a quirky sense of humour indulging in regular doses of parody, pastiche, irony and meta-fictional devices (Fig 1), at a time when the idea of postmodernism was yet to register its presence in Indian literary works.

However, it is not to be assumed that American comic strips have been completely averse to the ideas of self-referentiality and self parody. Thomas Inge traces a tradition of self referentiality back to early newspaper comic strips and masters like Outcault and McCay (6). In fact, self –referentiality is inherently welded to the medium of comics. The graphic sign that makes up graphic narrative always lets the reader see the trace of graphic act, the graphic performance, as it were occurring before their eyes, helping them not only to differentiate between what is shown in the image and how it is shown, but also the graphic art of showing (Mikkonen 81). Manjula displayed a crucial understanding of this and integrated this Meta – fictional play into the strip to address some very pertinent issues such as the stature and public perception of her chosen art and the forces of market and censorship that control it. Her self referential references hark back to the history of the comic strip with its attributed ‘low art’ status and a relentless ‘pandering to the norms’ that is demanded of it.

Perhaps, it is therefore significant to enquire why ‘Suki’, whom cartoonist E P Unny refers to as India’s first ‘common woman’ in cartoon (284), did not enjoy an extended stay in the pages of Indian newspapers despite being innovative, witty and above all, a fine chronicler of the idiosyncrasies of its times. The answer to this question lies in the economic contours that govern the constitution of the Indian newspaper’s funny page. The syndicated American comic strips have traditionally had a hegemonic presence in newspapers across the globe. This has also been

true in India where there is a very perceptible absence of indigenous comic strip tradition. This sits at odds with the political cartoon and the comic book streams of the art, which over the years have developed a tradition distinctly Indian in nature. The Indian political cartoon had come of age with Sankar, India's first professional cartoonist, and his successors Kutty, Vijayan, Abu and Rajinder Puri. Similar consolidation of native talent had happened in the comic book industry in the 1970s with Abdul Surti, Indrajal comics and Pai's *Amar Chitra Katha* series. It has been the presence of American syndication system that offers cheap and established international talent, coupled with editorial insensitivity of the Indian news paper editors that have prevented the gathering of such critical mass in the field of Indian comic strip. Manjula observes:

Whereas foreign strips are distributed by syndicates, resulting in prices as low as Rs 30 for a month of daily strips, a local cartoonist would obviously have to earn at least 500 times as much just in order to pay the rent on a barsati. ... Publishing Western strips is not merely cheaper; it also permits a newspaper to dodge the issue of socially relevant humour. (Strip the Skin)

As opposed to the political cartoonist, who traditionally has been a full time salaried employee of the newspaper, the Indian comic strip creator has always been a freelancer. This has worked well in the US with a sound syndication system, but not in India where syndication attempts have been more of individual efforts by cartoonists than an established commercial enterprise. Comic strip reading is mostly driven by habit and individual strips need to be carefully nurtured through its initial years and allowed to grow on readers, before any long term financial gains can be expected of it. Therefore comics syndicates invest a lot of money, effort and time on their comic strips—for major part of revenue is expected to be generated only over

period of time through licensing and merchandising— even providing a grace period window for new entrants, during which they are hard sold to newspapers across the globe. Without such sound economic model to fall back upon, Indian comic strip creators find themselves ill equipped to compete with the American syndicate Juggernaut.

The absence of an Indian comic syndication system has meant that Indian news paper editors have continued to serve their readers with outdated strips like “Bringing up Father”, “Blondie” and “Henry” which not only fail to reflect the world around them, but also a strut a narrative aesthetic and comic sensibility that is completely alien. The resultant effect is ironically ‘comical’. Faced with such contradictions, O.V Vijayan, India’s foremost political cartoonist, had remarked, “But, I am what Thurber can never understand. I am a Third World cartoonist. In my World, there are children who are fed on grass, and whose eyes, as they peer out of an Oxfam ad, are full of an infantile senility that Thurber might never have encountered” (Vijayan 1). Indian editors also tend to drift towards exclusivity, often insisting that the strips don’t appear in any other publication. This is in direct opposition to the very nature of dissemination of the comic strip, the economics of which demands mass production and consumption. It appears that the Indian comic strip in English has been straddling a strange situation, where editors complain about lack of quality and panache in the Indian variety while not realizing that they themselves have been equally guilty of editorial ignorance and insensitivity. Cartoonist Rajinder Puri, who somewhat successfully syndicated his political strip “News Hound” on his own, finds it absurd that Indian newspaper editors do not mind sharing internationally syndicated strips in common city editions but would balk at the thought of doing the same with Indian comic strips, even in non overlapping editions (Puri).

However, in recent years, aided by the internet, there has been a revival and consolidation of comics movement in India. While graphic novel hogs majority of the lime light, some of it has spilled over to comic books and strips, finding favour again with a generation grown up on a steady diet of Amar Chitra Katha, Indrajal and Diamond comics. This is evident in comics clubs, discussion forums, mailing lists, blogs and self publishing groups sprouting all over the Indian cyber space. The crowd is hip, exposed to international strips on the internet and armed with an increased purchasing power. Graphic narrative to them is not alien territory being knowledgeable enough to understand the nuances of the image-text narrative. Web comics like “This is Our Life”, “The Vigil Idiot” and “ACK!” are subscribed to in large numbers and shared across Facebook accounts. Comic conventions are attracting huge attendance, and in what could be a watershed event for Indian comics, *The New Indian Express* and *DNA* now have Indian comic strips jostling for space with syndicated strips in their Sunday magazines. The single, twenty something, city dwelling, neurotic, obsessive Suki would have felt perfectly at home if she ever were to comeback to the funny page these days.

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